FOLKLORE AND MYTHOLOGY OF THE MIDDLE EAST
(“FoMoME”)
Course Syllabus

Instructor: Ben Koerber
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Time: Tuesday and Thursday, 3:20-4:40pm
Place: Beck Hall, Room 119, Livingston Campus

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This fifteen-week project initiates its gentlemen and gentlewomen contestants into the study of “folklore” through a sweeping, yet coherently arranged, survey of the popular narrative forms and practices of the “Middle East.” After a commendable effort to bring cohesion to the fragmented texts of pre-Islamic Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Arabia, we make our way, through a series of carefully coordinated leaps and leverages, to the Middle Ages (where we remain for the better part of our time, acquainting ourselves with the heroes, tricksters, phantoms and mountebanks that populated the Islamic narrative landscape), while still managing to work in a few smart jabs at the folktales, comics, and popular ephemera of the present day. Along the way, we’ll catch glimpses – brief but potent – of the principle methods and theories debated in today’s besieged arenas of folkloristics: the tale-type and motif indexes, psychoanalysis, and critical theory. Thus informed, we will have at the following questions, among others:

- How can we explain the existence of multiple versions of the “same” folktale in communities separated by considerable geographical, linguistic, religious, national, and/or historical boundaries?
- Are some versions of a folktale more “original” or “authentic” than others? And what are the political or theoretical implications of such a claim?
- How might we characterize the effects that collection, publishing, and translation have on a given popular narrative form?
- What distinguishes “folklore” from other cultural domains (“elite,” religious, or commercial), and how does it interact with them?
- Are stories just stories? Or can they also be learning aids, nation builders, ideological propaganda, social capital, traded commodities, weapons of the weak, and/or repositories of deep psychological conflicts and tensions?

Parallel to the aforementioned academic frameworks, and of equal intellectual value, are the assorted personal “tricks” we can expect to acquire: proverb-trading, rhymed cursing, wiki-navigating, rumormongering, casting spells, exorcising, and tale-typing. Appreciating these tricks will help us understand how the study of folklore has the potential to foster a more “democratic” perspective on culture and the human condition than may be encountered elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences. It will also reveal the extent to which the discipline of folkloristics is one where “experts” and “amateurs” compete to outdo each other, with the latter group, curiously enough, scoring the greatest innovations and victories.

GRADES:

Grades will be determined by participation (20%), homework (25%), the mid-term (15%), a presentation (25%), and the final exam (15%). Participation grade is based on attendance and speaking up in class. It is the easiest part of the class, and all you have to do for a perfect score is show up every day, be reasonably on-time, and maybe say something now and then (You don't necessarily have to talk – I was sometimes a quiet student myself and understand that genius expresses itself in multiple forms, not all of which are verbal. Anyway, you will be forced to talk in your presentation, which I will get to in a second). Midterm and Final exams will be take-home. Details on the presentation are forthcoming, but the gist of it is that two of you will work together to present (15-20 min.) on a different version of the tale-type assigned for that day.

HOMEWORK:

Students are required to post (1) question and (1) short comment about the assigned readings on the SAKAI forum before coming to class. (The point of this assignment is to focus your ideas for class discussion.)
COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION TO FOLKLORE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Tuesday, 1/21: Introduction
  • “Where is the Middle East?” (website)

Thursday, 1/23: Introduction
  • Introductions to Folklore: Brunvand, 1-11; Teverson, 1-15
  • “Harlem Shake – Egypt and Tunisia” (link)
  • “How Coffee was Discovered”

WEEK 2: ANCIENT EGYPT

Tuesday, 1/28:
  • Teverson, 83-108
  • Archetypes and Motifs, xiii – xxiii
  • “Tropes Galore,” NPR (listen)
  • Pinch, Egyptian Myth, 1-14 (optional)

Thursday, 1/30:
  • “The Story of the Two Brothers”

WEEK 3: ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

Tuesday, 2/4: Gilgamesh, trans. Stephannie Dalley

Thursday, 2/6: Gilgamesh, trans. Stephannie Dalley

WEEK 4: PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

Tuesday, 2/11:
  • Reynolds, Arab Folklore, 1-17, 25-28
  • Albright, “Islam and the Religions of the Ancient Orient” (optional)

Thursday, 2/13:
  • Jayyusi, “Pre-Islamic Tales”
**WEEK 5: BEGINNINGS OF STORYTELLING IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD**

Tuesday, 2/18:

- Irwin, “Storyteller's Craft”

Thursday, 2/20:

- Jayyusi, “Tales of the Strange or Supernatural”

**WEEK 6: MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC UNDERWORLD**

Tuesday, 2/25:

- Irwin, “Low Life”
- Hyde, “Trickster: Intro”
- Bosworth, “Medieval Islamic Underworld: Intro” (optional)

Thursday, 2/27:

- Jayyusi, “Other Comic Tales”

**WEEK 7: 1001 NIGHTS**

Tuesday, 3/4: Irwin, “Introduction”


**WEEK 8: 1001 NIGHTS (CONT.)**

Tuesday, 3/11: “Delileh and Zeyneb,” *1001 Nights*

Thursday, 3/13: “Delileh and Zeyneb,” *1001 Nights*

**WEEK 9: SPRING RECESS**

Tuesday, 3/18: NO CLASS (SPRING RECESS)

Thursday, 3/20: NO CLASS (SPRING RECESS)

**WEEK 10: ADVENTURES OF BULUQIYA**

Tuesday, 3/25: “Adventures of Buluqiya”

***Mid-term Due***

Thursday, 3/27: “Adventures of Buluqiya”
**WEEK 11: MONSTERS AND MARVELS**

Tuesday, 4/1: Al-Qazwini

Thursday, 4/3: Al-Qazwini (cont.)

**WEEK 12: JINN & EXORCISM**

Tuesday, 4/8: El-Shamy, “Belief Characters”

Thursday, 4/10: Drower, “White and Black Magic of the Mandaeans”

**WEEKS 13: COMICS**

Tuesday, 4/15: selections from Ganzeer, Andeel, et al.

Thursday, 4/17: selections from Ganzeer, Andeel, et al.

**WEEKS 14-15: EPHEMERA**

Tuesday, 4/22: Rumors

- *NYT* links

Thursday, 4/24: Conspiracy Theories

- Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World*, “Introduction”

Tuesday, 4/29: Jokes

- El-Shamy, “Jokes”
- Muhawi, “The Metalinguistic Joke”

Thursday, 5/1: Insults and Invectives

- Marsot, “Mud-Slinging Egyptian Style”

**Final Exam Due: Monday, 5/12**