Metamorphoses of the Werewolf

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Virtually everyone today is familiar with the mythical werewolf, thanks to pop culture media, especially horror films such as *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Underworld* (2003), the remake of the 1941 classic, *The Wolf Man* (2009), music videos (for instance, a werewolf/werecat character in Michael Jackson's famous *Thriller* [1983]), comic books and computer games, or bestselling mystery novels, such as the recent *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer (2005-2008). However, it is less widely known that this stereotypically fright-invoking figure of Hollywood film lore has frequently changed its image in the past. Boasting a long line of predecessors, originating in antiquity, werewolves have been portrayed in contradictory fashion as either savage predators or noble heroes, their image vacillating on the border between good and evil. Precisely this evolution or *metamorphosis* of the werewolf's depiction in various narratives from antiquity through the Renaissance is the focus of Leslie A. Sconduto's monograph, which occupies a prominent place among recent scholarly studies of the werewolf, such as Brad Steiger's *The Werewolf Book: Encyclopedia of Shape Shifting Beings* (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink P, 1999), Leonard R.N. Ashley's *The Complete Book of Werewolves* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2001), Brian J. Frost's *The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2003), and Rosemary Ellen Guiley's *The Encyclopedia of Vampires, Werewolves, and Other Monsters* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2004). Sconduto's study adds to the abovementioned body of research a new and systematic analysis of major twelfth-century literary narratives about the werewolf—*Bisclavret, Melion, Arthur and Gorlagon,* and especially

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Guillaume de Palerne, hitherto little noted by scholars. Sconduto compares and contrasts them with the stories of sixteenth-century court trials, dedicated to investigating real cases of werewolves in Western Europe. She also places the werewolf narratives in the context of the Church's controversial position at various times concerning popular belief in werewolves, in order to determine the manner in which the Church might have influenced literary portrayals of the werewolf. In addition, Sconduto also discusses various socio-historical and cultural events, which further shaped werewolf lore. Such an approach helps her answer a question posed in the concluding chapter of her book—namely, why a werewolf was depicted as a hero in the twelfth century and as a blood-thirsty predator in the sixteenth.

Metamorphoses of the Werewolf is comprised of nine chapters, notes and an extensive bibliography, which includes both primary and secondary sources. Chapter One, "The Werewolf in Antiquity," looks at the earlies*t references to the werewolf phenomenon, such as the Akkadian* Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 1300-1000 BC)—the first literary narrative to feature a werewolf; and Greek and Roman mythology, which also flourished with references to this supernatural creature. Sconduto informs us that while these early narratives usually portray a person forced to become a werewolf as a punishment by the gods or as the consequence of a wicked woman's caprice, Virgil's eighth *eclogue* (c. 37 BC) shows the first werewolf able to shape-shift into a beast on his own accord (8). There, the werewolf appears in the persona of a powerful magician Moeris who becomes the primary literary character to symbolize the split personality of a man-wolf, as Sconduto aptly observes (9). In another text, namely Book I of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses* (c. 8 AD), we find a story of King Lycaon, whose plan to prove that Zeus is mortal, by serving him human flesh, fails and results in him being transformed into a werewolf as a punishment for challenging the gods. According to Sconduto, this text offers the first glimpse into the link between the werewolf legend and cannibalism—the feature, which will become especially strong in the narratives and various court trials of the Middle Ages. Another narrative that helped shape the traditional portrayal of the werewolf is Petronius' *Satyricon* (c. 54-68 AD). It introduces new elements, destined later to become an integral part of the archetypical werewolf story. These are the moonlit night, a time when the transformation becomes possible, and the injury that is typically suffered by a werewolf while in the shape of a beast. The latter will function as a sign that permits to track down and identify the werewolf when he assumes the human form (11). Sconduto concludes the chapter by dividing werewolves into two distinctive types: those who become werewolves by choice (voluntary werewolves) and those, whose ability to transform into a beast is imposed on them either as a punishment or hereditary curse (13). However, given the fact that many narratives resist such a classification, Sconduto turns her attention in the subsequent chapters to investigating the werewolf's behaviour after he is transformed into a ferocious animal, rather than the process of metamorphosis per se (14).

Chapter Two, "The Church's Response to the Werewolf," discusses ecclesiastical opposition to the pagan legends about the werewolf, which posed a threat to the

Christian postulate—especially at the dawn of Christianity—that God alone can create and change matter. As a result, the Church attempted to rebuke popular beliefs in the existence of werewolves, by interpreting the latter as a product of imagination rather than true beings. Sconduto's main focus in this Chapter is St. Augustine's theory of metamorphosis, which attempted to rationalize the experiences of witnesses or victims of a werewolf's presumed attack by construing them as products of the Devil's delusion, which St. Augustine termed an 'illusion' or 'phantasm' (*phantasticum*) imposed on humans (19). Having transported the shape-shifting ability into the realm of imagination, St. Augustine therefore proposes to look at the werewolf of the demonological legends as a metaphor rather than interpret this phenomenon literary. Thus, Sconduto's first two chapters consider two different takes on werewolf narratives: popular legends and antiquity romances that saw the werewolf as a true being, and early Church's writings that focused on the illusory or metaphorical nature of this phenomenon. It is precisely these two traditions, which shaped the werewolf's representation in medieval literature, as Chapter Three demonstrates.

Chapter Three closely analyzes a story of the werewolves of Ossory, which is part of the larger tractate *Topographia Hibernica*, written by Gerald of Wales circa 1188. Sconduto notes the peculiar feature of this tale, which portrays the werewolves as humans—a fact attested on both the mental level (i.e., their behaviour and thinking process) and the physical (the werewolves hide their human bodies beneath a wolf skin). In her opinion, this story stresses the dual nature of these werewolves and therefore attests to the Church's position of treating the werewolf shape as simply an illusion, rather than a true transformation of body and spirit (30-31). As Sconduto also observes, the tale even further corresponds to the Church's teaching because it emphasizes that the curse of shape-shifting is imposed on the villagers by God himself—the only one able to transform matter (31). Werewolf accounts appear also in French wonder tales of the same time. As an example, Sconduto analyzes Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia* (*Recreation for an Emperor*, c. 1209-1214), which includes two anecdotes about werewolves from Auvergne (35). Interestingly, the only similarity between the tales is that both are narrated by werewolves themselves. Otherwise, they are totally different and represent polar opposites of the werewolf spectrum—the first, depicting a human who understands the horror of his lycanthropic condition, while the second featuring a werewolf as a savage being who shows no glimpse of human senses while in the state of a wolf. Sconduto draws the conclusion that these particular accounts further underline the fact that both the popular views of the werewolf as a true ferocious creature, lacking any humanity, and the Church's view of the werewolf as simply an illusion or a punishment imposed by God, who is kind enough to allow the sufferer to preserve his human senses while being a wolf, continued to thrive in the Middle Ages and nurtured the corpus of the major medieval literary werewolf narratives, known collectively today as *The Werewolf's Tale*.

Four such tales, introduced in Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven, are devoted respectively to *Bisclavret* by Marie de France (between 1160 and 1178), *Melion*—the

anonymous Arthurian *lai* (c. 1190-1204), *Arthur and Gorlagon*, another unsigned Latin text from the realm of Arthurian legends (c. 13th-14th cc.), and, finally, the longest werewolf tale of the Middle Ages—the anonymous *Guillaume de Palerne* (c. 1194-1197). The first three tales bear a striking resemblance to each other in terms of numerous plot details. They all represent a werewolf as a noble hero who preserves his human mind behind the wolf skin—the feature that corresponds to St. Augustine's theory of metamorphosis (75). Each of the three stories, in addition, use a werewolf persona, according to Sconduto's apt close reading, as a means of conveying various messages to the reader, such as a lesson in loyalty and pride, a lesson for the adulteress and a lesson in noble sacrifice. The chapter on *Guillaume de Palerne*—the second largest in the book—offers a close reading of this major werewolf text from the late twelfth century, previously overlooked by scholars. In Sconduto's opinion, it occupies a prominent place in the corpus of *The Werewolf's Tale* by offering a portrayal of the werewolf who is in complete opposition to the traditional folkloric savage man-beast. As the scholar points out, "with Alphonse [the Spanish prince, changed by his evil stepmother into a werewolf in infancy] we see that the werewolf has undergone a total metamorphosis; no vestige remains of the bloodthirsty beast. He has been replaced by a self-sacrificing chivalrous hero" (4).

Chapter Eight, "A New Renaissance for the Wicked Wolf"—the longest in the book—transports the readers into the sixteenth century, known for its infamous witch trials throughout Europe. Sconduto researches yet another metamorphosis of the werewolf, which now appears as "a rough, dirty peasant who savagely attacks, kills, and then eats his victims, who are usually children. He is indeed the terrifying monster of our nightmares" (127). Another change, which surfaces at this time, concerns the treatment of the werewolf lore by the Church. While the early Fathers of the Church condemned the belief in the existence of these demonic beasts, the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century theological tractates (e.g., Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus maleficarum* [*The Hammer of Witches*, 1486] and Jean Bodin's *De la démonomanie des sorciers* [*Demonomania of Witches*, 1580], to name just a few of those analyzed in the book) present the opposite view and pronounce as heretics those who refuse to recognize werewolves and witches as true beings. Yet with the appearance of numerous cases of cannibalism, as well as recorded court trials of people who believed themselves to be werewolves—the most notorious being Jean Grenier—another group of theological authorities also attempted to find a rational explanation of such phenomena, especially given the fact that no real proof of transformation into a werewolf could be observed (170-171). Thus, such Church authority as Johann Weyer, for example, in his *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (*On the Illusions of the Demons*, 1563) argues that the lycanthropy was in fact a physical and/or metal disease (the latter, for instance, caused by the combination of melancholy and depression), rather than a supernatural ability (131-132). It is interesting to observe, however, that in the tales of various court cases, the representation of a werewolf at times includes the characteristics of some other demonic creatures, such as vampires, for example (see the description of

the 1521 werewolf case from Poligny of two men, Bourgot and Verdung, who, among other crimes, confess to killing a young girl and *drinking her blood as well as breaking another girl's neck with their teeth* [132, italics are mine]). Given the widely known phenomenon of the contamination of these daemon types—discussed, for instance, by Jan Louis Perkowski[1] or Brian J. Frost[2] and also reflected in the ambiguous meaning of the Greek term 'vrykolakas', which can signify both a werewolf and a vampire (Perkowski 354-355)—it would have been interesting to see Sconduto approach this issue in more detail.

In the concluding ninth chapter, titled "Explanations or 'Que cele beste senefie'," Sconduto primarily proposes to investigate and compare socio-historical and cultural factors that influenced the varied portrayal of the werewolf over time. The two most distinctive types are the twelfth-century depiction of the werewolf as a noble creature who protects others or wages wars in order to take revenge on those who caused harm to his honour and well-being, and the sixteenth-century portrayal of the blood-thirsty werewolf as a rough dirty peasant, engaged in cannibalism, often to ensure his own survival with little or no humanity left (200). While discussing such images, Sconduto pays attention to the historical phenomenon of cannibalism, taking place both during the Crusades of the twelfth century and during the religious wars of sixteenth-century Europe. In her opinion, the attempt to move away from the image of a werewolf as a flesh-devouring beast in the twelfth-century Arthurian tales is explained precisely by the fact that the anonymous chivalrous authors tried to redeem the image of the Christian knight, who is not supposed to engage in cannibalism, and to offer, through the portrayal of an idealized werewolf-knight, a model for the correct behaviour of the knight and courtier. In the sixteenth century, as Sconduto notes, various historical cataclysms, such as decades-long religious wars, famine, as well as a miserable economic situation in Europe, which led to starvation, resulted in the reappearance of cannibalism, practiced, in the opinion of uneducated folk, by werewolves and witches. Moreover, religious intolerance also led Protestants and Catholics to see members of the opposite religion as agents of the Demonic force and justified and even welcomed the atrocious crimes, enacted on the enemy, which often included cannibalism and desecration of corpses. What is fascinating is the fact that the sixteenth-century narratives, devoted to such cases, did not attempt to hide the truth but, as Sconduto notes, "firmly engrave themselves and their horrific acts into a cultural memory" (200). Precisely such accounts of the werewolf will later influence the eponymous character in the Gothic literary movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as the ferocious werewolf of pop culture today. Together with the cannibalistic nuances, however, another hidden subtext of the werewolf narrative in Gothic fiction is often sexual. Like the famous Dracula the Vampire (Bram Stoker's 1897 novel), the persona of the werewolf also became greatly romanticized and eroticized (see, for instance, the most notorious Werewolf novel of the 1930s, Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris*[3]). Indeed, as psychoanalysts often observed, if a person imagines himself a werewolf, "it is symbolically a self-denun-

ciation for secret deeds and desires of a sexual [italics are mine] or cannibalistic nature" (Frost 20). Unfortunately, Sconduto limits herself to a discussion of the cannibalistic subtext only, basing herself on the court trials of the sixteenth century, which, however, might also have some sexual nuances as well. Let us consider just one comment, made by the judge in the Jean Grenier's trial, which Sconduto quotes: "[I]t is remarkable that he [i.e., Jean Grenier] said that it was he who *lowered her* [the victim's] *dress*, because he did not rip it. This is something that we observed, to show that while real wolves tear with their claws, werewolves tear with their teeth, and *just like men they know how to remove the dresses of the girls* they want to *eat* [this word could possess a double meaning] without ripping them [italics are mine]" (170). The emphasized words hint at the fact that the defendant (who imagined himself a werewolf) might have also raped or attempted to rape the victim in addition to devouring her. Consideration of such nuances might further enrich Sconduto's research, if she chooses to pursue the werewolf theme further.

In summary, Sconduto's book is indeed a pioneering piece of research and should occupy a prominent place on the shelf of any comparativist dealing with West European demonology or the origins of the supernatural characters in the Gothic movement and horror genre. The monograph can also be used in courses dedicated to the study of demonology in antiquity and the Middle Ages, or in courses devoted to the werewolf per se. Moreover, it can be a fascinating read for werewolf fans and anyone interested in the history of this blood-chilling creature.

Notes

1. See the chapter "Vampire or Werewolf?" (Perkowski 351-368).
2. Frost mentions the East European belief that a werewolf becomes a vampire after death (14).
3. See Frost's discussion of Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris* (145).

Works Cited

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