

Fantasies of the Past
Anna Kelner
annakelner@g.harvard.edu
Spring 2018

“To the elvish craft, Enchantment, Fantasy aspires, and when it is successful of all forms of human art most nearly approaches.”—J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”

Course Description: What did J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis have in common? The simple answer is that both were British writers centered at the University of Oxford during the 1930s and ‘40s who wrote acclaimed works of fantasy and science fiction. It is less often observed that Tolkien and Lewis were also scholars fascinated by the literature, religion, and culture of the Latin Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This course takes this apparently unlikely juncture between speculative fiction and medieval/Renaissance literature as its starting point. We’ll read works of fiction and literary criticism by Tolkien, Lewis, and other writers of speculative fiction alongside the literary texts from the Middle Ages and early modern periods which inspired them (most often directly, but sometimes more obliquely).

Our basic premise is that reading these two groups of texts alongside each other can shed light on themes and motifs which become more readily apparent in the act of comparison. More broadly, we’ll ask ourselves *how* and *why* the deep past becomes re-imagined in speculative fiction. What kinds of dialogue between past and present emerge in the works of these scholar-critics, and how might these points of imaginative exchange challenge linear models of historical progress? Why might literary works which seem to have nearly vanished from the cultural memory find new life in forms of fantasy? If we understand history writing as an imaginative practice, how might this inform our own work as literary historians?

Course Design: We’ll start off by investigating the connection between history writing and storytelling as it was formulated at our chronological place of origin: the Middle Ages. We’ll investigate the interrelationship between chronicle (an early form of history writing) and fiction intrinsic to the literary genre of romance, using this as an entry point to investigate different modes of literary historiography. From there, we’ll move into three separate units centered on the transmission of key topics from the Middle Ages/Renaissance into speculative fiction: mythology, Christianity, and utopia/dystopia. Our readings in speculative fiction will focus on the works of the Inklings, a literary circle at Oxford which included both Tolkien and Lewis as well as contemporaries such as Charles Williams, but will also include “excursions out” to other works of science fiction and fantasy.

General Tutorial Goals

To introduce the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level, & to write 20-25pp research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will be able to:

- Design a research question

- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with a your own ideas and with other criticism
- Write with greater clarity and precision

Course Specific Goals

The course will prepare students to write junior papers that treat speculative fiction and medieval/Renaissance literature in combination: a road traveled by few critics, and hence with the potential for the development of junior papers which make substantial scholarly contributions. You will be able to:

- Formulate cohesive arguments about the relationship between speculative fiction and medieval/early modern literature, engaging with the existing critical literature on the topic.
- Discuss the role that fiction-making, fantasy, and the imagination play in the transmission of the literature, culture, and religion of the Middle Ages/Renaissance into the modern and contemporary periods.
- Engage critically with historiographic models, and consider how to integrate those perspectives into your own work.

Assignments

- **Short Essay** (Week 5, 15%): A 5-7 page paper, an extended comparison of one medieval/Renaissance text and one work of speculative fiction; this will be followed by an individual student conference to discuss the paper.
- **Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography** (Week 7, 15%): 2 page prospectus of the project before you begin working on it. An annotated bibliography of 8–10 sources should accompany the prospectus. The bibliography should reproduce in a few sentences the main argument of the work you intend to make use of. It should also include, in a few sentences, how you plan on engaging with the thesis of the work you have summarized.
- **Final Paper** (Reading Period, 40%): 18–25 page paper comparing a major theme, literary form, subject of historical interest, etc in one major literary work of medieval/Renaissance literature and one work of speculative fiction; please incorporate 8–10 critical articles. You should also incorporate several relevant secondary works (such as historical documents, critical works by our speculative fiction writers, etc).
- **Conference Presentation** (deadline TBD, 5%): a 5-minute paper on your research, delivered during the last three weeks of term (at a time to be agreed upon with Anna).
- **Participation & Preparation** (20%): A small seminar like this one thrives only when students participate actively and offer informed, thoughtful contributions to class discussion.
- **Minor Assignments** (5%):
 - **2 Response Papers** (deadline TBD): approx. 250–500 words comparing a “micro” point of comparison (such as a theme, literary genre, style, or motif) in two texts (one medieval/Renaissance literary text and one work of speculative fiction). Deadline to be agreed upon with Anna; if you have written a response paper that week, you will informally present it to start seminar.

- **2 Critical Reading Presentations** (deadline TBD): A 5-minute presentation summarizing the methods, conclusions, and flaws of a critical article read for that week. Deadline to be agreed upon with Anna.

Required texts:

- Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa (Penguin, 2002)
- Anon., *Beowulf*, ed. Daniel Donoghue, trans. Seamus Heaney (Norton Critical, 2002)
- Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (Harper Voyager, 1994)
- C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (HarperCollins, 2005)
- Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Paul Turner (Penguin, 2003)
- Snorri Sturlson, *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (Penguin, 2006)
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings* (Mariner, 2012)
- Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell* (Eerdmans, 1980)

Week 1: Defining *Histoire*: History and/or Storytelling?

- Primary text: Chrétien de Troyes, “Cligès,” trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000) (excerpts) (pdf)
- Primary text: Geoffrey of Monmouth, “Arthur of Britain,” in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. and trans. Michael A. Faletra (Toronto: Broadview, 2008) (pdf)
- Historiography (Annales School): Marc Bloch, “History, Men, and Time” (17–36) and “An Outline of the History of the Critical Method” (66–75) in *The Historian’s Craft* (Manchester U Press, 1992) (pdf)
- Queer historiography: Carolyn Dinshaw, “How Soon is Now?” from *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) (pdf)
- Literary historiography: Jon Whitman, “Romance and History: Designing the Times,” in *Romance and History: Imagining Time from the Medieval to the Early Modern Period*, ed. ibid. (Cambridge U Press, 2015) (optional) (pdf)

Unit 1: Mythology

Week 2: Tolkien’s *Beowulf*

- Primary text: *Beowulf*
- Supplemental primary text: J.R.R. Tolkien, trans., *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Mariner, 2015) (lines 1–69, for comparison to Heaney) (pdf)
- Supplemental criticism: J.R.R. Tolkien, “The Monsters and the Critics,” in *The Monsters & The Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) (pdf)
- Background reading: Walter Hooper, “The Inklings,” in *C.S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C.S. Lewis Society* (Oxford University Press, 2015) (pdf)

Junior tutorial workshop (date TBD; mandatory)

Week 3: Fantasy, “Fairy Stories,” and The Work of the Imagination

- Primary text: Thomas Malory, “The Tale of the Sankgreal,” in *Le Morte d’Arthur*, ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2004) (pdf)
- Supplemental criticism: J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Monsters & The Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Harpercollins, 1990) (pdf)
- Theories of subjectivity: Felicity Riddy, “The Next World,” in *Sir Thomas Malory* (New York: Brill, 1987) (pdf)

1 hour library research orientation, time TBD

Week 4: Tolkien’s Epic for England

- Primary text: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*
- Reception studies: Jane Chance, “The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien’s Epic,” in *Tolkien’s Art: A Mythology for England* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001) (pdf)

Junior tutorial workshop (date TBD; mandatory)

Week 5: Tolkien and the Old Norse Sagas

- Primary text: *The Prose Edda*
- Supplemental primary text: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (short selections) (pdf)
- New Historicism: Christine Chism, “Middle-earth, the Middle Ages, and the Aryan Nation: Myth and History in World War II,” in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (Routledge, 2003) (pdf)

Short essay due Friday

Unit 2: Christianity

Week 6: Dante, Poet and Theologian

- Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*
- Formalism: Teodolinda Barolini, “Detheologizing Dante: Realism, Reception, and the Resources of Narrative,” in *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1992) (pdf)

Junior tutorial workshop (date TBD; mandatory)

Individual conferences on your short essay during office hours

Week 7: Charles Williams’s Cosmology

- Primary text: Charles Williams, *The Descent into Hell*
- Supplemental criticism: Charles Williams, “Introduction” and “Inferno” from *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943) (pdf)

Prospectus and annotated bibliography due Friday

Week 8: Allegory, Image-Making, and Spenser's Protestant Epic

- Primary text: Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, ed. Thomas P. Roche (New York: Penguin, 1987) (pdf)
- Supplemental criticism: C.S. Lewis, "The *Faerie Queene*" and "Allegory" in *The Allegory of Love* (London: Oxford U Press, 1951) (pdf)
- Gender studies: Stephen Orgel, "What Knights Really Want," in *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*, ed. Brenda Machosky (Stanford: Stanford U Press, 2009) (pdf)

Week 9: C.S. Lewis's Christian Allegory

- Primary text: C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
- Supplemental criticism: C.S. Lewis, "Book 3: Christian Behavior," in *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952) (pdf)

Unit 3: Utopia/Dystopia

Week 10: Utopianism and Social Change

- Primary text: William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. Elizabeth Ann Robertson and Stephen H.A. Shepherd, trans. E. Talbot Donaldson (New York: Norton, 2006) (B text), Passus I–VII, XX (pdf)
- Primary text: William Morris, *The Dream of John Ball*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris* (New York: Cambridge U Press, 2012) (short excerpts) (pdf)
- Queer historiography: Karma Lochrie, "'Something Is Missing': Utopian Failure, *Piers Plowman*, and *The Dream of John Ball*," in *Nowhere in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) (pdf)

Week 11: Noplace?: The Age of Exploration

- Thomas More, *Utopia*
- Global literary studies: David Glimp, "Utopia and Global Risk Management," in *ELH* 75.2 (Summer 2008): 263–90 (pdf)

Full draft of the junior paper due Friday, 5 pm

Week 12: Utopia's Afterlife

- Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
- Marxist theory: Frederic Jameson, "The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions," from *Archaeologies of the Future* (Verso, 2005) (pdf)

Final paper due the last day of reading period (date TBD). Please note that students cannot pass the course unless they submit their final essay.

The Fine Print

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS's Honor Code: *"Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs."*

Collaboration: You are absolutely encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others' work. In individual assignments (which may include midterm or term papers, short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, or take-home exams), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Attendance: Your attendance in tutorial is vital to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole; so is your attendance in Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. I will allow each student a "free" tutorial absence to be used in case of sickness, travel, etc: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late really disrupts the work we're doing together: 2 lates = 1 absence. If you have attenuating circumstances, you must communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can discuss how to deal with it.

Due Dates & Late Grades: Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by midnight on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

Email: I'll use our course listserv to distribute important info throughout the semester—from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. You are responsible for checking your email on a daily basis Monday–Friday. I regularly check my email Monday–Friday during regular business hours (9–5); outside those hours and during weekends, I cannot guarantee a response. If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it's too late. Also, please let me know if you'd like to use a non-Harvard email address.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: *"Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely*

manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”