

Reading Homework

Werewolf Tails

From the philosophers, poets, and historians of the ancient world:

Socrates tells his audience in *The Republic* that “he who tastes of human entrails...is inevitably transformed into a wolf”.

Ovid, the Roman poet, in his *Metamorphoses*, relates many of the myths of ancient Greece concerned with the transformation of humans and gods into various animals. In one of these myths, a wicked king named Lycaon attempts to trick the God Zeus into eating human flesh by mixing it into a stew he serves the God. The story is all the more terrible since the flesh is that of one of Lycaon’s own sons! Zeus overturns the table when he senses the trick and immediately transforms Lycaon into a wolf. This is the origin of the word “Lycanthropy” (to be like Lycaon).



Herodotus, the Roman historian, reports as a fact the existence of a tribe of men, the Neuri, who could transform themselves into wolves at certain times of the year.

Where did the “were” in werewolf come from?

The “wer-” or “wer-e” in *wer(e)wulf* means “man”; it is related to Latin *vir* with the same meaning, the source of *virile* and *virility*. Both the Germanic and the Latin words derive from Indo-European *wīro-*, “man.” (Source: Wikipedia)

This means there could hypothetically be other creatures such as werebears or were-rabbits and so on.

In fact, the werewolf is part of a very old and widespread belief in the ability of humans or animals to change their shape. For thousands of years, people in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia have believed in **Shape Shifters**



Among certain Indian tribes found in Brazil’s Amazon jungle, there is the belief that the tribal medicine man can change his shape into that of a jaguar.

↩ *A medicine man (worker of magic/holy man) in form of Jaguar*

He does this in order to help his people for it is believed that the jaguar is wise and can advise the people in time of need about where to hunt and fish, how to make war, where to live, and where to find medicines.

Among the American Indians tribes of the Great Plains of North America, the shapeshifter is the coyote. In this case, it is an animal who takes the shape of a human and walks among the people.



He is known as “the trickster” because he plays tricks on people. Sometimes he steals food or causes other kinds of trouble. But his jokes and tricks are often ways to teach people how to live better lives.

Then there is Japan, where not one, but two animals have the power to change themselves into human beings: the fox and the tanuki.



“According to Yōkai folklore, all foxes have the ability to shapeshift into human form. While some folktales speak of kitsune employing this ability to trick others – as foxes in folklore often do – other stories portray them as faithful guardians, friends, lovers, and wives.” – Wikipedia

“Tanuki has been significant in Japanese folklore since ancient times. The legendary *tanuki* is reputed to be mischievous and jolly, a master of disguise and shapeshifting, but somewhat gullible and absentminded”. – Wikipedia

In Europe, the dominant shape-shifter has been the werewolf: a man (or woman) with the power to become a wolf or wolf-like monster. One theme that is fairly common in ancient werewolf stories is that the man is turned into a werewolf as punishment for evil acts...especially breaking the taboo against cannibalism.

As Christianity replaced paganism in Europe the werewolf legends did not disappear but (like much of pagan belief) were incorporated into the Christian world view. However, by the 15th century, it was believed that werewolves were not people punished by God for their evil deeds, but were closer to being witches (people who acquired magical powers by selling their souls to Satan).



In fact, werewolves could almost be called a sub-species of witch since it was believed that in all cases the power of transformation into an animal (usually a wolf) was the result of power granted by Satan. This is remarkably close to one interpretation of the Dracula story (that Dracula became a vampire by asking the “powers of darkness” to let him die and then walk again as *nosferatu* (un-dead) and feed on the blood of the living as a vampire. Even one of the same taboos is broken in the case of both vampires and werewolves, that against cannibalism.

But the werewolf is a far older monster than the vampire and there are also clear reasons why people believed so strongly in their existence.

1. Lycanthropy is real.

In *The Wolf Man*, Larry’s father, Sir John Talbot, a man of science and rational thought, explains that “lycanthropy” is a mental disease in which a man (or woman) truly believes they are a wolf. This is all quite true. The mentally ill can (and do) sometimes believe themselves to



be angels, devils, aliens, or even famous people from history (when I worked in a mental hospital one of my patients, a sweet little old lady, told me that she was Adolf Hitler). People can also believe they are animals and probably the most frequently occurring belief is that the person is a wolf. Why a wolf? Well, the mentally ill read books and watch movies (or read Plato, Ovid, and Herodotus) and their minds would seem to fix on the wolf because of werewolf stories!

2. Witches were real, too.



The term “witch” came to mean someone who was in league with Satan. But most people accused of witchcraft were either entirely innocent or were simply people who still believed in the pagan gods of old or who practiced “magic” in the form of using certain herbs and mushrooms to alter their state of consciousness (just as modern drug users do today). Certain herbs and mushrooms could make the user believe he or she had the power to fly or change their shape (into that of a wolf or some other creature).

Again, the person using the drug would be influenced by werewolf stories and be attracted to that kind of transformation.



3. People really did look like Larry Talbot’s werewolf!



There is a very rare genetic condition known as hypertrichosis (hyper = extreme, *trichoun* [Greek for “covered with hair”], -osis, a suffix meaning

“of or related to sickness or disease”). The D.N.A. marker for this condition is passed through the male line and rarely occurs in women. In men, it can cause the entire body to be covered by hair (including the face). So there really were men who looked just like the werewolf Jack Pierce’s makeup turned Lon Chaney Jr into for *The Wolfman*. As an interesting side note, people with hypertrichosis often found themselves working in carnivals and circuses as “freaks” because those were the only jobs they could get. These people did not suffer any form of mental illness at all. Their condition was purely physical.

