

## GRADUATE SEMINAR On Imagination

Professor | Dr. Aminah Hasan-Birdwell

### Course Description

The present course aims to provide alternative resources for thinking through the notion of imagination in modern thought. The canonical view of imagination as a cause of error stems from responses to Aristotelianism within Epicureanism, Skepticism, and Stoicism. Specifically, for the Greco-Roman Stoics, imagination is not only a source of deception and error but also of our fears and anxieties. As Seneca famously declared in the *Letters from a Stoic*, “We suffer more often in imagination than in reality.” In the early modern period, imagination continued to be seen as a dubious and deceptive faculty of the mind, with the exception of materialist thinkers of the seventeenth century, particularly Thomas Hobbes and Margaret Cavendish. The course centers on Cavendish’s revision to the tradition. Deeply influenced by the Stoics and Neo-Stoicism, Cavendish expanded the role of imagination to attend to (a) epistemological claims on the limits of knowledge, (b) a foundation for self-knowledge, (c) a philosophy of fiction, and (d) ethics and political thought. For Cavendish, imagination is a part of rational matter and is not a product of or conditioned by the senses. This view of imagination is predicated on a different conception of the body and mind than any other in the seventeenth century. According to this conception, the sensible and rational parts of matter are wholly separate: the rational parts are independent, that is, they can produce thought or images without the aid of the sensible or sensitive parts of matter. Although imagination is housed in the rational parts, it has its own mode of operation distinct from reason. These claims about imagination play an important role in her understanding of reason and her materialist, vitalist ontology, which contrasts with the frameworks put forth by Justus Lipsius, Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal, Hobbes, and others.

The goal of the course is not only to examine Cavendish’s view of the imagination but to rethink a philosophy of the mind based upon a materialist ontology. We will ask, what is the philosophical, including the ethical and political, value in contrasting Cavendish with other frameworks? Does Cavendish’s view of the body help us overcome our contemporary hesitations towards conceptions of the body found in early modern tradition, or does it reinforce these conceptions? How can we rethink the role of fiction and philosophy through her view of imagination? What role does imagination play within thinking through philosophical problems in ethics?

### Course Readings

Aristotle, *De Anima*, Chapter 8, Book III

Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*

Hierocles, *Hierocles the Stoic: Elements of Ethics, Fragments, and Excerpts*

Lipsius, *On Constancy*

Montaigne, *Essays*

Descartes, *Passion of the Soul*

Pascal, *Pensées*

Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Hobbes, *Elements of the Law*

Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*

Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*

Cavendish, *Political Writings* (includes *Blazing World*)

Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*