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The Werewolf's Indifference

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A WEREWOLF IS THE PROBLEM of animal difference expressed in monster's flesh. This compound creature asks how intermixed with the bestial (*-wolf*) the human (*were-*) might already be. All that is civilized, ennobling, and sacred is lost in fleshly tumult with lupine appetites, impulses, and violence. The werewolf would seem the ideal monster to query the suppression of "the animal part within us all."¹ Yet a warning that this monstrous admixture is not so easy to make a universalizing metaphor inheres in the fact that Latin possesses no common noun for the creature. Lycaon might be transformed by an angry god into a wolf, and might (in Ovid's narration) inhabit briefly an interstitial space where he possesses human and bestial qualities, but at transformation's end one term replaces another, *vir* to *lupus*. When Gervase of Tilbury in the *Otia imperialia* is describing men who metamorphose under lunar influence, he observes: "In England we have often seen men change into wolves [*homines in lupos mutari*] according to the phases of the moon. The Gauls call men of this kind *gerulfi*, while the English name for them is *werewolves*, *were* being the English equivalent of *uir*."² Gervase must employ French and English words to gloss his Latinate circumlocution.³

As its etymologically admixed nature suggests, the werewolf is a hy-

¹Joyce E. Salisbury, "Human Beasts and Bestial Humans in the Middle Ages," in *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, ed. Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior (New York: Routledge, 1997), 9–22. Salisbury is arguing for more sympathy toward the animal within. See also her book *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

²Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*, 87–89, I.15.

³Although Gervase is dubious about many animal transformations, the werewolves seem to be a true change of body. See the thorough discussion in Leslie A. Scoduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008), 35–38.

brid monster. Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that hybridity is a dialogue in which “contraries are simultaneous and in conversation with each other.”⁴ The werewolf is therefore not an identity-robbing degradation of the human, nor the yielding to a submerged and interior animality, but the staging of a conversation in which the human always triumphs. Hybridity is therefore a simultaneity of unequal differences. As Karl Steel has demonstrated, this overpowering of animal possibility by human exceptionality is a ceaseless, fraught, and violence-driven process. Humans are made at animal expense. Steel points out that a werewolf’s raising the problem of “the animal part that is within us all” is possible only “if humans are understood to have discrete ‘animal’ and ‘human’ parts.”⁵ As idealized differences, these categories need to be produced and stabilized repeatedly: the only way to maintain such separations is through more violence.

As admonitory figures, werewolves would seem to warn us why species difference must remain firm. So keen is the desired division between animal and human that many medieval werewolves are not true composites but humans encased in lupine skin, awaiting liberation. Gerald of Wales describes natives of Ossory cursed by Saint Natalis to don wolf fur and live as beasts. Under these animal garments, their bodies remain unaltered.⁶ Two of these transformed Irish villagers announce their appearance to a group of startled travelers with the resonant words “Do not be afraid.” Wolf skin is peeled back to reveal an ordinary woman inside. The werewolves deliver a human message, an anthropocentric horror story about being entrapped in an alien encasement. What human would not seek an immediate release from enclosure within such degrading and disjunctive corporeality? If this hybrid form stages a dialogue, the conversation is one-sided. Who speaks the animal’s narrative? Who could wish for such a monster’s impossibly amalgamated body? Who could desire such a life?

Cursed and pedagogical creatures, werewolves cannot be a happy lot. The citizens of Ossory bewail their compulsion. Yet medieval literature also describes werewolves cheerful in their composite bodies: the clever

⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 160.

⁵ Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 12.

⁶ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John O’Meara (London: Penguin Books, 1982). For an influential treatment of the episode stressing its stabilities of forms, see Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 15–18, 106–11.

Alphonse, who teaches the young lovers to disguise themselves in animal skins in *Guillaume de Palerne*; the forest-loving protagonist of *Melion*, who discovers in wolf fur a success never realized while an ordinary husband and vassal; Bisclavret, who when trapped in animal form attains a satisfaction denied as a quotidian knight. Animality is supposed to be a despised state, the abject condition against which humanity asserts itself. The werewolf knows better. This monster inhabits a space of undifferentiated concurrency, in the doubled sense of a *running together* and a *mutual assent*. The werewolf offers neither a conversation (which too easily becomes a conversion) nor a dialogue (weighted in advance toward human domination), but a pause, a hesitation, a concurrence during which what is supposed to be contrastive remains coexistent, in difference, indifferent. Werewolves do not reject the stony enclosure of castles for arboreal wilds. They are not proto-romanticists or early avatars of Bear Grylls. What is most intriguing about the state of unsettled animality that they incarnate is its irreducible hybridity, its ethical complexity, and its dispersive instability, pro-animal yet posthuman.

Perhaps that sounds too affirmative for so fierce a creature. In *Bisclavret*, Marie de France glosses “werewolf” in harsh but familiar terms:

Garualf, c[eo] est beste salvage:
Tant cum il est en cele rage,
Hummes devure, grant mal fait,
Es granz forez converse et vait.

[A werewolf is a savage beast:
while his fury is on him,
he eats men, does much harm,
goes deep in the forest to live.]⁷

Marie vividly describes the bestiality incarnated by this monster, its sylvan existence of uncontrolled violence, even anthropophagy. Who would embrace such animal life? Bisclavret. A well-respected knight four days of the week and a forest-dwelling wolf the other three, Bisclavret is not unhappy. His mistake is to confide the secret of his dual

⁷ *Bisclavret*, 9–12, in Marie de France, *Lais*, ed. Alfred Ewert, intro. Glyn S. Burgess (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1995); translation from Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, *The Lais of Marie de France* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1978). Further references by line numbers.

nature to his wife. Unlike the werewolves described by Gerald of Wales who don lupine skins, Marie's knight simply removes his clothing and stashes the garments in the hollow of a woodland rock. Once "stark naked" (*tut nu*), he tells his fearful spouse, the following adventure (*aventure*) inevitably arrives:

Dame, jeo devienç bisclavret:
 En cele grant forest me met,
 Al plus espés de la gaudine,
 S'i vif de preie e de ravine.
 (63–66)

[My dear, I become a werewolf:
 I go into the great forest,
 in the thickest part of the woods,
 and I live on prey I hunt down.]

This account of roaming the forest is significantly less violent than the vision of lycanthropy with which the *lai* opens. The wolf's sustenance in the forest depths is described as *preie*, which could be deer, rabbits, and foxes. Or not. What matters is that unlike the opening gloss, no invitation is extended to consider brutality against specific bodies. Bynum therefore sees a vast difference between the *garvalf*, the Norman word for the savage werewolf of tradition, and Marie's own *bisclavret*, the term of unknown origin that is supposed to be its Breton equivalent.⁸ I wonder, though, if these two nouns can be so easily separated and suspect that Marie is up to something more complicated and inventive.

Bisclavret hesitates to reveal his covert life. He fears he will lose his "very self" ("me meïsmes en perdrai") if this secret becomes known. Yet although he admits his second nature to his wife with apprehension, he speaks it without shame. He arrives home from his three wolfen days *joius e liez*, happy and delighted (30). Time in the forest vivifies. His wife is terrified by this knowledge and certain she will never desire to share a bed with him again (102). Feigning passion for a neighbor, she arranges to have Bisclavret's clothing stolen, trapping him in animal form. Bisclavret's anger at his wife is immense, his revenge brutal: when she comes to the court where he has become the king's favorite pet, he bites

⁸Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 170–71.

the nose from her face. Torture compels the disfigured woman to reveal her crime, and she admits the stealing of his transfigurative clothes.

Strangely, however, when the vestments are returned to a lupine Bisclavret, he looks upon them with indifference: "he didn't even seem to notice them"(280). A councillor suggests that the former knight is too modest to dress in public. Critics generally find this intratextual interpretation persuasive. Bisclavret's shame signals his readiness to abandon his animality and return to civility. Yet the councillor's words are nonsensical. Why would Bisclavret feel shame? Certainly not at his nakedness: he is covered in fur, and he is refusing to dress, not to strip. The clothing is a potent materialization of his humanity. Why would shame inhere in a return to that superior state? Marie de France's *lais* are usually crafted around densely symbolic objects that might be described as *parabolic*, an adjective for parables (stories) as well as parabola (curved orbits). To enter into relation with a parabolic object is to be swept into an unexpected narrative that alters the trajectory of one's life, spinning it around a novel center of accelerating gravity. Everything changes at such encounters. These objects are *aventure* in material form: the ship in *Guigemar*, the hawk and sword in *Yonec*, the swan in *Milun*. Why would Bisclavret demonstrate such apathy toward the thing that can restore human being?

Werewolves' bodies are convenient animal vehicles for meditating upon human identity in the Middle Ages. They are theologically rich and pose difficult questions about identity and continuity, as Bynum has shown. They often prove to be less hybrid than they at first appear: unzip the wolf skin and out pops the human who had always been dwelling inside. Werewolves easily become allegories, reaffirming the superiority of the human, their natural dominance and difference. So why would a werewolf, through a dogged lack of interest, suggest he is at home in a shaggy form? Could it be that Bisclavret is simply indifferent to a return to quotidian humanity, and thus offers no reaction at all to these powerfully symbolic accoutrements?

As a knight, Bisclavret is noble and loved. His three days spent prowling the forests in a wolf's body detracted nothing, and he returns home refreshed. The forest is a place of privacy. He resists telling his wife about his lupine sojourns because he fears the loss of that space, her love, his selfhood. He places his clothing in the hollow of a rock by an ancient chapel to gain something that he knows imperils his life as husband and neighbor: a space inhuman (lived among vegetation and

beasts, filled with violence but also shared with trees, other animals, stones) and innovative (he creates and sustains a precarious existence). This hybrid space is also too easily annexed back into the orbit of ordinary human lives. Bisclavret in his wolf body earns the king's affection through an act of submission, kissing the monarch's stirrup and making his readiness to serve visually evident. Well fed and watered, full of proper submission but also ready to unleash proper violence, he is at once like a favorite hunting dog and like a good household knight. He learns the equivalence between two forms that seemed mutually exclusive, learns their indifference.

Immediately upon his restoration, Bisclavret is beheld asleep upon the royal bed. His wife—the one who did not want him in her bed any more—is banished. Her female children inherit her noselessness, an infinitely repeating historical sign of the misogyny that has limned this tale, with its closing vision of a thoroughly homosocial world. And perhaps with that trading of one dreary bed for another we realize the reason for Bisclavret's unresponsiveness to the offered clothing. He returns from his wolf's form to a startlingly familiar scene, one that he thought he had trotted away from long ago. How sad his departure from lycanthropy must be, as an ephemeral but invigoratingly uncertain world yields to soft beds and predictable human vistas "a tutdis," *forever*.