Poison: Science, Technology, and Medicine in Global History

How to Find Me
Carla Nappi
Dept. of History & Philosophy
Wilson 2-158
nappi@montana.edu
Office hours: Tuesdays 9 – 11 AM

How to Find the Class
Spring 2008
Tues/Thurs from 12:45 - 2:00
Lewis Hall 304

From arsenic and alchemical elixirs to opium andaconite, deadly and dangerous materials and the construction of notions of toxicity around them have played central roles in global history. This course provides an introduction to the study of science, technology, and medicine in world history by deeply investigating the ideas of “poison” and toxicity in various contexts. Topics will include ancient studies of serpent toxins circulating among the Greco-Roman and Arabic textual worlds; demonic poisons and the connection between magic and healing in east Asia; natural histories and ideas of “artifice;” aphrodisiacs and sciences of fertility; and environmental illnesses and their relationships to emerging global technologies. We will also situate discussions of opium and tobacco in east and central Asia within a comparative discussion of the global construction of “poisons” such as chocolate, tomatoes, and coffee, and explore the relationship between toxicity and ideas of “foreignness” more broadly writ.

This course is designed to introduce you to a wide range of fields and media within the history of science through the lens of poison and toxicity. We will range widely over topic and geographic areas this semester. One premise of this course is that there is no one history of science, technology, or medicine. Rather, we will use the entire globe for our laboratory and playground as we explore different ways of constructing histories of science and medicine.

Thinkpieces and the Course Website

We will be using the website every week to discuss the material via thinkpieces and responses. Make friends with it:

http://webct.montana.edu/

Log in with your WebCT ID. You all should be signed up for the course website already – if not, let me know ASAP.

To post thinkpieces and responses:
1. Log in to WebCT
2. See the Course Menu on the lefthand side of the page. It lists all of the course components.
   To post on the discussion board:
   - Click “Discussion Board”
   - Click on the topic for the week (“Week 2,” etc.)
3. To post a thinkpiece: Click the bar for Compose Message and follow the directions.
4. To post a response: Click on the icon next to the thinkpiece you’d like to respond to, and
   hit Reply to post your response. And so on, and so on. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Some of these thinkpieces will have a focused theme or assignment and some will be more
open-ended. I will distribute thinkpiece assignments in class. Timing will be taken into account
when assessing your grades for the thinkpieces/responses, so please get these in on time.
However, we all have a bad week once in a while. With that in mind, if you find it impossible to
get your weekly thinkpiece posted by **WEDNESDAY at 8 PM** please email me and let me
know: it is **always** better to post a late thinkpiece/response than not post at all, as you may
receive partial credit.

The course website also contains vital resources such as (some) course readings, reading guides,
and assorted other goodies. Do check it out regularly. It does a body good.

**A Note on Attendance**

Regular attendance is vital to your success in this course. It is your responsibility to make up any
work from missed classes, to make sure you didn’t miss crucial information, and to stay on
track. I will regularly take attendance in lecture, and will use attendance as an importance factor
in assessing participation grades. In order to grant an excused absence I will need to see proper
documentation. Three or more unexcused absences will lower your grade.

**Requirements**

All requirements must be completed in order to pass the course:
1. Weekly reading assignments (due on the date indicated in the course syllabus)
2. Weekly thinkpiece/response assignments due each week by **WEDNESDAY at 8 PM**
3. Participation in class discussions (Please let me know privately, via email or in person,
   if you are not comfortable speaking in a group. I can work with you to develop your
   skills, and/or we can set up an alternative.)
4. Paper:
   a. Final Paper Due **Monday, May 05** in my office (Wilson Hall 2-168) by 5 pm

**Grading**

Your grade will be assessed according to the following breakdown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Class Discussion</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinkpieces and Responses</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the final paper you have a choice. Either:
1. Keep track of a news story (or track a SETS issue in another
   medium like TV, film, music, fiction, etc) and write a paper relating
it to a topic or reading from the second half of the course. A detailed description of this and a grading rubric will be distributed in class.

2. Write a 3-book review on a history of science or medicine topic of interest to you. I will work with you to identify topics and relevant books.

In this course, more than half of your grade will be based on participation in class and on the course WebCT site through thinkpieces and responses. That’s a whole big bunch. Please use the following as a guide to help you assess your participation in WebCT thinkpieces and responses:

A-LEVEL PARTICIPATION
- The student consistently posted insightful comments and questions that prompted on-topic discussion
- The student consistently and explicitly engaged the course materials in discussion, demonstrating that s/he read and thought about each week’s reading material
- In responses, the student consistently helped clarify or synthesize other classmates’ ideas with thoughtful posts. In practice, this means posting more than “I totally agree!” or “That’s a good point” as a response.
- If disagreeing with another classmate’s ideas, the student stated his/her disagreement or objections clearly, yet politely
- The student used clear and correct English in her/his posts, paying attention to grammar, spelling, and capitalization.

B-LEVEL PARTICIPATION
- The student was notably lacking in one or two of the items listed for A-level participation
- The student failed to submit thinkpieces or responses on time for two or more weeks
- The participant usually, but not always, expressed her/himself clearly

C-LEVEL PARTICIPATION
- The student was consistently lacking in two or more of the items listed for A-level participation
- The student failed to submit thinkpieces or responses on time for five or more weeks
- The student’s responses to classmates’ thinkpieces were lazy or otherwise did not show a strong engagement with their classmates’ ideas. Repeatedly posting responses that are nothing more than “I agree,” or “That’s a good point” is an example of this.
- The student rarely expressed him/herself clearly, or rarely spoke in class, even when prompted.
D-LEVEL PARTICIPATION
- The student was consistently lacking in two or more of the items listed for A-level participation
- The student rarely expressed him/herself clearly, or rarely spoke in class, even when prompted.
- The student failed to submit thinkpieces or responses on time for six or more weeks

F-LEVEL PARTICIPATION
- The student was rude or abusive to other course participants
- The student consistently failed or refused to participate at all, even when specifically prompted or questioned, even if the student’s participation otherwise conforms to a higher level on the rubric

Readings
The course material will include short essays, book excerpts, images, and other files posted to the WebCT site. In addition, the books required for purchase include:

1. João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*
3. Thomas Abraham, *Twenty-First Century Plague*
4. William Bass and Jon Jefferson, *Death's Acre*

And now we bring you…..
The Weekly Schedule (Note: The Management reserves the right to adjust this as necessary.)
ACT I
PILLS

…In which we introduce the history of science, medicine, and technology in the early and medieval world as a foundation for what is to come, and because it is inherently groovy.
Week One

Thursday Jan. 17  Introduction to the Course
Reading: Make sure to read the syllabus carefully. There is a lot of information about the course in here, and you’re responsible for its contents! No thinkpiece due this week!

Week Two

Tuesday Jan. 22  Serpents and Snakestones
Thursday Jan. 24  Blister Beetles
Reading for Discussion:
4. Li Shizhen, *Compendium of Materia Medica*, “Blister Beetle (banmao).” **Th**

Week Three

Tuesday Jan. 29  Plague
Thursday Jan. 31  Poppies
Reading for Discussion:

Week Four

Tuesday Feb. 05  Magic and Martial Arts
Thursday Feb. 07  Alchemy
Reading for Discussion:
ACT II
POTIONS

…In which we introduce the history of science, medicine, and technology as they shaped empire-building in the early modern world as a way to move toward our study of modernity, and because it is also inherently groovy.
Week Five

Tuesday Feb. 12  Hemlock
Thursday Feb. 14  Arsenic

Readings for Discussion:
1. Finish Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*. Tu
2. Tanya Pollard, *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England* (selection). Tu

Week Six

Tuesday Feb. 19  Peacock Flowers
Thursday Feb. 21  Tea

Reading for Discussion:

Week Seven

Tuesday Feb. 26  Spice
Thursday Feb. 28  Chocolate

Reading for Discussion:

Important Event: Meet with professor (in person or via email) to decide on a topic for final paper.

Week Eight

Tuesday Mar. 04  Drink
Thursday Mar. 06  No Class

Reading for Discussion:

Important Event: Hand in typed description of final paper topic in class on Tuesday.
ACT III

PARTICLES

…In which we finally get around to exploring science, medicine, and technology as they have shaped modern global history, because it is Objectively Important for understanding the world you live in, and because it is, in addition, inherently groovy.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading for Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>Tuesday Mar. 18</td>
<td>Bodies</td>
<td>1. William Bass and Jon Jefferson, <em>Death’s Acre</em>. Th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday Mar. 20</td>
<td>Bugs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>Tuesday Mar. 25</td>
<td>Leprosy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday Mar. 27</td>
<td>Life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading for Discussion</td>
<td>1. João Biehl, <em>Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment</em>. Th</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleven</td>
<td>Tuesday Apr. 01</td>
<td>Trees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday Apr. 03</td>
<td>No Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading: No reading! Make time this week to work on your final papers and make sure you’re on track.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelve</td>
<td>Tuesday Apr. 08</td>
<td>Atoms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday Apr. 10</td>
<td>Allergies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading for Discussion</td>
<td>1. Adriana Petryna, <em>Life Exposed</em> (selection). Tu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Important Event: <strong>Thinkpiece-revision assignment begins.</strong> See handout.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirteen</td>
<td>Tuesday Apr. 15</td>
<td>Anthrax</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday Apr. 17</td>
<td>Gas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourteen</td>
<td>Tuesday Apr. 22</td>
<td>Meat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday Apr. 24</td>
<td>Mercury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading for Discussion</td>
<td>1. Harvey Levenstein, <em>Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet</em> (selection). Tu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday Apr. 29</td>
<td>Zombies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday May 01</td>
<td>SARS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading for Discussion:


Thinkpiece Revision Assignment for Weeks 12-14

Due each week: By Saturday at 8 pm (NO LATER)

PLEASE NOTE CHANGE: There will be no thinkpiece revision due Week 15 in order to give you time to finish up your papers!!

We will use the remainder of the weekly thinkpieces to work on honing the skills that you will need in your final paper, and that are useful more broadly in historical analysis:

1. Clear, well-structured *prose*
2. A clear *argument/thesis* that…
3. …is well-supported by *evidence* from the texts

Your job by next week is to develop an ARGUMENT involving one of the main themes of the course. (See handout for some guidelines.)

Week 12 (By 8 PM Saturday April 12):

- Post a response paper to the WebCT site. This response paper should have a clear thesis involving some major issue/theme of the course and use PETRYNA and MITMAN as evidence to support the argument. Make sure to cite page numbers from the readings whenever necessary, and make clear and explicit reference to the texts.
- Make sure to save a copy of your response paper as a word-processing document: this will come in handy next week.

Week 13 (By 8 PM Saturday April 19):

- Based on my suggestions on your response paper from last week, revise the response and post a new, improved version. This new version should not only incorporate revisions based on my suggestions, but should ALSO expand the response paper with further evidence culled from the MURAKAMI reading.
- In sum: the new version should represent revision/rewriting AND additional evidence from the MURAKAMI text.

Week 14 (By 8 PM Saturday April 26):

- Same deal as last week. Based on my suggestions on your revised response paper from last week, revise again and post a new, improved version. This new version should not only incorporate revisions based on my suggestions, but should ALSO expand the response paper with further evidence culled from the RITVO, FISHER, and GEORGE readings.

By the end of this semester as a result of this assignment, you should have a much more refined grasp of how to develop an elegant, clear thesis and support it with textual evidence. The
emphasis on revision will also help you develop your writing skills much more carefully than would otherwise be possible. In evaluating these as part of your participation grade, I will be looking explicitly for how much you’ve taken the revision seriously by incorporating editorial advice, fixing mistakes, etc.