

English 480 (W) Studies in Literature and Folklore—The Italian Fairy Tale

Description

This course will focus on the tale of magic in Italy by tracing the emergence of the genre from the oral tradition into literature, contextualizing the Italian fairy tale within a comparative or cross-cultural understanding of the genre, and exploring the translation of the Italian fairy tale across media and cultures in history as well as in contemporary culture.

Texts

Selections from Giovanfrancesco Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* or *Pleasant Nights*; Giambattista Basile's *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*, translated by Nancy L. Canepa; selections from Thomas Crane's *Italian Popular Tales*; *Beautiful Angiola: The Lost Sicilian Folk and Fairy Tales of Laura Gonzenbach*, translated by Jack Zipes; Carlo Lorenzini/Collodi's *Pinocchio*; Italo Calvino's *Italian Folktales*; selections from Gianni Rodari's *The Grammar of Fantasy*; three films, Disney's 1940 *Pinocchio*; Roberto Benigni's 2002 *Pinocchio*; and *Pinocchio 3000*, a 2003 sci-fi Canadian film.

Syllabus

The syllabus is organized in four parts, each of which will comprise four weeks of the course. This 400-level course will combine wonder-filled readings with an interdisciplinary, analytical approach to the social history of the Italian fairy tale as genre.

PART I The goals of this introduction to the emergence of fairy tales in Italy are to a) provide an understanding of how modern fairy tales first circulated in print; b) deepen the students' understanding of how the fairy tale emerges from folktales as "extraindividual" narratives (existing within and beyond each individual and personalized telling); c) identify stylistic and structural features of the new genre; d) show how fairy tales relate to some kind of group identity construction (ethnic, national, gendered) and yet are shaped by the experiences and ideologies of individual artists.

The emergence of the fairy-tale genre from the oral tradition into literature is now traced back to medieval Latin texts (Ziolkowski 2006), but it is with the publication of Giovanfrancesco Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (Venice, 1551-1553) and with Giambattista Basile's Neapolitan *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634-1636) that the genre clearly acquires distinctive features as printed fiction that differs from a novella or a fable. Among the dozen fairy tales in Straparola's collection and the fifty in Basile's, we find in Straparola the first modern printings of world-wide favorites such as "Puss in Boots" ("Costantino Fortunato") and "The Animal Bridegroom" ("Re Porco"), and in Basile "Sleeping Beauty" ("Sole, Luna, e Talia") or "Cinderella" ("La Gatta Cenerentola"). These collections, then, inaugurate the production and reception of a modern genre, mixing magic transformations and entertainment, that quickly acquires vast popularity in modern Europe; furthermore, some stories—such as "The Three Citrons" ("Le Tre Melarance") and "Rapunzel" ("Petrosinella")—have a distinctively Italian flavor that roots them in Southern European culture (Italy was not a nation until the 1860s) and local (Venice and Naples were in different ways very cosmopolitan cities) societies. Because some of these tales appear in different versions in the two collections (e.g., "Puss in Boots") the styles and poetics of the two writers can be easily foregrounded.

PART II The main goal in this section of the course is to contextualize the early Italian fairy tale within a comparative or cross-cultural understanding of the genre, especially in relation to fairy-tale classics such as Charles Perrault (*Histoires, ou contes du temps passé* 1697) and the Brothers Grimm (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen* published in various editions from 1812 to 1857).

Perrault (and the less known French aristocratic women also writing fairy tales at the turn of the XVII century) as well as the Grimms knew the early Italian tales: how and to what ends did they transform Straparola and Basile? The bawdiness and stylistic flair of Basile are for instance replaced by an intellectual irony and stylistic terseness in Perrault. And the wit of the underclass protagonist in Straparola is supplanted by a dark morality and a nostalgic representation of the poor in the Grimms. These transformations are indicative of different cultural frameworks for the development of the genre, but they also crystallize the dominant ideology of the genre as it comes to us today. The fairy-tale bestsellers that became canonized in Euro-American literary and popular culture fulfill(ed) specific socializing functions—most prominently, the construction of femininity and childhood in a bourgeois family context. The foundational Italian tales, which did not easily conform to these models, were thus neglected in the canonization of the fairy tale, though they continued to be of interest to comparative folklorists and to Italian literature scholars (Benedetto Croce). Students will be comparing selected tales (e.g., “Sleeping Beauty” and “Cinderella”) in versions by Straparola, Basile, Perrault, and the Grimms to reflect on cultural translation and genre ideology.

PART III Here we will develop an understanding of the Italian fairy tale in relation to the socio-cultural history of specific regions that were united into a modern nation during the 1860-1870 period. The construction of a national identity for Germany was part of the Grimms’ project when they envisioned collecting folk and fairy tales that would, as per their selection and editing, differ from the ones from France, e.g., and express the soul of the German people. Following the Grimms, writers in Europe edited other “national” collections, and among them we will look closely at Thomas Crane’s *Italian Popular Tales* which is published in 1885, shortly after the unification of Italy, but defines the Italian fairy tale from an Anglo-American and scholarly perspective. *Beautiful Angiola: The Lost Sicilian Folk and Fairy Tales of Laura Gonzenbach*, translated into English by Jack Zipes in the XXI century, is a collection of Sicilian folk and fairy tales, first published in High German by a Swiss woman who was born in Messina in 1842. We will read these stories (all told by women to this woman collector who was however an outsider in terms of class and education) because they offer much insight into the complex history and social struggles of Sicily and strikingly diverse representations of female heroines that counter stereotypes of Southern Italian women. These tales also complement the famous folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè’s compendium of tales from Sicily published in the late XIX century, of which we will read selections if Zipes’s translation of Pitrè is available in 2009. Finally, we will read Italo Calvino’s *Italian Folktales* (1960), a collection assembled in the nationalistic mode of the Grimms but also shaped by a post-World War II perspective on class and other social issues.

PART IV In this last section of the course we will explore how the Italian fairy tale is traveling cross-culturally in the contemporary world.

Having read Calvino's popular collection and the recent translations of earlier Italian fairy-tale collections, students will have a strong sense of how the Italian fairy tale is a "hot topic" in folklore and fairy-tale studies today. Italian fairy tales are providing international scholars with new insights on the origin and history of the genre; they are also providing these scholars as well as general readers with a treasure trove of plots, ethnographic details, and metaphors that help to break the mold of the fairy tale as it has been canonized via Perrault, the Grimms, and Disney.

Because the fairy tale circulates predominantly as children's literature today, we will read Collodi's world-famous *Pinocchio*. Authored by Carlo Lorenzini (1826-1890), a Florentine writer who also translated Perrault's fairy tales into Italian, *Pinocchio* was first published serially between 1881 and 1883, and stands out in several ways as an early children's novel. Our focus in the class will be on the transformation of this rather somber and historically grounded fairy tale into the very popular Disney animated film (1940) and two other recent films, Roberto Benigni's live-action 2002 *Pinocchio* and the 2003 Canadian scifi *Pinocchio 3000*. We will also read fairy-tale related selections ("Popular Folk Tales as Raw Material," "Little Red Riding Hood in a Helicopter," "The Fairy Tale Reversed," "What Happened After?," "The Fairy Tale Salad," "Recasting the Fairy Tale," "The Cards of Propp") from Gianni Rodari's *Grammar of Fantasy*, a leading text in innovative children's literature that has had world-wide impact in children's education.

Assignments and Grades

Since this is a W course there will be at least 20 pages of graded writing. These include one final project, 8-10 pages long, in which students will be analyzing an Italian fairy tale and taking one of the following approaches: comparing it to other Italian or cross-cultural versions; interpreting the features that localize and historicize its production in Italy; reflecting on its relation to canonized fairy tales; exploring how its Italy-specific features are translated in today's popular culture. For this paper, students' writing process—focused free-writing, drafts, and revisions—will be taken into account, and at least one draft will be graded. In the first half of the semester, students will write one short paper comparing a Straparola/Basile tale with its "sister tale" in the Perrault/Grimms collection. Each student will also be responsible for two short essays, 2-3 pages each; these papers are to respond to and raise discussions questions about fairy-tale collection chosen from two of the four different parts of the course. There will be an in-class group presentation, with a research component (multiple versions and history of an Italian fairy tale) and a handout requirement.

Grades: final paper 35%; process for final paper 15%; critical responses and questions 20% (10% each); comparison 15%; participation including presentation 15%.