Oxford and the Rise of Fantasy

LMH Summer Programmes are provided by Lady Margaret Hall, a college in the University of Oxford

Course:	Oxford and the Rise of Fantasy
Available:	Programme Session 2: 21st July 2025 to 8th August 2025
Lectures:	18 Hours
Seminars:	12 Hours
Tutorials:	3 Hours
Independent Study:	Approximately 120 Hours
Recommended Credit:	15 CATS / 7.5 ECTS / 4 US Credits

About this Course:	What inspired the emergence and flowering of the fantasy genre in the 20th and 21st century? Oxford - historic, beautiful, and timeless seat of learning - is closely associated with the genre. Towering figures of fantasy literature, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, were both professors at the University of Oxford, and many more, like Diana Wynne Jones or Philip Pullman, were educated at Oxford or, like J. K. Rowling, influenced by its literary products and settings. Oxford and the Rise of Fantasy offers a unique opportunity to examine the fantasy genre from its earliest origins to the present day, exploring at each stage the influence of Oxford and its writers. The course traces a history of the fantasy genre's formation and crystallization, from its medieval beginnings to the present. You will look at the story-telling and world-building literary devices used by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who wrote his medieval bestseller about King Arthur in Oxford Castle, and the authors of Renaissance Romance fantasies. You will explore Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, a forerunner of science fiction, and 18th-century Gothic fantasies which paved the way for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The course follows Oxford's own Lewis Carroll, Scottish fantasy author George MacDonald, and the pre-Raphaelite William Morris through to Tolkien and Lewis and beyond. We will also consider recent critical approaches to the fantasy genre as well as discuss whether these pre-21st century texts lend themselves with ease to the modern media of cinema, TV serialisation, or computer games, and which adjustments have been made or are still to be made to make them relevant to our own times.

Course Overview:	<u>Week 1 – From Medieval Origins to Early Modern Innovation</u> • King Arthur and the *Matter of Britain* • From Geoffrey of Monmouth to *Le Morte D'Arthur* • Religion and Politics in Early Modern Fantasy • Science and Utopianism in *The Blazing World* *Oxford and the Rise of Fantasy* traces the origins, formation, and development of the fantasy genre using a chronological approach. In the first week of the course we begin with the earliest beginnings of the genre, exploring the world of King Arthur and his court described in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), examining how the *Matter of Britain* took its place alongside the *Matters* of France and Rome, and considering the later standardisation of Arthurian narratives in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. From Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* to Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, we shall then investigate how themes of religion, politics, science, and utopianism mark the transitional Early Modern period. <u>Week 2 – The Romantic, the Gothic, and the Fantastic</u> • *The Castle of Otranto* and the Advent of the Gothic • Gothic and Fantasy from *Frankenstein* to *Dracula* • George MacDonald and the Crystallisation of the Fantasy Genre • *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Lewis Carroll's Oxford In the second week of the course we proceed to the 18th Century, exploring how Gothic fiction emerged from the Romantic movement, overlapping with and in turn inspiring the fantasy genre. We shall read the 19th Century Scottish preacher and author George MacDonald, arguably the first modern fantasy novelist, and consider how his fantasies and fairy tales incorporate his devout Christianity, a theme which will later be revisited with regard to J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. We finish Week 2 with a close examination of MacDonald's mentee, Lewis Carroll, whose *Alice* stories inextricably linked the fantasy genre with the people and geography of the City and University Oxford. <u>Week 3 – Tolkien, Lewis, and the Flourishing of Fantasy</u> • Morris, Arts and Crafts, and High Fantasy • Tolkien, Lewis, and the Inklings • The World-Building of Middle Earth, Narnia, and Lyra's Oxford • Film, Games, and the Future of the Fantasy Genre In the final week of the course we reach the height of the fantasy genre's flourishing, beginning at the very end of the 19th Century with William Morris' influential novel *The Well at the World's End*. We shall discuss Morris' complex personal worldview, incorporating Romanticism, medievalism, and socialism, and his association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Arts and Crafts movement. In turn we shall introduce the Inklings, the Oxford literary group whose members included Tolkien and Lewis, the two towering figures of 20th Century fantasy literature. We shall explore the similarities and differences between the story-telling and world-building in Tolkien's *Middle Earth* novels and Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, before considering the alternate history and geography of Oxford created in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. The course concludes with discussion of the state and future of the fantasy genre, especially in unconventional literary forms, exploring the role of television, film, video games, and fan-fiction.

Key Texts:	*The Blazing World*, Margaret Cavendish *Dracula*, Bram Stoker *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll *The Well at the World's End*, William Morris *The Hobbit*, J. R. R. Tolkien
Learning Outcomes:	By the end of this course, you will: • Be able to demonstrate a detailed understanding of the development of the fantasy genre, and its links to Oxford writers. • Be able to evaluate the relationship between fantasy literary texts and their historical and cultural contexts. • Understand and critically assess the key debates regarding the contemporary fantasy genre and its future direction. • Develop a critical vocabulary for discussing the fantasy genre in a range of periods.
Admissions Requirements:	LMH Summer Programmes are designed for students who want to gain and develop knowledge in their chosen subject area. LMH Summer Programmes are intensive courses of study aimed at undergraduates who have completed one, two, or three years of their degree, or entry level postgraduate students. We will consider each applicant's academic ability and expect successful applicants to have a minimum grade point average equivalent to 2:1 level on the British grading scale. For example, this would mean at least a 3.2 GPA on the 4.0 grading scale in the United States, and 80% in China. **This course would suit students of the Humanities, especially those with an interest in English Literature, Theatre, Dramatic Arts, or History. The course would be of particular relevance to those with an interest in the future of literature in diverse media.** To participate fully in the programme all students will need to have proficiency in English. English language requirements for students who are not native English speakers: • TOEFL iBT score of 98 • IELTS score of 7.0 (no less than 6.5 in each component) • Duolingo English Test score of 125 (no less than 115 in each section) • Cambridge English Scale score of 185 If the language of instruction in your home institution is English you do not need to provide evidence of your English proficiency.
Teaching Methods:	Core syllabus material will be covered in lectures. Students attend four lectures each week and each lecture lasts 90 minutes. Seminars in smaller groups offer students space to discuss and debate, to dig deeper into difficult concepts, and to explore their own ideas. Student contribution to seminars is vital, and tutors will ensure everyone takes part in discussions. Seminars last 1 hour and students will take part in four seminars each week. Independent study is a crucial part of an LMH Summer Programme and of the Oxford teaching model. Tutors will recommend important reading to do between lectures and seminars that will enable students to come to class equipped to understand the information presented and prepared to take part in discussion and debate. Each week students will have an assignment of independent work to complete and submit in advance of the tutorial. There is an appropriate amount of

	space in the timetable to complete the necessary reading, preparation, and assignments. Students should expect to do around 40 hours of independent study each week. The final class each week is a tutorial, a very small class typically including only 2-4 students and central to the teaching methods used by the University of Oxford and on LMH Summer Programmes. Guided by their tutor, students will receive feedback on their assignments and be challenged to defend, justify, or even rethink their work and ideas. These rigorous academic discussions help develop and facilitate learning in a way that cannot be done with lectures and seminars alone.
Assessment:	On a three-week LMH Summer Programme students produce one piece of assessed work every week, which is submitted to the tutor and then discussed in a tutorial. At the end of each week students will receive a percentage grade for their submitted work. Each week's work counts for a third of the final percentage grade, so the final grade is an average of the mark received for each piece of work. Students who stay for six or nine weeks will receive a separate grade for each 3-week course.
Academic Credit:	Lady Margaret Hall will provide a transcript of students' assessed work, and can send this directly to your home institution if required. LMH Summer Programmes are designed to be eligible for academic credit, and we will communicate with home institution to facilitate this as needed. As a guide, we recommend the award of 15 CATS / 7.5 ECTS / 4 US Credits for each 3-week course.