

Department of English, Carleton University

ENGL 5303W

Winter 2013

*** Preliminary Course Outline / Subject to Change

**Studies in Early Modern Literature I- The Force of Phantasm and Phantasy in Spenser,
Marlowe and Shakespeare**

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Course description:

This course will consider the force of fantasy for early modern subjectivity in selected texts written by Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare. Fantasy was the mental faculty of image-making from which poets and rhetoricians drew their material to captivate readers. Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare were of course masters of manipulating images but this mastery raises fascinating questions from the perspective of the period's view of interiority. During this time, various institutions—the state, the church, and education—regarded the mental faculty of phantasy and its products with deep suspicion. In particular, early modern psychology depicted this faculty's images or phantasms as breeding cognitive disorder, which could jeopardize the subject's ability to reason and behave ethically. In the precariously balanced inner world of subjectivity, fantasy could play the role of traitor—let alone seducer, rogue, or madman—to the self and to others. Given the cultural anxieties over this unstable mental organ, how does the manipulation of phantasm and phantasy in the works of Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare trouble, if not clash with, their culture's ethical codes? How does early modern fantasy—so very different from the romantic imagination—tantalize, seduce, disrupt, and annihilate early modern subjectivity with its images? In brief, how do read the phantasm?

We will study not only literary texts but also a variety of non-literary texts with an attention to representations of how the faculty of fantasy interacts with other dimensions of interiority and subjectivity. Our analyses of fantasies will be directed but not limited by early modern historical and psychological contexts; contemporary psychoanalytic and cultural theorists, such as Lacan, Althusser, Klein, and Žižek, will enrich and nuance our critical vocabulary for dealing with the literary works. These theorists will help us to conceptualize fantasy as a political and ideological category, not grounded in the pathological whims of the individual mind, but positioning subjectivity within the larger currents and flows of early modern culture.