

Essay No. 1

If you are fulfilling your writing requirement for the class (a total of ten pages of formal writing) by writing two papers, the first one is due on **Monday, October 21**. If you have reason to think you will need to extend this deadline, please talk to me in person or over email ahead of time so that we can make an appropriate arrangement. You may email your papers to me in **.doc** or **.rtf** format, or leave a paper copy in my mailbox in 226 Milbank Hall.

Below are some suggested topics for the first essay. These are just suggestions; you are welcome to write on a topic of your own devising, provided you clear it with me in advance. You are also welcome to tinker with the suggested topics below to produce something that interests you more. For your reference, the texts we have read so far include: *Metamorphoses*; *The Golden Ass*; *History of the Kings of Britain*; Marie de France's *Lais*; *Yvain, or the Knight of the Lion*; *Sir Orfeo*; selections from *Canterbury Tales*; *The Faerie Queene*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *The English Faust Book*; *Doctor Faustus*.

1. **Magical and/or salvific female figures** play a large role in the texts we have read: for example, there is Isis in *The Golden Ass*, the old/young lady who befriends the knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale, Lunete in *Yvain*. Pick two or three texts and discuss the role of salvific female figures therein. You may choose to compare, contrast, or a bit of both. Are there similar roles for male characters in the texts you have chosen? Why or why not?
2. **Marvelous animals** abound in the texts we have read: the ass in *The Golden Ass* (and his echo in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), the white hart in "Guigemar," the lions in *Yvain* and *The Faerie Queene*. All these creatures can communicate with humans, and many seem to have other magical qualities as well. Discuss the function of the animal imagery in two or more of the texts we have read.
3. An alternative take on the above topic: **metamorphoses** (defined by Ovid as "bodies changed to other forms") seem to be a major, perhaps *the* major outlet for magic in the texts we've read so far (see the examples above, plus of course virtually all the magic in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). Why do you suppose this is? Do metamorphoses seem to have the same significance from work to work, or do they mean different things in different texts? Pick one or two texts and explore the philosophical significance of metamorphosis therein.
4. The deployment of magic has strong **political** undertones in the Arthurian romances (which promote British political legitimacy), in the Latin works of Apuleius and (perhaps) Ovid (which assert the value of certain religious or political institutions against foreign encroachment), and in the Elizabethan works we've read (where politics, religion, and dynastic succession are closely intertwined). Discuss the relationship between magic and politics in two or more of these works.
5. **Erotic love** plays a major role in many texts we've read, and is often intertwined with themes of religious devotion (examples: the lady in "Guigemar" who faithfully attends Mass even as she is falling [adulterously] for Our Hero; the deception of Ygernia and adulterous conception of Arthur against a background of defending Britain from pagan invaders; the love of Redcrosse for Una and of Prince Arthur for Queen Gloriana) and/or with magic (examples: Medea, Circe, Lucius/Phoebus, Uther/Ygernia, Sir Orfeo/Herodias, the lovers in the *Lais* and *Canterbury Tales*...). Explore some examples of erotic love from texts we've read. What is at stake in the success or failure of love? What role does magic play? Does it have metaphorical or allegorical significance? What other themes become entangled with the love story, and why? What overall effect is achieved?
6. Many of our texts have featured **fairies** – or their non-English equivalents – but the way they are conceptualized changes from author to author (and from culture to culture). Pick two or more texts and examine what the fairies/faeries are doing there: what kind of being they represent, what kind of magic is at their disposal, what their relationship to humans is, what meaning they impart to the text. What are fairies for? What are we supposed to learn from them?
7. **Confinement** has a big role to play in many of our texts; characters' movements are restricted in ways that cause conflict for them, often requiring a magical intervention or resolution. Some examples: Circe's efforts to keep men on her island; the various magical castles in which people get stuck in *The Faerie Queene*; the imprisoned wife in "Guigemar"; the confinement of Yvain in enemy territory, from which he is rescued by Lunete and her ring of invisibility; the detention of Herodias in *Sir Orfeo*. Pick two or three cases and discuss the use of magic in them.
8. Explore the role of the **magician** in *The Golden Ass*, *History of the Kings of Britain*, the Franklin's Tale, *The Faerie Queene*, *Doctor Faustus*, or any other text(s) in which you can identify such a figure. (You might decide to argue against making a distinction between "magicians" and "witches," in which case additional figures would become available for comparison. Be sure to justify your selection in the course of your paper.)