

GSWS 2455/ENGL 2355. Happily Ever After? Melissa Jensen, Fall 2024

Course Description:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that there are no more famous opening words than “Once upon a time”. They are familiar to the point of ubiquity, beloved, demanded, simply accepted as a promise that something extraordinary is about to unfold. And, in fairy tales, something always does.

In this course, we will focus not on that promise (after all, it’s an immutable truth), but on the less immutable “Happily ever after” that we expect to have follow. Because not every tale ends happily for anyone, let alone everyone. Just ask most fictional stepmothers. And even for the winner, the path is seldom smooth.

We will examine fairy tales and folklore across continents and centuries, considering both form and function in how they stand as both rulebook and cautionary tale, specifically as they speak to gender and sexuality. What, really, are the messages in these age-old tales? In their contemporary adaptations? How, as 21st century scholars, should we approach magic and monstrosity? When we sing along loudly with Queen Elsa of Disney’s Frozen, exhorting each other to “Let It Go”, what is *it*?

Materials will include the traditional fantastical (such as Grimm’s tales, One Thousand and One Nights, Ghanaian folklore, The Odyssey, Pride and Prejudice), to the modern (Disney Disney Disney, Hayao Miyazaki, Angela Carter, Barbie) to the scholarly (such as Morrison, Lieberman, Kristeva, Warner, Solnit).

Requirements include weekly check-ins, two short response papers, a presentation on a course-related topic, a final project, and regular participation in class discussions. If all good little scholars are eager and industrious, there might be literary cookies. If not, there might be (were)wolves...

Course Objectives:

The goal is for students to engage in fairy- and folktales not just as representative texts of era or genre, but as an ongoing, mutable part of the fabric of culture, society, and history.

Students will develop their understanding of gender studies, here within the context of folklore. They will examine how the structure and culture represented in these stories tell their own tales: enforcing—or busting—stereotype and constraint, leading the next generation who demands that “Once upon a time” down its own path.

Number and size of paper(s) assigned:

All students will write two short (500ish word) responses to a choice of critical prompts. They will have the option to write a 2500-3500 word paper for their final project; this may be an original fairy tale, or a critical analysis of a thematic or material focus from the term.

Number and type of exams (if any):

No exams

Other requirements/assignments:

Each student will prepare a short, 10-15 minute presentation on a subject viably connected to fairy tales and gender. There is weekly reading/viewing, and weekly short response exercises to check in on how they're engaging with the material. Students may choose, for their final project, to do an alternative to a written piece. In the past, these have included short films, visual art, dramatic monologues, and other creative expressions.