

## Reading by Starlight: Astronomy and Literature

Collaborative Seminar between the Departments of Literature Studies and Physics/Astronomy

Prof. Vanderbeke and Prof. Neuhäuser

Fall 2016/17 Wednesdays 16-18 (room announced later)

Since time immemorial, people have looked at the stars not only as celestial sign posts for their travels or as tools to calculate the annual cycle of the seasons, but also as guidance in their lives and a way to create order in their respective cosmologies. From the early Babylonian observatories, the Egyptian pyramids or ancient monolithic monuments like Stonehenge to the various astrological worldviews that were equally important in Eastern and Western cultures, to the Ptolemaic cosmos, the Newtonian clockwork universe and our modern theories about the Big Bang and an ever expanding cosmos, our visions of the heavens had a momentous impact on how we see ourselves and our role in the cosmos. Of course, literature always took an important part in the discussions of such concepts, in particular in times when the division between the sciences and the arts was not as absolute as it seems to be today.

In the seminar we will read and discuss fictional and non-fictional texts from antiquity to the present which present, question or support particular astronomical or astrological theories and observations. They may include:

Georgio de Santillana and Herta von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill. An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and Its Transmission Through Myth* (excerpts)

Jerome Lettvin – “The Gorgon’s Eye”

Lucian – *A True Story*

Geoffrey Chaucer – *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* and excerpts from his literary works

Giordano Bruno – *On the Infinite, the Universe and the Worlds* (excerpts)

Kepler – *Somnium* (excerpts)

Shakespeare – Excerpts from various plays

John Milton – *Paradise Lost* (excerpts)

Campanella – *The City of the Sun*

The correspondence between Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet

Peter Ackroyd – *First Light*

Stanislaw Lem – “The New Cosmogony”

This seminar is a joint venture between the Department of Physics and Astronomy and The Institute of English and American Studies, which means that students of physics/astronomy and literature will cooperate in the classroom and possibly (hopefully) also in presentations. Of course, this does not mean that the students of English literature are required to be acquainted with astrophysical theories or versed in mathematics, and neither will the students of physics and astronomy have to know about literary theories or the tools of literary studies. But we expect open-mindedness about the work done in the respective fields and a willingness to take part in a truly interdisciplinary discussion.

To receive credit points, students will have to write a term paper of approximately 15-20 pages. The topic should be chosen by the student but discussed with the instructor. For students of physics the assessment method may be amended to suit the requirements of their programme.

**Geeignet als nicht-physikalisches Wahlfach für Physik/Astronomie-Studierende (6 ECTS)**

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