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# THE CENTRE FOR FANTASY AND THE FANTASTIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW: PRACTISING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Rob Maslen

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September 2020 saw the founding of the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic at the University of Glasgow, UK. It was the culmination of a long process, which began with the teaching of Fantasy at undergraduate level in a course that proved immensely popular with students, then went a step further with the establishment of an MLitt in Fantasy in 2015, and broke into a run with the advertising of two dedicated appointments in the field in 2018. This led to the arrival in Glasgow of two key figures: the Lord Kelvin Adam Smith Research Fellow Rhys Williams, a specialist in climate futures, and the respected Fantasy scholar Dimitra Fimi, whose expertise in Tolkien placed her work at the very heart of the so-called 'fuzzy set' of Fantasy. As far as we know, these two were the first academics ever to have had their job titles specifically linked to the concept of 'Fantasy', and their arrival marked something of a sea change in academic attitudes to the fantastic. They joined the two Fantasy enthusiasts already working in English at Glasgow, myself and the indefatigable Matthew Sangster, a Romanticist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Fantasy fiction, film, TV, comics, and games. Our efforts were already being strongly supported by the German fairy tale specialist Laura Martin, the gaming scholar Matt Barr, Maureen Farrell – an expert in Scottish children's Fantasy in the School of Education – and a rapidly growing cohort of doctoral students and MLitt students past and present. So all at once we had ourselves a community or fellowship, the first prerequisite of any attempt to engineer changes large or small.

With Dimitra's appointment it began to seem inevitable that a Centre would soon be founded, given her phenomenal energy as an agitator for the genre as well as a scholar. Two years later the Centre was [duly launched](#), its launchpad having been a major symposium Dimitra organised in 2019 at which students, scholars, writers, artists, and fans gave up a day to the question of how such a Centre might function and what it might achieve. But what exactly *is* a Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic? Or to ask the question again as formulated by the participants in Dimitra's symposium, what does it do? The question is well worth asking given that such a Centre has no physical presence, despite our dreams of acquiring a castle with space enough in its dungeons for a world-class archive, room in the Great Hall for a theatre and gallery, and banks of state-of-the-art computers in the Keep. Given, too, that we live in the Age of Covid, when the Climate Catastrophe has been acknowledged by multiple governments as an emergency of unprecedented proportions, a Centre for Fantasy might look to many like a piece of reckless self-indulgence. What, then, is it *for*?

The first answer is simple enough: to focus minds on a range of questions about what Fantasy does. These questions were deemed worth asking six years ago by my colleagues in the College of Arts at Glasgow, when they first gave permission for the setting-up of an MLitt in Fantasy, largely on the basis of the case we had made for it: that Fantasy is making its presence felt with increasing forcefulness in the twenty-first century, as the Science Fiction (SF) and Fantasy section of bookshops expand exponentially, infiltrating shelves once dedicated to realist fiction; as Fantasy TV shows dominate the output of major streaming services; as Fantasy movies emerge as among the most successful in cinema history, and Fantasy computer games outperform the bulk of their 'realistic' rivals in the industry. During Covid, much of the world has been wedded to an online fantasy environment, for better or worse. Is there a connection, here, to the increasing dominance of fantasy politics in global affairs, a politics that chooses to ignore the facts in favour of sometimes disturbing dreams of personal gratification? Or to the fantasy that climate catastrophe might be a lie – the dark flip side of benign environmentalist fantasies about a general Return to Nature? Is fantasy mere escapism? Is escapism itself 'mere,' or is it an essential need, as many have found it in the context of repeated lockdowns, whether imposed by governments or by the requirement to protect our families, friends, and vulnerable strangers from a disease that resembles the fantastic in making the unthinkable suddenly, urgently present? Why is Fantasy everywhere these days, and why do we love it? Why do *I* love it, given that my affections may differ from yours? Has Fantasy got a history? Will it have a future?

The second answer is not so simple: a Centre invites us to ask what we *mean* by Fantasy. How useful is the term? Why Fantasy rather than SF, or Horror, or one of those catch-all categories, Speculative Fiction or Fantastika? This question I can only answer – like everyone else – from a personal angle. I first began to hear the term fantasy as a child in the 1970s, when it began to be used to describe the fiction I liked, where impossible things happened, such as spontaneous metamorphosis into animal, plant, or supernatural being, the appearance of dragons, trolls or other, stranger creatures, activities wholly outside the capabilities of ordinary people, such as flight, invisibility, light production at a click of the fingers, the discovery of worlds fit for human habitation in wardrobes, hills, woods, mirrors, the sea or the sky. At the time, I was not interested in fiction that described the sorts of things I came across in my daily life; I knew enough about those already. What I wanted was what I hadn't got, and in excess, in superabundance; not just friendships with animals but conversations with *talking* animals, or animals that don't exist, or animals who were formerly humans, or would be again, possibly not at the most convenient moments. And I have gone on wanting these things, although I have also come to recognise how stories about them serve to enrich the everyday, investing the hedgerows and streets with a mystique they would otherwise lack.

What I like about using the term fantasy in an academic context is its free acknowledgment of the contempt an interest in such things can generate; a contempt to which we fantasy-lovers were often subjected – in youth, at least, and sometimes now – to such an extent that we felt the need to conceal our artistic allegiances, or defend them in self-deprecating terms as soon as they had been confessed, as I never needed to defend my work as a scholar of Renaissance Studies. It's important that this set of lived experiences be acknowledged when we pay attention to the fantastic;

embarrassment, mockery, shame. What I like, too, is the fact that the term fantasy contains within itself the admission that we don't *really* know how things work, and that as a result we will always live in a world of wonders; a fact that we can either ignore or embrace, as fantasists do. There are other, more political reasons for loving fantasy – one of them being encapsulated in the evocative phrase used by Lucinda Holdsworth in a recent blog post, that “Fantasy is the first step of all activism”; another being something of a mantra with Rhys Williams, that fantasy provides what might be called a placeholder for the things we don't yet have, but can *dream* of having, now, not just in the future or the imagined past: a healthy working relationship with plants and animals, for instance, or power that is not reliant on fossil fuels. Certainly, it's to fantasy that I can partly ascribe my own burgeoning sense of political commitment as I grew up and grew rapidly older, though Fantasy here shades into Science Fiction, utopianism, the capacity to share other lives imaginatively which is the province of all fiction.

I like the way 'fantasy' changes things when it's applied to them. For instance, you can call Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) a Modernist text, or you can call it Fantasy because of the impossible things it takes for granted: a man who lives for hundreds of years, becoming a woman along the way. The different terms, Modernism and Fantasy, make different things happen. Modernism focuses the mind on a web of experimental artistic movements that sprang up in the 1910s and flourished through the 1930s and beyond, while Fantasy enables us to link those experiments with the web of fictions being woven at the same time, in which the world of the twentieth century (or in *Orlando*'s case, the world of the last four centuries) is acknowledged as fantastic because of the unpredictable changes it has hosted, changes one might confidently have branded impossible before they happened. The term 'fantasy' brings *Orlando* into conversation with texts and other artworks from which it is usually segregated, and *Orlando* is altered in the process. This is why I apply the term quite freely, in the interests of finding out what might happen if it should stick.

A Centre dedicated to Fantasy provides a focus for such questions and cogitations – a focus that has the blessing as well as the financial and social clout of an institution behind it, as it might not have done in the past. It provides a safe haven where fantasists can meet and discuss their rival dreams; not that fantasists were necessarily *persecuted* for those dreams before this, but frequent disparagement can have a wearing effect on even the most ebullient of personalities. It provides a forum for events; since the launch of the Centre in September 2020 there have been four of them, all online, and by the time this editorial sees (virtual) print there will have been two or three more. It provides a launchpad for activities, such as the founding of a new series of academic monographs dedicated to Fantasy that was recently announced by Bloomsbury (Perspectives on Fantasy), and whose editorial team is headlined by members of the Centre and their friends and associates around the world. It generates works of art, having welcomed creative people and fans as well as scholars from its inception; one of our forthcoming events is the launch of a novel which the author began while studying for the MLitt in Fantasy. It forges alliances: we will be holding an international Fantasy conference co-sponsored with the USA-based International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (IAFA), while the British Library turned to the Centre when it began to plan for a forthcoming exhibition on Fantasy, now deferred because of Covid but still very much in the works.

It presents new opportunities for learning, such as the Fantasy Summer School, which starts this year. The Centre, then, is a field of dreams, which attracts activities, objects, and people into its magic circle; people and objects that would otherwise be scattered in ones and twos across the globe. We have already had some donations, of archives and fantasy-related objects as well as funds, and without a Centre it's hard to imagine how such donations could be made. Finally, the Centre gives us an online presence we would not otherwise have had, and this extends its influence well beyond the bounds of Glasgow, Scotland, or Europe.

The fact is, though, that we don't yet know what a Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic does, and will not and should not know exactly what it does until it has done it. That's because in the end it's a collection of people rather than a concept, many of them young, many of them still thinking about where and how to make their first move within the compass of the strange artefacts, places, and texts that obsess or haunt them. We're waiting to find out; and the waiting itself bears daily fruit in the shape of ideas, adventures, causes, dreams. Come join us, then, in the antechamber of the impossible. It almost certainly won't be.

Further information can be found at the Centre's [website](#) and its [blog](#).

#### BIONOTE

**Rob Maslen** is co-director (with Dr Dimitra Fimi) of the new Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic at the University of Glasgow, UK. He is the author of two monographs, *Elizabethan Fictions* (1997) and *Shakespeare and Comedy* (2005), and three editions: Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* (2002), Mervyn Peake's *Collected Poems* (2008), and (with Peter Winington) Peake's *Complete Nonsense* (2011). He has published many essays on speculative fiction, and blogs at [The City of Lost Books](#).