ENGLISH 399: SEX, GENDER, AND SCIENCE/FICTION  
WINTER 2012  
PROFESSOR BEN SAUNDERS

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Description:  
In this class we will read several works of science-fiction that explore themes of gender and sexuality, in conjunction with some recent non-fiction texts on the biological foundations of gendered difference and sexual orientation.

Ordinarily, we might consider scientific knowledge to be the primary source material from which the texts of science-fiction are derived. The empirical discoveries and technological innovations are thought to come first, and to inspire fantasies that are then regarded as secondary in both the temporal and the evaluative sense — as mere escapist entertainments, inherently less valuable than the “truths” that inspired them. But in this course we will consider the possibility that this is a false hierarchy, that creativity and imaginative play are the real “mothers of invention” (to use what will come to seem a loaded metaphor), and that scientists may actually have something to learn from science-fiction writers. We will test the thesis that, at the highest level of philosophical speculation, the distinction between “reality” and “fantasy” may be neither sustainable nor useful.

Our inquiries will be therefore be governed by the following key questions: What unexamined ideas about sexuality and gender can be said to ground both the fictional and the factual discourses? To what extent are both science-fiction writers and scientists limited by cultural assumptions about sex and gender? And to what extent do both science-fiction writers and scientists challenge such assumptions with their ostensibly very different kinds of writing and research?

Texts:  
*The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin  
*Her Smoke Rose Up Forever* by James Tiptree, Jr. [Alice Sheldon]  
*The Female Man* by Joanna Russ  
*The Gate to Women’s Country* by Sherri Tepper  
*Brainstorm*, by Rebecca M. Jordan-Young

All of the above should be available at the UO Textbook store. Other readings will be supplied in photocopied form.

Method of Assessment:  
Grades will be based upon

- A short (3-5 page) speculative essay. Peer draft due by 4 pm on Friday of Week II (Jan. 20), final draft due by 4 pm on Friday of Week III (Jan. 27), PLUS
- A short (3 page maximum) research-report on your experiences/discoveries within the Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin papers in Special Collections, Knight Library. You may complete this assignment at any point prior to 4 pm on Friday of Week IX (March 9), PLUS
- An analysis of a James Tiptree, Jr. short story (5-7 pages), due at 4 pm Friday of Week VI (Feb.17), and EITHER
- A longer research paper (10 pages minimum) due at 4 pm, Friday, Week X (March 16), OR
- A performance-based/creative final project, to be presented to the class on Wednesday of Week X (March 14).

See below for more details regarding all these assignments.
There may also be pop-quizzes on the reading throughout the semester. No further warnings will be given about these quizzes.

**Assignment One: The Speculative Essay.**

“Is It Possible To Have A Sense of Self Apart From A Sense of Gender?”

How important is one’s gender to one’s sense of self? Write a philosophical and speculative essay of no fewer than THREE and no more than FIVE pages on this topic. In the process, you should consider some (and perhaps all) of the following questions. Would you be the same person if your gender identity changed? If all human beings could change genders at will, what consequences would this have for human identity and for the world in which we live? What if there was only one gender (for example, if human beings reproduced asexually)? Would a world where there was only one gender be the same as a world with no gender, or different? Can you offer a thought-experiment — a description of an imagined world — that could help us to see the difference (or lack of difference)? What would an “ungendered” self be like? What are the political implications of the conclusion that identity is indivisible from gender? What are the political implications of the conclusion that identity persists apart from gender considerations?

During Week I and the early part of Week II, you should “brainstorm” written answers to some or all of these questions in turn, in draft form, just to get your thoughts going. Don’t censor yourself or worry about contradictions, at first; just get some ideas down on paper. Then revise those thoughts into the draft of a short essay. **Remember, just because it is a draft does not mean you should not be concerned with issues of STYLE as well as CONTENT; if your sentences are ungrammatical and sloppy, your thinking will also be disconnected and weak.** On FRIDAY of WEEK II (Jan. 20), by no later than 4 pm, you will email copies of your draft essay to two class members (assigned by me). Those class members will print up and comment upon your drafts, returning them to you on MONDAY of Week III. We will set aside half an hour of class-time for an exchange of papers and discussion of their contents. You may then incorporate those conversations into your final revisions, which are due at my office in hard-copy form by 4 pm on FRIDAY of WEEK III.

DO NOT be tempted to hand in something that simply addresses the questions above serially (one after the other). That’s a fine way to start your writing process, but it would not be an essay. Your argument or arguments need to arise and proceed from one to another in a coherent, logical way.

You are strongly encouraged to refer to the texts we have read so far to support your claims. You may also write from personal experience. (Some conjunction of both your reading and your experience will probably be most effective.)

**Assignment Two: The Research Report**

Special Collections in Knight Library contains a treasure trove: the personal letters and papers of science-fiction writers Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin. At some point prior to the Friday of Week IX, you will all be required to visit Special Collections and spend some time looking through this archive. (I have assigned each of you a different deadline, alphabetically according to your last name; if you fall into group A-H this work is due by Friday Week V; if I-P, Friday Week VII; if Q-Z, Friday Week IX).

You should be prepared to spend at least a full morning or afternoon — **at least three uninterrupted hours**, in other words — just going through the materials and taking some notes on what you find. (Remember, Special Collections staff can copy individual documents for you if you want them for research purposes.)

After visiting the collection, write a short (three page maximum) paper about your discoveries, focusing in detail on at least one unpublished document. You may build on this work in your Final Research Paper (see below), in which case you may regard this assignment as a preliminary exploration of the archive.
Assignment Three: Short Story Analysis

Chose ONE of James Tiptree, Jr.’s short stories for a literary analysis (of five-seven pages). This analysis should explore the relationship between style and content, and avoid plot summary; in other words, you should focus in detail on the way the story is told and consider how those details affect your perception of events within it. For example, what kind(s) of narrative voice does Tiptree employ in the story — Omniscient narrator? First person point-of-view? Stream of consciousness? — and what difference does it make? Above all, you need to specify the ways in which Tiptree’s different narrative strategies and specific uses of language — the vocabulary, the syntax of particular sentences, the use of metaphor, even the sound of the words — can generate meaningful associations and nuanced inflections of tone and mood, thereby influencing and shaping the reader’s response.

You may use our classroom discussions as a starting point, but the best essay will extend, complicate, or qualify those observations. You are encouraged to refer to any of the non-fictional texts we have read on the subject of gender and sexuality, if and when they seem relevant. You may also consult outside sources on Tiptree’s work, but be sure to cite those sources fully and accurately (plagiarism will be harshly punished).

Assignment Four, Option One: Research Paper

For this assignment, you may write about any of the fictional texts we have read for the course. The same guidelines as for the Short Story Analysis apply, but more strictly; you are required to refer to at least one of the philosophical or critical texts we have read during the term, as well as at least one more additional outside source. This additional source may be drawn from the letters and papers in Special Collections, as well as published criticism.

I am happy to meet with you to discuss your choice of topic and provide suggestions for additional readings — just come and see me during office hours, or send me an email with your ideas. (But please give some thought to what you want to talk about in these papers before contacting me; this makes it much easier to be helpful.) I also STRONGLY recommend starting to write on your topic at least two weeks in advance of the due date.

Assignment Four, Option Two: The Creative Project

Instead of writing a second paper, you may work in groups (of 2-6) to produce a performance based final project (10-15 minutes in length) for the rest of your classmates to watch, or even produce a short piece of creative writing. (Video projects are also permissible, but please be aware that technology can create as many problems as solves. Unless your creative idea absolutely dictates a pre-recorded performance, I urge you to “go live.”) The basic idea is that performances/creative projects can function as instructive interpretations, just like an essay.

For example, you could write and perform a play adapting some portion of the prose fictions we have read for the “stage” of the classroom; you could write an original play involving any of the characters or authors; you could have the authors and/or their characters meet and talk in a new setting; you could write a short speculative fiction of your own that explores the themes of the class; you could combine any of these suggestions, or you could come up with something else. As long as it is suitably engaged with the issues of gender and science-fiction that we have considered during the term you are only limited by your imaginations.

Performance projects will be presented in class on Wednesday of Week X. Creative writing projects are due at 4 pm on Friday of Week X. Students should meet with me by the beginning of week VII to discuss the form of this project. If I have not heard from you by this time I will assume that you are opting for the research paper.

Final grades break down as follows:
Speculative Essay: 20%
Archival Research Report: 10%
Story Analysis: 30%
Final Project: 40%

NB: Extra credit – up to 1/3 of a letter grade – will be available to those students who make valuable contributions in class throughout the quarter. Remember: a significant in-class class contribution can involve asking an intelligent question, as well as providing answers.

Students who fail to answer more than 50% of quiz questions correctly will see their final grade reduced by 1/3 of a letter grade. So you would be well advised to do the reading.

Buyer Beware

- Late papers will not be accepted without a valid medical or dean’s excuse.
- Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will result in a lowered grade, at the rate of 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. from A to A-) for every unexcused absence. No further warnings will be given.
- In the event of illness, an unanticipated family commitment, or other approved University business (such as participation in a sporting event), some absences may be considered “excused.” In almost all cases, excused absences require some form of official documentation (for example, a doctor’s note). Courteous students will also contact me about their unavoidable absences, either before or (in the event of an emergency) as soon as is reasonable after the class in question.
- There will be no “do-overs” or second-chances on written assignments. You need to make it your best work the first time around. If you are concerned that you will underperform on a particular assignment, you need to come and see me beforehand; afterwards is too late.
- If you miss a quiz, you missed a quiz. There will be no make-up assignments (except in the case of an excused absence).
- Always bring a text to class. Students without a text will be asked to leave. You can’t even pretend to be interested if you don’t have a book in front of you.
- Plagiarism (presenting the research and insights of others as if they were your own) will result in automatic failure of the course. Loss of financial aid is a common additional consequence; and in certain cases (a second offense, for example), plagiarism can result in dismissal from the university. Please be aware that every term for the last twelve years I have failed dozens of students for not citing or for inadequately citing (that is, plagiarizing) online sources. In one particularly unpleasant term I was forced to fail eight students in a class of forty. (Yes, that’s almost a quarter of the class; yes, I failed them all, outright; yes, at least one of those students lost her financial aid and was unable to complete her degree.) Understand further: even if you re-write a source in your own words, if you do not cite that source in both your text and your bibliography, you are still committing plagiarism (of the sneakiest, most dishonest kind).
- If you are unsure how to cite sources, you have many options: for example, you can consult a style manual, a reference librarian, a writing instructor, or a student-writing advisor. If you remain uncertain, you can even ask me. But remember, it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with this basic requirement of scholarly writing.
- These texts deal with adult subject matter and themes, including issues of homosexual desire and trans-gendered identity. You are not required to like everything you read — indeed, I hope for a more complicated response than that — but please be ready to meet the intellectual challenges of this extraordinary material with an open mind if you chose to take this course.

If you have any questions about any of the above, feel free to ask. That is why I am here.

*Please note: on occasion I am forced to cancel my office hours for departmental/committee meetings, graduate student examinations, and other significant administrative duties. This will be the case on Friday, February 9th and Friday, March 23rd. I will endeavor to inform you all in advance of any other cancellations, and to reschedule my hours accordingly, but it may not always be possible to do so. Your patience and understanding is appreciated.