

When the Wolfsbane Blooms

Even a man who is pure at heart,
And says his prayers by night,
May become a wolf when the wolfsbane blooms,
And the Autumn moon is bright.

-- *The Wolf Man, 1941*

Standard modern definitions of attractiveness do not speak favorably of extensive amounts of hair growing all over the body, or oozing open sores covering most of the skin. The disadvantages are self-evident. Yet, imagine being subject to a death sentence merely for acquiring these afflictions. The inhabitants of Europe in the Middle Ages not only could be put to death for such offenses, but often were. They were put to death for being werewolves.

Legends and myths concerning werewolves and other were-animals are some of the most culturally universal beliefs that mankind has ever known; but why is the idea of the transformation of man into animal such a compelling and horrifying topic, even today? The answer may stem from our past. Some of our richest historical accounts are associated with this sort of transformation or with similar accounts of human-like animals.

The myths begin with Romulus and Remus, brothers who were abandoned at birth, but grew up to be the founders of Rome. It is what happened between these two events that often escapes the pragmatic historian. Romulus and Remus were said to have been weaned by a *she-wolf*. Acting as mother and protector to two human children could certainly be considered human-like for such a wild animal as a wolf. The comparison between this she-wolf and other animals with human qualities ends with her benevolence. Were-animals are not usually this friendly. For example, there was a certain group of warriors among the Norse Vikings that

were known as *Berserkers*. They ordinarily appeared as normal Nordics; however, upon going into battle they would whip themselves into a savage frenzy, or go berserk, and transform into bears.

The explanation for this probably stops short before the realm of magic. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the etymology of the word *berserk* as "bear-sark" or "bear skin." This may explain why the Berserkers were perceived as bears. Their opponents didn't want to be known as cowards, so they told all who asked that the Berserkers transformed into murderous, unbeatable bears, when all they actually did was wear bearskins in battle.

Dracula is another early example of a man-into-animal legend. Dracula and other vampires were said to have the ability to metamorphosize into bats, leopards, rats, and of course, wolves. Dracula is often referred to as having hair on the palms on his hands. These days, we would say that this was the result of autoerotic behavior; in the Middle Ages, misplaced or inordinate amounts of hair were telltale signs of a werewolf in human form. Dracula was a real and horrifying image to the inhabitants of old Europe. He was the first recorded *lycanthrope* or werewolf.

Like the Berserkers, the Dracula legend also has a basis in reality. Dracula's probable role model was a Transylvanian prince known as Vlad Tepes, but also as Vlad the Impaler. Some of his atrocities include: Inviting 5,000 peasants to a feast at his castle and, after trapping them inside, burning it to the ground to prevent an uprising; nailing hats to the heads of foreign dignitaries who refused to remove them in his presence; and eating meals of human flesh while watching the strugglings of people he had impaled on nine-foot-long wooden stakes in the ground. Vlad could impale these people in such a way that it took them two days to die, earning him his name, and a place in the nightmares of generations to come.

It would not take much for some of Vlad's subjects to exaggerate these acts into bloodsucking, contracts with Satan, and metamorphosing into a wolf. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* couldn't be far behind these exaggerations.

One of the most overlooked werewolf stories is that of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Think about it; a wolf *plots* to kill Red's grandma, *thinks* in order to outwit Red and has an intelligible conversation with our heroine— a seven year old girl (something most humans only wish they could do). These are all very human-like activities, as the name werewolf or man-wolf implies.

A great many cultures have a transformation or man-like-animal legend akin to *Red Riding Hood*. Men transform into tigers in Burma, leopards in Africa and eagles among the American Indians. The Egyptians had their Sphinx, who was part man, part lion, as well as the sun god *Ra*, who had the body of a man and the head of a falcon. These were-animals usually represented some fearful or punitive element, but as the legend of the Japanese were-swan proves, this is not always the case.

It turns out that in most of these instances, the transformation from man into animal was the result of some societal taboo. In Serbo-Croatian legend, for instance, werewolves were often thus plagued because of sexual relations with their mothers. Other activities that caused a person to become a werewolf in the Europe of the Middle Ages included being born with teeth, born out of wedlock to parents who were born out of wedlock, and being weaned before time.

The most terrifying taboo, and most common reason given to explain a werewolf, was arguing that a fellow villager signed a contract with Satan. This was the most direct way for a werewolf to make evil work in his favor. Within this variable, the werewolf has control over his own metamorphosis.

Outside these taboos, the avenues to becoming a werewolf become more varied and less logical. There were certain "sure fire" methods to determine who was a werewolf

based on distinguishing characteristics. If those under suspicion had long fingernails, lots of hair, or eyebrows that were linked at the bridge of the nose, there was no doubt that they were werewolves. If they shied away from light, had a wolf-like gait, had wounds that matched a murderous wolf's, had *any* excessive wounds (presumably from running around the dark forest at night and bumping into things), or behaved like a wolf in any manner, that was a dead giveaway. Paranoid villagers put scores of people to death simply because they had these characteristics.

If an actual wolf went on the rampage killing a farmer's cattle, a shepherd's flock, or even humans, the villagers simply found the one of themselves who most resembled a wolf. When this person was killed, but the wolf's rampage continued, it was obvious that they had killed the wrong werewolf. The only thing to do at this point would be to find another wolf-man and put him to death.

Unfortunately for the victims, these killings were probably not solely based in superstition. There were probably more villagers who fit the werewolf bill than previously thought possible. A Dr. Lee Illis has written a thesis entitled *Porphyria and the Aetiology of Werewolves*. In it, Dr. Illis discusses a now rare disease known as porphyria. The affliction manifests itself in several suspicious symptoms. The victims of porphyria, a congenital recessive-gene disease, suffer from numerous open sores over their entire bodies, and light is intensely painful to their eyes. Dr. Illis contends that any superstitious villager plagued by wolf attacks during the Middle Ages would more than likely mistake these symptoms as direct proof of being a werewolf. Considering that wolves get open sores from running around the forest on all fours, and that they shy away from light, what other conclusion could be drawn? And as if these poor porphyria sufferers didn't have enough problems, the disease often caused their teeth to become a deep red color, obviously from biting their prey. Those who had contracted porphyria didn't stand much of a chance against bloodthirsty wolf hunters. Dr. Illis concludes

that because of the frequent outbreaks of porphyria during the Middle Ages, these villagers probably had more werewolves to contend with than they could possibly kill.

So what could be worse than a disease that made a person look like the human version of a wolf? How about a disease that made a person look like an actual wolf. There is an even rarer medical condition known as *hypertrichosis* that causes hair to grow in excess all over the body. Those who display hypertrichotic tendencies have hair on their foreheads, cheeks, and almost anywhere else imaginable. They have more recently been displayed in circus side shows. Even though this condition is extremely rare, it would (and did) only take one or two instances of it to perpetuate any fear in the likelihood of werewolves.

Other phenomena that may have bred werewolf paranoia include rabid wolves and dogs, feral children (those raised by wolves), and *lycanthropy*. Lycanthropy is a mental disorder that causes its sufferer to behave like and imagine he is a wolf. Any of these instances alone, or in unison, could be used as rationale for putting an innocent person to death.

The bizarre combination of these diseases and defects may be slightly detached from our superstition-free existence. Even so, we still pump millions of dollars into seeing werewolf and vampire movies. We still observe Halloween, a holiday originally created to scare away evil spirits like those who contributed to the existence of werewolves. We are not as detached from our predecessors as we might like to think. Just remember to pluck those hairs between your eyebrows and bandage any open sores before going out on a night with a full moon; you might be considered a scapegoat in wolf's clothing.