

A dark, atmospheric forest scene. In the foreground, a crow with a red eye stands on a patch of green grass. The background is a dense, misty forest with large trees and spider webs hanging from the branches. A small bird is perched on a branch in the upper right.

MYTH AND METAMORPHOSIS

A workbook

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ANIMALS IN MYTH AND FAIRY TALES

Humans have always lived in close contact with animals; it's not surprising that they should populate our myths and fairy tales too. All kinds of creatures, from the fiercest of bears to the most fragile of butterflies, play major roles in our mythologies. And in a fairy tale, you're just as likely to be spoken to by a wolf or a crow as you are by a human. Animals might act as the messengers of the gods, guard the gates to the Otherworld, or offer themselves as a guide. Depending on the story, they can be allies or enemies, helpful to humans or harmful, so representing the ambiguous, not-to-be-taken-for-granted power of the natural world.

Even more interesting are the stories which blur the boundaries between human and 'other'. And they're everywhere – even the most cursory readings of the old myths and stories of Europe make it clear that our ancestors believed that the borderlines between humans and other animals were much less clearly defined than we imagine them to be today, and more easily bridged. These tales had their origins in times when there were closer connections between humans and the natural world – and in the days when there was no differentiation between the secular and the sacred, because the sacred existed everywhere, in everything. You didn't need a special building to find it in, nor a special person to act as your intermediary; it was right there, all around you – in that tree, or that stone, or that fish.

In those times, then, animals were very much more than simply creatures that we might hunt and eat: they were teachers, and allies, and sometimes they were even gods. Some of our oldest stories involve powerful animals who embody a kind of wisdom which is different from (but entirely congruent with) the ways of knowing that humans have. Animals, of course, can do things that we can't, and can sense things that we don't know about – and in these old tales, wild animals in particular were repositories for the kind of knowledge which we long ago renounced.

In our native mythologies, animals are inextricably intertwined with the lives of both humans and gods – so much so that the ability to shapeshift from one to the other is taken to be perfectly natural. Old Irish literature is filled with humans who can shapeshift into creatures such as swans, fish, seals, horses and deer, blurring the boundaries which we still imagine set humans apart from the rest of the natural world. The old goddesses of the Celtic peoples are often closely identified with carrion birds, especially with crows and ravens. The best-known of them is the complex of Irish goddesses associated with the Morrígan; in her crow form, she represents both death and rebirth.

Sometimes, specific animals took on huge significance for individuals or tribes, to the extent that they overtly identified with them. Anthropologists usually use the term 'totemism' to describe the ways in which indigenous communities around the world consider certain animals to be the patrons – or even the ancestors – of their people. In Ireland, some tribes adopted the names of animals as their protective totem: for example, the *Artraige* (bear-people),

Osraige (deer-people), *Grecraige* (horse-people) and *Sordraige* (boar-people). Inscriptions on Ogham stones suggest that individuals sometimes had their own totem animal: there, we find references to people with names like ‘Wolf-singer’ and ‘Raven Born’. This kind of totemism undoubtedly inspired Philip Pullman’s fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*, in which dæmons are the external physical representation of an individual’s ‘inner self’. Your dæmon can change from shape to shape while you’re still a child, but during adolescence will eventually settle permanently into the form of the animal which you most resemble in character. And so Lyra Belacqua’s dæmon Pantalaimon first appears in the story as a dark brown moth, but his final form is a beautiful red-gold pine marten. Human and dæmon are in effect two entities sharing one body, and to be severed from one’s dæmon causes death to the human.

Totemism of this kind is likely also to have been the origin of countless stories around the world in which an animal assumes human form – either voluntarily, or due to an enchantment – in order to enter into a relationship with a man or woman. Or vice versa. Once upon a time, there was a poor man who had so many children that he hardly had enough food or clothing to go around. They were all pretty children, but the prettiest was the youngest daughter, and there was no end to her loveliness. One evening, at the fall of the year, the weather was so wild and rough outside that the house shook. And then something gave three taps on the windowpane ... ‘Will you give me your youngest daughter? If you will, I’ll make you as rich as you are now poor,’ said the great White Bear who stood outside. So begins the old Norwegian story, ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon’. And so of course, to save her family, the youngest daughter marries the Bear – only to discover that, at night, the Bear is actually a man. Eventually, after many mistakes and adventures, in the castle which lies to the east of the sun and the west of the moon, the youngest daughter breaks the spell which has enchanted him, and he is transformed into the handsomest of all possible princes.

These stories, then, affirm the kinship between animals and humans, while still acknowledging their strangeness and otherness.

THINGS THAT ANIMAL TALES TEACH US

Kinship and otherness – a blurring of the boundaries between human and other-than-human

An animistic worldview: everything is alive, has soul, and purpose – not just humans. We’re also taught to see the sacred in everything

Ways of negotiating with the wild – inside and outside of ourselves

REFLECTION/ JOURNALING QUESTIONS

- Where and when have animals (either domestic animals, or animals in the wild) played a major role in your life? What light did they shed on your own nature?
- Do you think that being close to animals can help you ground yourself in your own animal body? How?
- Is there an animal you hold sacred? Why? What does this animal represent to you? Is it some quality of your own way of being in the world, or some quality that you would like to have?
- What is your favourite myth or fairy tale which features an animal in a major role? Why? What does the animal in this story represent to you? What light does the story, and the animal(s) in it, shed on the texture of your own life?
- Has an animal ever appeared to you in a significant way in a dream? What animal? Write about the nature of your encounter/ interaction with the animal. What, if anything, was it conveying to you in the dream? What was happening in your life at the time which might be illuminated by the dream-animal? Write down every detail that you can remember about the animal, and about your reaction to it in the dream. If you close your eyes and reimagine your dream experience with the animal, how does it make you feel? Is there any part of your body which is moved or affected by the image? What does this say to you, if so?

EXERCISES

- If you had a dæmon (like the characters in Philip Pullman's books) what animal would it be, and why? Which qualities of that animal do you love and admire? Which qualities do you find more challenging? Which qualities or characteristics of the animal reflect your nature?
- If you were this animal, how would you see the world differently? How would it feel to be in its body?
- Look for stories, myths and artwork which are focused around this animal.
- If the animal is native to the place where you live, look for locations where you might observe it.

- How can you honour this animal? Create a mini-altar, on which you can place images of the animal; perhaps a poem in praise of it; a feather, if it's a bird, for example; something from the animal's habitat ...
 - Create a ritual to honour the animal. Go outside; move your body in a way that reflects the animal's movement. Offer something to the land which supports it.
 - Close your eyes, relax, and imagine that you're making a journey to meet your animal. What happens when you meet?
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If you're interested in pursuing this kind of work, you might like to check out my online self-study courses 'Courting the World Soul', and 'This Mythic Life'.

Details at <https://sharonblackie.net/work-with-me/>