

View our course trailer below!

Course questions? Concerns?

E-mail us!

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Professor McKenna's Office Hours: Warren House 204, times TBA

TF Lorena Alessandrini: lorena_alessandrini@g.harvard.edu

Lorena's Office Hours: Fridays, 9:30 - 10:30 and via Zoom

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Course Description

I can't think of a culture in the world that hasn't been fascinated by the idea that our identity as humans is merely provisional, or accidental; that a human might once have been, or might become, an eagle, or a wolf, or a seal, or a bug. Or a tree, for that matter. We seem always and everywhere to have tried in stories to answer a question to which neither science nor philosophy has found a definitive answer: what is it to be human?

For the last 150 years or so, much of that thinking has focused on evolution and genetics. Yet, whatever we may think is the "meaning" of images like the "shaft scene" in the Lascaux caves, it is apparent that humans were thinking about themselves in relation to animals at least as long as 20,000 years ago. The Hebrew Bible reflects on the boundary between the human and the animal, as do ancient philosophy and Classical mythology. The great religions of the book reflect on the relationship of humans to other animals, and in many other cultures, including those of

many Native American peoples, it is not only in narrative mythology but also in ritual practice that the boundary between the human and the animal blurs or dissolves.

In this course, we think about what it is to be human through stories, as people everywhere have done for millennia. Storytelling is a form of imaginative play that allows exploration of the human condition beyond the factual. It is especially in stories that animals can be human and humans can be animals. There are stories in which transformation is understood as punishment, as though it is a misfortune to be anything other than human. In other stories, transformation is a means of extending a natural lifespan. In still others, transformation is a learning opportunity. And there are stories in which metamorphosis is simply a fact. All of these stories give readers the opportunity to reflect on the relationship of human and non-human. life forms, and to imagine what it would be like to fly, or to run on four strong legs, or to live in the ocean--or to be hunted.

Stories from the Celtic-language traditions of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany are our main focus, but you will find and share stories from other traditions too. We'll also read stories in which characters cross the boundaries of gender, as well as of species. We don't often encounter hybrid creatures in Celtic traditions. There are no centaurs or satyrs. Even the creatures sometimes called mermaids are shapeshifters, rather than half woman / half fish. Rather, there seems to be a kind of fluidity to species identity that allows transformation to happen spontaneously, or to be inflicted by someone with preternatural powers.

As you may know, there is no concentration in Celtic, and that makes this course an ideal Arts and Humanities elective. No one has to compete with students who know more than they do about the field; everyone is on the same footing.

The questions we will ask about our readings include:

- What is the nature of this text, and when was it written, and how do those aspects of it inflect the way that it understands the relationship of humans to other animals?
- What is the world of story in which this text is embedded? Is it entirely the creation of a human author, or does it belong to a narrative tradition that provides context and explains its assumptions?
- Who are/were the people for whom this story was meaningful, and how do their understanding of the animals involved and our understanding of them affect our understanding of the story?
- Does this story describe a person who has actually become another kind of animal or

changed gender, or does it describe what has been called "transmigration of the soul", in which a human spirit inhabits an animal body while retaining human consciousness and identity?

Course Instructors

Professor Catherine McKenna

Office Hours: Warren House 204, hours **TBD**

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Lorena Alessandrini, Teaching Fellow

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Lectures and Sections

Plenary sessions of the course will be held
Tuesdays & Thursdays, from 10:30 - 11:45 a.m.

Students are expected to attend class regularly, both plenary sessions and sections, to have done the reading required for the day (which is never onerous) as well as any written work assigned, and to participate in the discussion. Plenary sessions will include lecture segments, discussion, and group work.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in our inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although faculty are invited by AEO to contact the office to discuss appropriate implementation. We understand that this is an extraordinarily difficult time, so please do not hesitate to reach out to discuss how we can help support you and facilitate maximum learning.

Electronic Devices Policy

No phones in the classroom. I.e., your phone may be in your pocket or backpack, but you may not make use of it for any purpose (texting, checking email, looking things up on the Web). Should you receive an urgent call that requires immediate response, you may leave the classroom to attend to it.

Laptops and tablets may be used in the classroom solely for the purpose of looking closely at the text under discussion in class at that time or at related sites on the Web. Anyone who uses a laptop or tablet for any other purpose will be asked not to have it in class at all from that time forward, but to bring printouts of texts we are discussing to the class instead.

[Introduction - 9/1]

Weekly Assigned Reading

Tuesday 9/6 & Thursday 9/8

Fionn, Sadhbh and Oisín

Bran and Sgeolang, Fionn's Dogs

Tuesday 9/13 & Thursday 9/15

Weekly Assigned Readings

Mermaids and People of the Sea

Tuesday 9/20 & Thursday 9/22

Weekly Assigned Reading

Selkies, Mermaids and Other Transforming Women

[Weekly Assigned Reading](#)

Tuesday 9/27 & Thursday 9/29

Swan Song - The Children of Lir

[Weekly Assigned Reading](#)

Tuesday 10/4 & Thursday 10/6

A Beautiful Fly - The Wooing of Áedán

[Weekly Assigned Reading](#)

Tuesday 10/11 & Thursday 10/13

Punishment - Math, Son of Mathonwy

[Weekly Assigned Reading](#)

Tuesday 10/18 & Thursday 10/20

An Unplanned Change of Gender

[Weekly Assigned Reading](#)

Tuesday 10/25 & Thursday 10/27

Werewolves

[Weekly Assigned Reading](#)

Tuesday 11/1 & Thursday 11/3

Stories from the Cattle Raid of Cooley

[Weekly Assigned Reading](#)

Tuesday 11/8 & Thursday 11/10

Poet as Bird-man, Poet as Grain of Wheat

Weekly Assigned Reading

Tuesday 11/15 & Thursday 11/17

Surviving - Tuan mac Cairill

Weekly Assigned Reading

Tuesday 11/22

Thanksgiving 11/24

**Exchanging Natures - The Dream of Oengus
and Pangur B  n**

Weekly Assigned Reading

Tuesday 11/29 & Thursday 12/1

Prepared Attendance and Participation (20%)

You  re expected to attend both lecture and section meetings of the course, and to participate in both. Come to each lecture meeting with a question about that day  s reading which you think Lorena and I should be able to answer. These questions are all-important to the course: it  s around your questions that our class sessions will be structured, rather than by a lesson plan that we have devised for the day.

Each student will be assigned a Tuesday or Thursday lecture meeting for which to take notes about topics discussed, points made and questions raised. Within 24 hours, you will write up your notes--informally, but coherently, doing your best to organize the notes according to topics, rather than according to a strict chronological order. The final product should be about 3/4 -- 1 page in length (single spaced, 12 point font). You'll submit your notes, in .doc form, to Lorena for posting on the Canvas site as a study and review guide for the class. Your notes will count toward

your attendance and participation grade.

Perusall Annotations (16%)

- Provide thoughtful, informed comments on selected secondary readings. Four points for each of four assignments, graded SAT/UNSAT. These assignments will be spread out throughout the term.
- Late annotations will not be accepted, because these comments shape the discussion in class on the day that they are due. If you absolutely cannot meet the deadline for one of the Perusall assignments, consult with the instructor or your TF.

Focus on one Humanimal (20%)

- You will work with an animal of your choice that appears as a transformed human in one of our stories—perhaps a swan, perhaps a wolf, perhaps a fly. With the assistance of your TF and a course librarian, you will use the StoryMap platform to build a multimedia online site that explores (1) the actual nature of that animal (2) the Celtic story or legend in which we encounter that animal (3) stories from other traditions in which that animal is the “target” of a transformation.
- Your complete StoryMap will be due—and shared with the class—before Thanksgiving.

Tale performance (14%)

With the help of a course librarian and your TF, you[™]ll locate a tale of shapeshifting from another tradition and perform it in section in late October, without a script.

This assignment will be evaluated on the clarity and liveliness with which you perform your story

The Schools Collection in the Irish National Folklore Collection (10%)

After an introduction to the National Folklore Collection of Ireland, you will explore its "Schools Collection" and identify one short tale about a person or an animal. You'll describe your selection and its relationship to the stories we are studying in a paragraph or two--no more than 350 words, and you'll present your selection in section in mid-October.

Take Home Final Examination (20 %)

This take home final, distributed on December 1 and due on December 9, will ask you to write a short essay (about 1000 words, 4--5 pages) dealing with the term's reading as a whole. You will have a choice of prompts to respond to.

For a PDF of course requirements, click [here](#).