ENG 407: Oral Traditions in Ancient and Modern Culture

In this course we’ll explore the old and new examples of the oldest form of literature — literature composed, told, and transmitted orally. We’ll look at examples ranging from the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and the medieval Irish epic, *The Táin*, to fairy tales, jokes, and urban legends. In these we’ll examine the ways memory and cognition shape form and narrative, and how oral literature has been used for thousands of years to enlighten, communicate, and entertain.

Required texts (available in the UO Bookstore):

Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles
*The Táin*, trans. Thomas Kinsella
*Beowulf*, trans. R. M. Liuzza (if you have this text in another edition from “Intro to the Major,” that edition will do; otherwise this is the best edition)

All other texts will be available in class or on Blackboard.

Requirements:
- midterm 20%
- paper 20%
- fieldwork project 30%
- take-home final exam/paper 30%
- reading, participation, and short assignments: not formally graded, but necessary to do well

week 1: *Introduction to Oral Literature: Issues and Forms*
April
Th 4: Role of modern oral literature in a literate society
   Assignment: bring in an example of modern oral literature
   Reading: F. C. Bartlett, “Some Experiments in the Reproduction of Folk Stories”

week 2: *Functions and Characteristics of Oral Literature*
Tu 9: Functions of literature across time: identity, community, entertainment
   *The Odyssey* book 1
   John D. Niles, “Poetry as Social Praxis”; Kenneth Jackson, from “The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition” (on Blackboard)
Th 11: Traditional narrative  
*The Odyssey* book 2; memory experiments  
Axel Olrik, “Epic Laws of Folk Narrative” (on Blackboard)

week 3: **Classics of Oral Tradition: The Odyssey**  
Tu 16: *The Odyssey* books 8, 9, and 10  
    Additional reading: Lord Raglan, “The Hero of Tradition” (on Blackboard)  
Th 18: *The Odyssey* books 11-12  
    *Odyssey* imitation assignment due

week 4: **Classics of Oral Tradition: Beowulf**  
Tu 23: *Beowulf*  
Th 25 *Beowulf* continued

week 5: **Beowulf and The Táin**  
Tu 30 *Beowulf* continued; Benjamin Bagby’s *Beowulf*. First paper due.  
May  
Th 2: Introduction to the Celtic bardic tradition: elegies, stanzas, triads and tales  
    (no reading, but get started on *The Táin* for next Tuesday). Fieldwork proposal due.

week 6: **Classics of Oral Tradition: The Old Irish Táin**  
Tu 7: *The Táin* pp. 1-2, 6-8, 21-25, 53-100  
Th 9: *The Táin*, pp. 167-205

week 7: **Finishing The Táin**  
Th 16: Midterm

week 8: **Modern Oral Tradition**  
Tu 21: viewing of Spalding Gray, *Monster in a Box*  
Th 23: discussion of *Monster in a Box*

week 9: **Fieldwork Analysis**  
Tu 28: Fieldwork analysis due (oral reports)  
Th 30: Fieldwork oral reports continued

week 10: **Finishing up**  
June  
Tu 4: Fieldwork oral reports. Final exam questions handed out.  
Th 6: Conclusions; discussion of final.