Module Description:

This module examines transformations in late medieval English romance in its broadest sense, covering both the genre’s fascination with stories of metamorphosis and shape-shifting and the key role played by translation and the refashioning of popular stories and motifs. Many late medieval romances feature characters who transform into animals, objects or other strange or monstrous beings. We will examine what such tales of transformation tell us about how medieval people perceived the boundaries between human and animal, man and woman, life and death, body and spirit, and the natural and supernatural worlds. We will also pay attention to elements of humour and fantasy, to examine why late medieval authors and readers found stories about mutating bodies and identities so appealing – and, indeed, why we still find them so interesting today.

Though the focus lies on Middle English romance, in some seminars we will consider connections with other vernacular traditions, most notably French romance. A high percentage of Middle English romances are translations or adaptations, and not all romances that circulated in Britain were written in English. We will take a close look at how such cross-cultural exchanges helped shape a genre known for its constant reinvention and infinite adaptability.

Themes and topics discussed may include: werewolves; Arthurian romances; serpent women; ghosts and death as transformation; magical versus divine transformations; transvestism and gender transformations; translation, adaptation, and rewriting; shifting generic boundaries.

Aims: This module aims to introduce students to the concept of transformation as a way of interrogating the literary genre of late medieval romance, both in terms of its preoccupation with stories of metamorphosis and identity formation, and the role played by translation and cross-cultural exchange as key creative impulses.

It aims to give students the opportunity to develop their skills in close reading and in reading comparatively across texts; to set the romances’ preoccupation with stories that question the limits of human identity in a wider historical, cultural, literary, and critical context; and to develop students’ understanding of concepts like
transformation, translation, and rewriting both from the perspective of modern criticism and how it was understood by medieval authors and readers.

**Key texts:**

Works to be read may include: *William of Palerne, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Mélusine, Valentine and Orson, The Awntyrs off Arthure, Lybeaus Desconus, The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle, Roman de Silence, King of Tars, Chevalere Assigne.*

Most of the Middle English romances are available online, via the TEAMS website: [http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams](http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams)

Other romances will be made available to students, either digitally via the VLE or via paper copies (to be distributed in advance).

Works in French will be read in modern translation.

**Preliminary reading:**

The most important preliminary work students can do is to start reading some of the romances, especially those available via TEAMs. Works available online include *Lybeaus Desconus* ([introduction here](http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams)), *The Awntyrs off Arthure* ([introduction here](http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams)), *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* ([introduction here](http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams)), and *The King of Tars* ([introduction here](http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams)).

Useful places to start for critical reading are: