

Fantasy Cultures: Game of Thrones and the Modern World

FLNG 381

Professor: Thomas Leek
Office: CCC 404
Phone: 715-252-7515
Email: tleek@uwsp.edu
Office Hours: Tuesday 1:00-2:00, Thursday 10:00-10:50
Meeting Times: Monday/Wednesday, 9:30-10:45
Meeting Place: CCC 305

I. Course Description



An historically-based fantasy world is any artistic representation of a fictional world that borrows elements from verified history, but mixes these elements with the creator’s invention, sometimes emphasizing accurate depictions of history, but sometimes weighted heavily towards fantasy. The international phenomena of fantasy worlds and historical fiction indicates a persistent modern fascination with the ancient and medieval worlds, most evident in depictions of an imagined world and international order. Thus, while the “Middle Ages” constitute a distinctly European manner of describing history, consumers from Russia to the United States to Japan have been entertained by a variety of stories set in pseudo-medieval and pseudo-historical worlds. In this course, we will examine the medieval world and the medieval worlds of the modern imagination and ask: do we see ourselves in these stories? If so, how and why? How do various cultures interact with their past through fantasy literature and historical fiction? Why do we enjoy retelling history with dragons and zombies?

This course is not about the television show *Game of Thrones*, nor the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Rather, we will use that material as a baseline, contemporary example of fantasy world-building. But we will read and explore folklore and fantasy literature in an international, diachronic fashion.

It is expected that you will be at every class period, having completed the necessary readings, writings, or other homework, and that you take part in class discussion.

II. Learning Outcomes for this Course:

- Learning Outcome 1: To describe the literary and academic dialog about and with the medieval period [Humanities LO# 1]

Assignments: Course readings, in-class discussions, and short reaction texts to the readings and films.

- Learning Outcome 2: Describe the similarities and differences between primary sources on ancient and medieval culture and modern, fantastical representations of medieval culture.

Analyze the development of fantasy culture from folkloristics [Historical Perspectives LO#1].

Assignments: Course readings on early folkloristics, in-class discussions, and the description of a folktale collection.]

- Learning Outcome 3: To examine perennial questions concerning the human condition, and how humans understand their place in history using tools like literary fantasy and academics.

Assignments: In-class discussion, short essay on folktales. [Humanities LO#1 and LO#2]

- Learning Outcome 4: Describe the differences between medieval and modern social identities and the ways these are demonstrated and analyzed in fantasy culture as opposed to academic history. What do the different approaches to culture bring to our understanding of the medieval world and how we relate to history? [Historical Perspective LO#4]. Assignments: Course readings, in-class discussion, and the final group project analyzing a fantasy world.

III. Assignments:

Much of this seminar involves reading, discussing, and writing short reaction essays to the material we have discussed. These are the homework assignments you must complete:

- Readings: Read the listed primary source or article before the next class period in which we will be discussing the listed readings.
- Online reactions: Write half a page to a page of reaction to a reading/discussion and submit via D2L.
- Medieval food: in week XII, we will take some time to move class to the kitchen and prepare some medieval dishes as authentically as we can. You need not be an expert cook to take part, but willing to research and learn.
- Films: Towards the end of the semester, we will lighten up on the reading so as to give you more time to complete your final projects and presentations. Instead, you will watch two films outside of class and we will discuss these in class. One film is short enough to view in class in the final week. I will also include an assignment for a fantasy film of your choice, for which you will write a review and briefly explain in class.
- Final Project: Fantasy cultures are an international phenomenon, though sometimes (not always) peculiarly tied to nationalist discourses. While we are reading and discussing our examples throughout the semester, you are to choose a work of fantasy, folklore, science fiction, and/or historical fiction to explore, report on, and present at the end of the semester.

Below is a list of possible works of literature you may choose to report on. You may choose something else with my approval. You may not choose the examples we use throughout the semester: *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Grimms' Tales*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Game of Thrones*, or *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

In your report and presentation, you are to offer a summary (visual aids are welcome) of the fantasy material, discuss the historical and pseudo-historical dimensions of the work, and describe the historical or science fiction discourse at work in the material. Are any myths of history debunked? Created? Do the various figures in the material reflect on history or on a contemporaneous vision of history? How does this artistic rendering of history compare to an academic approach to history?

List of possible fantasies:

Ossian

Kalevala

Tales from E.T.A. Hoffman (e.g. *The Nutcracker*)

The Kingkiller Chronicle (or anything else from Rothfuss)

Alice in Wonderland

Star Wars Novels (not the films)

Kwaidan/Kaidan

Nine Layers of Sky

The *Narnia* series

The Princess and The Goblin

The Stone and the Flute

Monkey (Journey to the West)

Investiture of the Gods

Children of Blood and Stone

The Bird that Drinks Blood

Children of the Rune

One-Hundred Years of Solitude

This is not a comprehensive list. Feel free to come to me with a suggestion for your own.

IV. Grading Structure

Participation in Discussions – 20

Online Reactions – 12

Film Reviews – 8

Medieval Food – 5

Midterm (short bluebook essays) – 10

Final Paper – 20

Presentation – 10

Final Exam – 15

V. Texts

Required Primary Texts to be found online:

The Book of Emperors. Ed. and Trans, Henry Myers. Morgantown, West Virginia, 2013.

Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. "Preface to the Second Edition of the Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm (1819)."

http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=348

Kepler, Johannes. *Dream*.

<https://frostydrew.org/papers/dc/papers/paper-somnium/>

Herodotus. *The Histories*:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0126>

"Puss in Boots", site with texts from Straparola, Basile, and Perrault.

<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0545Blit.html>

Articles and Book Chapters available online:

Bottigheimer, Ruth. "*Fairy Godfather*, Fairy-Tale History, and Fairy-Tale Scholarship: A Response to Dan Ben-Amos, Jan M. Ziolkowski, and Francisco Vaz da Silva".

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/396117/summary>

Braeger, Analida: "The Taste of Medieval Food."

<http://www.medievalists.net/2014/12/medieval-food-taste/>

Cobb, Paul. "Is Islamic History in Danger of Becoming Irrelevant?"

<https://blog.oup.com/2014/08/irrelevance-of-islamic-history/>

Cook, Simon J. "Lord of the Rings as English Mythology".

<http://yemachine.com/tolkien/lord-of-the-rings-as-english-mythology/>

Elliott, Andrew B.R. "A Vile Love Affair: Right Wing Nationalism and the Middle Ages".

<https://www.publicmedievalist.com/vile-love-affair/>

Łaszkiewicz, Weronika. "Finding God(s) in Fantasylands: Religious Ideas in Fantasy Literature."

<http://www.crossroads.uwb.edu.pl/finding-gods-in-fantasylands/>

Nichols, Catherine. "The Good Guy/Bad Guy Myth."

<https://aeon.co/essays/why-is-pop-culture-obsessed-with-battles-between-good-and-evil>

Rahman, Aamer. "Daenerys' Whole Storyline on *Game of Thrones* is Messed Up."

<https://io9.gizmodo.com/daenerys-whole-storyline-on-game-of-thrones-is-messed-513189766>

Sayer, Duncan. "Why the Idea that the English Have a Common Anglo-Saxon Origin Is a Myth." <https://theconversation.com/why-the-idea-that-the-english-have-a-common-anglo-saxon-origin-is-a-myth-88272>

Ziolkowski, Jan. "A Fairy Tale from before Fairy Tales: Egbert of Liège's "De puella a lupelis a seruata" and the Medieval Background of 'Little Red Riding Hood'". http://www.jstor.org/stable/2863656?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Books on Reserve:

Dundes, Alan. 1982. *Cinderella, A Folklore Casebook*. New York: Garland.

Geary, Patrick. 2000. *The Myth of Nations: The Origins of Medieval Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell.

Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*.

Smith, Anthony. 1994. *Theories of Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zipes, Jack. 2006. *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. New York: Routledge.

Films on Reserve:

Alexander Nevsky. (Eisenstein) 1938. (Also available on YouTube)

Momotaro no Umiwashi (Eigashu) 1943. (Also available on YouTube)

Das Zaubermännchen (Engel) 1960.

VI. Schedule

Week I:

Wednesday, Sept. 4 - *Course Introduction*:

Leading Question: What are the boundaries of fantasy culture/literature? Is it international? Have we always had it? What's distinctive about modern fantasy? Discuss syllabus, assignments, final assignment.

Homework:

- Read *Herodotus* excerpt Book I
- Think about a fantasy world you're interested in. Choose by week III.
- Write an online reaction (#1) on fantasy culture.

Week II:

Monday, Sept. 9 - Discussion: *History and fantasy*:

Leading Question: How can we describe the superficial commonalities between fantasy literature and religion? Do the superficial connections point to anything deeper?

Homework:

- Read Łaszkievicz article, "Finding Gods".
- Write an online reaction (#2) on historical writing and fantasy.

Wednesday, Sept. 11 - Discussion: *Divinity and divinities in fantasy literature*:

Leading Question: How does Łaszkievicz characterize the issues around the divine in fantasy literature? How can we describe the superficial commonalities between religion and fantasy?

Introduce *Poor Heinrich*.

Leading Question: Did the Middle Ages have fantasy literature similar to our own?

Homework:

- *The Book of Emperors*, "Rome's Founding", "Julius Caesar", and "Nero". .
- Write an online reaction to Łaszkievicz (#3).

Week III:

Monday, Sept. 16 - Discussion of *The Book of Emperors*

Leading Question: How can we interpret the interaction of magic and religion in this medieval tale?

Homework: *The Book of Emperors*, "Constantius Chlorus", "Constantine", "Charlemagne".

Wednesday, Sept. 18 - Discussion of *The Book of Emperors*. Introduce Ziolkowski.

Leading Question: Is this a fairy tale or fantasy in the sense that we are familiar with fairy tales? Were there fairy tales in the Medieval period?

Homework:

- Read: Ziolkowski article, “A Medieval Little Red Riding Hood”.
- Write an online reaction to *The Book of Emperors*.
- Read “Puss in Boots” from Straparola and Basile;
- Choose a fantasy world you’re interested in.

Week IV: *I’m at a conference.*

Week V:

Monday, Sept. 30 - Discussion of Bottigheimer and Straparola tales.

Leading Question: Can the medieval “Little Red Riding Hood” credibly be connected to the “Little Red Riding Hood” that we know? What are the differences? What are the similarities?

Leading Question: What differences do we find between medieval tales and modern fairy tales? Do these differences involve details, worldview, or genre? Who is more correct about fairy tales: Ziolkowski or Bottigheimer?

Homework:

- Bottigheimer article.
- Write an online reaction to Ziolkowski Bottigheimer.
- Zipes chapter (introduction) in *Why Fairy Tales Stick*.
- Write an online reaction on international aspects of folktale plots.

Wednesday, Oct. 2 - Discussion of fairy tale history, orientalism and the Arabian Nights.

Leading Question: What is cultural authenticity? Do the Arabian Nights respect the culture being demonstrated? How can we evaluate the “authenticity” of a cultural artifact like the *Arabian Nights* or derivatives like the Disney film *Aladdin*?

Homework:

- Nichols Article, “Good Guy/Bad Guy”.
- Write an online reaction to Aladdin.

Week VI:

Monday, Oct. 7 - Discussion of Nichols article.

Leading Question: How do the moral universes and worldviews of traditional folktales contrast to the worldviews presented in modern fantasies like *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* or *Game of Thrones*?

Homework:

- Read Kepler’s *Dream* / Excerpt from *Utopia*
- Write an online reaction to Nichols article.

Wednesday, Oct. 9 - Discussion of utopian fantasies and science fiction

Leading Question: What sort of Utopia does Kepler present? Do we find similar utopian impulses in more traditional fantasy or folktales?

Homework:

- Read Grimm’s Preface to folktale collection.

- Write an online reaction to Kepler's *Dream*, utopias.

Week VII:

Monday, Oct. 14 - Discussion on folkloristics and its assumptions.

Leading Question: What motivated the Grimms to collect tales from the "Volk"? What standards did they set for themselves as collectors?

Homework:

- Read Grimms' tales, 1st and 7th editions (Maiden Without Hands / Rapunzel / Children who Played at Slaughter)

Wednesday, Oct. 16 - Discussion of Grimms' Tales.

Leading Question: What changes did the Grimms make to the later editions of their tales. Do these changes fit with their vision for the collection of folktales?

Homework:

- Read Gellner/Smith on nationalism.
- Write an online reaction to the Grimms' tales, differences between the first and later editions.

Week VIII:

Monday, Oct. 21 - Discussion of nationalism and fantasy

Leading Question: What is nationalism and what is a nation? From what we know of and have discussed of the Grimms, do they fit the mold of typical early nationalists?

Homework:

- Read: Articles from Cook "English Mythology" and Sayer "Common Ancestry".
- Excerpts from Tolkien.

Wednesday, Oct. 23 - Midterm

Week IX:

Monday, Oct. 28 - Tolkien and D&D: Role up AD&D characters and discuss the experience.

Leading Question: How do we experience the creation of Tolkienesque characters? How does race work in character creation and world-building? Does this correspond to racial stereotypes in 20th and 21st-century societies?

Homework: Write a reaction to Tolkien and related articles.

Wednesday, Oct. 30 - Introductory discussion to Game of Thrones.

Leading Question: What are our subjective impressions – no matter our level of exposure – what is appealing about GoT? What is controversial about it?

Homework: Explore some online discussion of the GoT series. What is controversial?

How are the violence and sexuality on the show criticized or defended? (Any student who

does not wish to expose themselves to this material may ask about an alternative assignment).

Read: “Game of Thrones: Worst Finale Ever?”

<https://newrepublic.com/article/153947/game-thrones-worst-finale-ever>

Week X:

Monday, Nov. 4 – Why did GoT Start to Suck? Discussion of the beginning and the end.

Leading Question: Did the writers come up with a satisfying ending to the show? In what ways are different myths supported or created?

Homework:

- Rahman article, “Daenerys’ Whole Storyline”.
- Write an online reaction to Daenerys Targaryen as a figure and heroine.

Wednesday, Nov. 6 - Discussion of the Daenerys Targaryean figure.

Leading Question: Is the figure of Daenerys Targaryean anachronistic? An imperialist cliché? How do we project our own ideologies onto ancient worlds through fantasy?

Homework:

- Cobb article “Islamic History”.
- Write an online reaction to the questions surrounding the Daenerys figure.

Week XI:

Monday, Nov. 11 - Guest speaker: Dr. Edgar Francis: Is Islamic History in Danger of Becoming Irrelevant? (Or: Were the Middle Ages particularly cruel and why do many modern people play dress-up and reenact this supposed cruelty? “Are you not entertained?”)

Homework: Read Elliott, “A Vile Love Affair”.

Wednesday, Nov. 13 –

Guest speaker: Arne Parrott, “Performing in Renaissance Festivals – Is this a museum or a theme park?”

Start researching medieval food.

Week XII:

Monday, Nov. 18 - Discussion of nationalism, history, and fantasy.

Leading Question: Why do ethnocentric and nationalist movements appeal to history?

Homework: Read Geary, “Introduction”.

Wednesday, Nov 20 – Discussion: Geary and the connection between bad history, fantasy, and nationalism.

Homework:

Write an online reaction to Elliott and Geary.

Read Braeger “The Taste of Medieval Food”. Do some research on what ingredients you would need and how you would prepare a medieval dish.

Homework: Make sure we have the ingredients necessary to prepare a medieval dish.

Week XIII:

Monday, Nov, 25 - Discussion of history as an experience while we prepare and eat our medieval dishes.

Leading Question: How credible are our efforts to recreate a medieval dish? What worked best and what worked less well?

Homework: Watch *Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein)

Wednesday, Nov. 27 - *Alexander Nevsky* (Russian Film) discussion.

Leading Question: What ideological and nationalist elements can we identify in Eisenstein's film? Continue any discussion of medieval food.

Homework: write a reaction to *Alexander Nevsky*.

Week XIV:

Monday, December 2 – Discuss *Das Zaubermännchen* and *Alexander Nevsky*.

Homework: Watch *Momotaro no Umiwashi* (Eigashu)

Wednesday, December 4 - *Momotaro* (Japanese Film) discussion

Leading Question: What ideological and nationalist motifs can we identify in Eigashu's film? / Presentations

Homework: write an online reaction to *Momotaro no Umiwashi*.

Week XV:

Monday, December - 9 - *Presentations*

Wednesday, December 11 - *Presentations*