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Spring term 2016
Class: TuTh 12-1:20, Chapman 204
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FLR 410/510: Oral Traditions in Ancient and Medieval/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.

This class fulfills the Pre-1500 and Folklore requirements for the English major.

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, that edition will do; otherwise this is the best edition)

Additional texts for graduate students (and interested undergrads) — not in Bookstore, get these from the UO library or from online booksellers:

A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd edition (2000)

David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes* (1995)

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

Requirements for undergraduates:

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

Requirements for graduates:

midterm 20%

seminar paper 30%

fieldwork project 30%

take-home final exam/paper 20%

reading, participation, and short assignments: not formally graded, but necessary to do well

Learning Outcomes:

This class should help you to:

1. Identify, explain and apply basic concepts in oral tradition and theory
2. Develop the ability to conduct fieldwork on oral theory and integrate your research findings into written and oral presentations
3. Identify, explain, and analyze diverse oral traditions in relationship to the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which they are performed, employing appropriate theoretical and methodological approaches
4. Identify, explain, and critically analyze the role of oral traditions in community constitution, identity formation, and conflict negotiation for diverse groups of people in the United States and globally, both in the past and in the present
5. Compose an oral epic by resting overnight on a sacred oxhide (optional)

If you have a documented disability, you're invited to let me know, and we'll discuss accommodations for this class in conjunction with Disability Services.

Schedule:

week 1: **Introduction to Oral Literature: Starting to Think About Oral Tales**

March

Tu 29: Introduction. Issues of oral literature and memory. "The War of the Ghosts"

Th 31: The 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: **What Makes Oral Literature the Way It Is? What Makes It Memorable?**

April

Tu 5: Memorability and Meaning

- Axel Olrik, "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative" (on Canvas)
- Kenneth Jackson, from "The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition" (on Canvas)

Th 7:

- Chip Heath et al., "Emotional Selection in Memes: The Case of Urban Legends," from *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81:6 (2001), 1028-41 (on Canvas) — no need to absorb the statistics, just get the general ideas
- John D. Niles, "Poetry as Social Praxis," from *College English* 61 (1998), 143-66 (on Canvas)

for graduate students and interested undergrads:

- Lord, *Singer of Tales*, ch. 3, "The Formula"

week 3: **Classics of Oral Tradition: *The Odyssey***

Tu 12: *The Odyssey* books 1 and 2.

for graduate students and interested undergrads:

- Lord, *Singer of Tales*, ch. 4, "The Theme"

Th 14: *The Odyssey* books 8, 9, and 10

- Additional reading: Lord Raglan, “The Hero of Tradition” (on Canvas)

week 4: **Classics of Oral Tradition: *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf***

Tu 19: *The Odyssey* books 11-12. *Odyssey* imitation assignment due.

for graduate students and interested undergrads:

- Lord, *Singer of Tales*, ch. 8, “The Odyssey”

Th 21: *Beowulf*.

for graduate students and interested undergrads:

- Rubin, *Memory*, Introduction and ch. 2, “The Representation of Themes...”

week 5: ***Beowulf* and *The Táin***

Tu 27: *Beowulf* continued.

for graduate students and interested undergrads:

- Rubin, *Memory*, ch. 3, “Imagery”

May

Th 29: *Beowulf* continued: Benjamin Bagby’s *Beowulf*. Fieldwork proposal due.

week 6: ***The Táin***

May

Tu 3: *The Táin* pp. 1-2, 6-8, 21-25, 53-100

Th 5: *The Táin*, pp. 167-205

week 7: **Finishing *The Táin***

Tu 10: *The Táin*, pp. 206-253.

Th 12: Midterm

week 8: **Modern Oral Tradition**

Tu 17: Communal viewing of Spalding Gray, *Monster in a Box*. First paper due (undergrads).

Th 19: discussion of *Monster in a Box*

week 9: **Fieldwork!**

Tu 24: Fieldwork analysis due. Oral reports begin.

Th 26: Fieldwork oral reports continued

week 10: **More Fieldwork; Finishing up**

June

Tu 31: Fieldwork oral reports. Final exam questions handed out.

June

Th 1: Fieldwork oral reports.