

We all know what a werewolf is and how it is supposed to behave. Even if you are not a monster nerd, you must have seen some films – werewolves just happen to be one of those monsters greatly favoured by film makers and storytellers throughout the years. More often than not, the ferocious killer walks alone among the trees, with deadly claws and hungry teeth, its green eyes shining in the shadow, and dark grey fur shimmering under the silver lights of a full moon's night. In perfect silence it waits, in a flash it kills. It is the monster that howls in the distant woods, but never far enough for you to feel safe; it is the monster that haunts your restless sleep.

The medieval authors were fascinated with werewolves just as much as we are. Yet, despite all the fearsome ferocity, the werewolf they have imagined is not quite the same monster in our era. Here are the five things that you may not know about medieval werewolves:

## 1. Transformative Mode

First thing first: how does a man turn into a werewolf? Interestingly, whereas in recent films and TVs it is always the wolf ripping out of the man, the medieval werewolf often 'wears' the wolf. One way of man-to-wolf transformation is to wear a wolfskin:

this is most common in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, where the wolf-man is frequently referred to in skin-related terms, echoing the tradition of *berserkr* and *úlfheðnar*, battle-frenzied warriors wearing nothing but bear/wolf skin. Gerald of Wales also reports a priest encountering a werewolf couple while travelling across the region of Ossory in Ireland. When the priest refuses to perform the last rites for the dying she-wolf, fearing that she might be some devil's trick, the man-wolf 'unzips' the wolfskin to reveal the old woman underneath, as if it were just a coat.

The difference in transformative mode results in difference in emphasis: when the wolf comes out of the man, it is as if the wolf has been there all the time, lurking under the guise of a seemingly ordinary man; the violence it is about to unleash is heralded by the freshly torn flesh and streaks of blood. The man is but an empty shell, broken, dead, cast away. The wolf is the essence. In the medieval portrayal, on the other hand, even though in some cases the wolfskin/form does bring out the beast within, the man is only wrapped, hidden, but never destroyed. The werewolf is more like a riddle, waiting to be solved.

## 2. 'Be a wolf, have the understanding of ... a man!'

The quote above is from *Arthur and Gorlagon*, one of the four Arthurian Romances written in Latin. In the story, King Gorlagon is turned into a wolf by his treacherous wife. She could have got away with the crime, had she not made the mistake of enchanting 'the understanding of a man' instead of 'the understanding of a wolf'. A most unlikely mistake, and most unfortunate on the wife's part, but it brings another major difference between modern and medieval werewolves: the medieval ones are rarely savage monsters; instead, they can be surprisingly intelligent, rational, and well-behaved. Melion, Bisclavret, and Gorlagon find no difficulty in mingling with the king's knights and courtiers – Gorlagon even sits on the horse and waiting on the king's table 'with his forepaws erect'. Granted, courtesy does not make werewolves mild and friendly creatures, but even when they perform some deeds of violence, that violence is well

justified. Take Bisclavret for example: the wolf inflicts great harm upon his (ex-)wife and her lover, but the action is read as revenge, thus confirming rather than forfeiting the wolf's humanity.

### 3. Appearance

In many representations in our era, the werewolf is a gigantic creature that stands on two feet. Sometimes there are even traces of human features lingering on the face. In the medieval world, this image is in fact closer to the Cynocephales or 'Dog-head', one of the monstrous races from the edge of world. The werewolves, instead, appear just like ordinary wolves. The only thing special about them is that they may be alarmingly big – and more dangerous, presumably due to their human intelligence, but nothing more. This certainly makes things trickier and an awful lot uncannier: how can you ever tell? To what extent will you trust the appearance?

Cynocephales (The Travels of Sir John Mandeville):

'Thence one travels by sea to another land, called Natumera [Nicobar islands]. It is a large and fair island, whose circuit is nearly a thousand miles. Men and women of that isle have heads like dogs, and they are called Cynocephales. These people, despite their shape, are fully reasonable and intelligent. They worship an ox as their god. Each one of them carries an ox made of gold or silver on his brow, as a token that they love their god well. They go quite naked except for a little cloth round their privy parts. They are big in stature and good warriors; they carry a large shield, which covers all their body, and a long spear in their hand, and dressed in this way they boldly against their enemies. If they capture any man in battle, they eat them.'

### 4. Full Moon's Night?

It is almost common knowledge that werewolf transforms whenever he sees a full moon, a fact that is well demonstrated by Professor Lupin. Yet the medieval werewolves have no qualms whatsoever with lunar phases. Most man-to-wolf transformation is a one-off thing; the hero is either cursed, betrayed, or punished to be trapped in wolf form for a certain period of time. Once they have overpowered the evil-doer or redeemed themselves, they are released once and for all. Bisclavret transforms regularly and repetitively, but he does so on a weekly base and shows no concern of any astronomical phenomenon.

The only example is found in *Otia Imperialia* or 'Recreation for an Emperor', a *speculum* written by Gervase of Tilbury for Otto IV. Gervase reports men turning into wolves 'according to the cycles of the moon'. He gives the example of one Chaucevaire, who does transform under lunar influence, but does so only when there is a new moon, the very opposite to the full moon. The connection between the werewolf and the moon possibly has its roots in the etymology of the Latin word moon, *luna*, which is associated with lunatics. Their loss of human reason dehumanises them, rendering them figurative beasts, which, as the previous point shows, apparently is not the case with most of the werewolves.

## 5. Werewolves vs. Vampires

Either best friend or archenemy, the werewolves and the vampires always enjoy a very special relationship. Throughout the years, the former may be servant or partner to the latter, or that only weapon with which the vampires can be vanquished, or – as in *Being Human*, housemates.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1992) – werewolf transformation

Although vampires or vampirish beings rarely make their appearance in the literature concerned here, their bond with the werewolves is still felt. Old Norse sagas see a creature called *draugr*, a walking-dead kind of creature that shares many features with the vampires. One of the most famous *draugar*, Glámr in *Grettis saga Ásmundarson* is said to have *úlfgrár* – ‘wolf-grey’ – hair. The adjective is never used on natural wolves but only on wolf-related human such as Egill Skallagrímson, whose entire family has the reputation of being wolfish and berserk-ish. The fact that Glámr has the same hair colour certainly brings him closer to wolfishness. Moreover, Grettir, who ‘inherits’ from Glámr the *draugr* nature, becomes a figurative wolf when he is outlawed and is forced to feed on the sheep on the Island of Drangey.

It is intriguing to ponder over just how differently the werewolves and the vampires have been developed throughout the years. In the medieval werewolf texts, werewolves tend to be aristocrats – knights, princes, or even kings. In most cases they are victimised, civilised, sympathised. The vampires, on the other hand, are not very high on the social ladder to begin with; and the concept of sympathetic vampires has only become in the vogue in the past century. How this difference came into being? It may have to do with one fundamental difference between the vampire and the werewolf: according to Philip Bernhardt-House, this is a difference between transcendental permanency and permanent transformation—that the vampire's immortality and resistance to identity change make it more desirable, and certainly easier to romaniticise. It is certainly something to think about. The same goes without saying for all the other points that have been listed above. What has been changed or foregrounded? And what not? But what seems to remain constant is the struggle between man and beast, forever embodied in the figure of the werewolf.