

Shape-Shifting in Late-Twelfth Century Ireland and Wales

It was while he was travelling through Ireland with the Anglo-Norman army that Gerald of Wales heard the account of the werewolves of Ossory:

About three years ago before the coming of Lord John into Ireland, it happened that a priest, journeying from Ulster towards Meath, spent the night in a wood on the borders of Meath. He was staying up beside a fire which he had prepared for himself under the leafy boundaries of a tree, and had for company only a little boy, when a wolf came up to them and immediately broke into these words: 'Do not be afraid! Do not fear! Do not worry! There is nothing to fear!'

They were completely astounded and in great consternation. The wolf said to them something about God that seemed reasonable. The priest called on him and abjured him by the omnipotent God and faith in the Trinity not to harm them and tell them what kind of creature he was, who, although in the form of a beast, could speak human words. The wolf gave a Catholic answer in all things and at length added:

'We are natives of Ossory²²⁴. From there every seven years, because of the imprecation of a certain saint, namely the abbot Natalis, two persons are compelled to go into exile not only from their territory but also from their bodily shape. They put off the form of man completely and put on the form of wolf. When the seven years are up, and if they have survived, two others take their place in the same way, and the first pair must return to their former country and nature.

'My companion in this pilgrimage is not far from here and is seriously ill. Please give her in her last hour the solace of the priesthood in bringing to her the revelation of the divine mercy.'

This is what he said, and the priest, full of fear, followed him to a certain tree not far away. In the hollow of the tree the priest saw a she-wolf groaning and grieving like a human being, even though her appearance was that of a beast. As soon as she saw him she welcomed him in a human way, and then gave thanks also to God that in her last hour he had granted such consolation. She then received from the hands of the priest all last rites duly performed up to the last communion. This too she eagerly requested, and implored him to complete his good act by giving her the viaticum ... To remove all doubt [the he-wolf] pulled all the skin off the she-wolf from the head down to the navel, folding it back with his paw as if were a hand. And immediately the shape of an old woman, clear to be seen, appeared. At that, the priest, more through terror than reason, communicated her as she had earnestly demanded, and then she devoutly received the sacrament. Afterwards, the skin that had been removed by the he-wolf resumed its former position.²²⁵

Something about this strange story seems to have caused Gerald and his clerical colleagues considerable unease. After relaying the account of the meeting with the werewolves, the archdeacon noted that while he had been passing through the area some two years later, he was met by two priests who had been sent by the local bishop to ascertain his views on this 'serious matter'. Gerald had passed on his views in writing, which had been duly ratified by the bishop and his synod – who had in turn submitted a sealed report on the alleged events to no less a person than the Pope himself. Nobody, it seemed, questioned the word of the priest who had been witness to these events. The issue was not the veracity of these events, so much as their theological implications.

As we will discover throughout this study, the late-twelfth century was a time of widespread cultural, intellectual and religious ferment at all levels of medieval European society. The rediscovery of certain classical works, notably the *Physica* of Aristotle, had led to a renewed interest within the monastic schools in the 'labile, percolating, fertile' world of nature²²⁶. At

223 *ibid.* BK II, Ch.7 (Thorpe, p.187-188)

224 An upland district in the South East of Ireland.

the same time, the Latinate thinkers of the age were also being horrified and titillated by the works of Ovid, with its celebrations of flux and monstrous *metamorphosis*. These ideas challenged the fundamental orders of things. They destabilized the categories of reality, violated the boundaries of gender and species and (worst of all) threatened the position of the rational human being at the top of the corporal chain of being. It was perhaps as a result of such ontological anxieties that the ecclesiastical authorities imposed strict controls on the teaching of the newly discovered works of Aristotle. Around the same time, Conrad Abbot of Hirsau banned his monks from reading tales in which man's reason was obscured by his mutation into a beasts or stones – a proscription clearly aimed at counteracting the subversive popularity of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* within this particular monastic community. There was, it would seem, a feeling of mutability in the air. Late-twelfth century sources abound with mysterious reports of 'greenmen and werewolves, stigmata and eucharistic miracles, and dreams of turning copper into gold'.²²⁷ Heresy was once again abroad, or perceived to be abroad: with dissident religious groups being charged (significantly) with reviving the forbidden belief of *metempsychosis*, the passage of the soul between physical bodies.

In subsequent editions of Gerald's *Topographia* (in which the account of the werewolves is contained), a lengthy comment is appended to this episode. Gerald was attempting to rationalise the appearance of these monsters in terms of various canonical categories of *mutatio*. He compares the werewolves to the miracle of water into wine; or the transubstantial mystery of the Eucharist; or even the incarnation of Christ himself. These afterthoughts are rambling and inconclusive, and one has the distinct impression Gerald had failed even to convince himself. Nonetheless, it is equally clear that the archdeacon could sense that there was something not quite right about the Irish werewolves, something which required nailing down into orthodox theology. Gerald's somewhat obsessive preoccupation with this question is significant in this context, revealing as it is of the prejudices and insecurities of Franco-Roman world, a position that we will see was radically counterpoised by the author of the Four Branches (c.f. pp. 490 n. 870)

None of Gerald's theological explications, it need hardly be said, had much to do with the original experience of the wandering Irish priest. As we have already seen (p. 111-112), 'lycanthropic' warrior societies were a not-unknown feature at the peripheries of Early Medieval society, and in isolated areas such groups seem to have been active well into the Central Middle Ages. These brigand gangs, consisting in the main of landless adolescents, along with various outlawed or other marginal persons, were sometimes to be found encamped in the wilderness zones between settled communities. While these dangerous groups may have had informal ties with the local settled communities, such agreements were perhaps more of the order of a protection racket than an oath of feudal loyalty. Whether the *fiana* (as these marginal communities were known in Ireland) were regarded as a lawless gang of reavers or a loose tribal militia no doubt depended largely on the circumstances.²²⁸ Interesting from our point of view is the fact that the more anti-social activities of these marginal groups, which would have included anything from the theft of livestock to murder and gang-rape, was often described in predatory terms by the verb *fáelad*, literally 'wolving' or 'wilding'. This echoes a commonplace onomastic metaphor, found in a variety of Early Irish (and indeed, Indo-European) contexts, in which canine and lupine name-elements occur in relation to young warrior males.²²⁹ Even more significant here is the poetic epithet that was sometimes used to denote the warrior: *luch-thonn* 'wolf-skin'. This usage has clear parallels with the Old Norse term *úlf-heöinn* 'wolf-skin', which was used of the frenzied

225 Giraldus Cambrensis *The History and Topography of Ireland* §52 trans. J. J. O'Meara (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1982) pp. 69-72

226 Caroline Walker Bynum *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001) p.84

227 Such beliefs were nothing new among the lay-population of medieval Europe, but given the mood of the Latinate orders (the chief producers of documentary records), it is perhaps unsurprising that we begin to hear more reports of these uncanny phenomena in the years leading up to the end of the twelfth century

berserkr or ‘bare-shirt’ warriors alluded to above.²³⁰ The actual donning of wolf-skins may well have been a psychotropic ritual practice amongst these warrior groups in Ireland, just as it apparently was amongst the Viking *berserkr*.

All in all, it is hard to believe that the encounter with the ‘werewolves’ in the borderlands between Meath and Ulster – alarming though it undoubtedly must have been – was not related to this particular cultural phenomenon. Could this have simply been based on the mumbled words of a confused and frightened country priest, whose exaggerated description of this pair of fur-clad outlaws was seized on eagerly by Gerald and the local episcopate? Does the fact that this account was taken so literally tell us more about contemporary learned obsessions with monsters, hybrids and Ovidian metamorphoses, than the authentic nature of popular supernatural belief in the countryside of Ireland?

However, closer analysis reveals there may have been more to this ‘lycanthropic’ complex than the simple matter of the sartorial habits of wilderness-dwelling brigands. What is interesting here is the notion, reflected in Gerald’s account, that a state of lycanthropy could be *inflicted involuntarily* by a third party; or as Old Irish sources would put it, someone could have the *hair of the wolf* (*dluí fulla*) *put upon them* (i.e. be forced into a state of vagrancy).²³¹ In Gerald’s account, it was Saint Natalis who (for reasons unknown) seems to have caused the people Ossory to suffer two of their number to go forth in this state every seven years. The idea of a saint having this terrifying dehumanising power is not unattested elsewhere in the medieval Celtic tradition. Notably, as we shall see when we consider the related complex of the Madness of the Birdman in Chapter 5 (pp. 516-520), there is the curse of Saint Rónan, which caused the unfortunate Suibne Geillt to sprout feathers and take to the tree-tops of the wilderness. Indeed, the evidence is that metamorphoses of this kind, occasioned by a third party or otherwise, were by no means unheard of elsewhere in the medieval Celtic tradition. We might recall the tale of *Tochmarc Étain* ‘The Wooing of Étain’ (c.f. p. 98), in which the druidess Fúanmach strikes the heroine with a ‘wand of scarlet rowan’, which causes her to turn into a pool of water. As a result the ‘heat of the fire and the seething of the earth’ brings forth a worm; this worm then transforms into a fly, which (after several generations of being buffeted by storms of druidic sorcery) is swallowed by a queen of the Ulaid and reborn as a princess in that tribal kingdom. Numerous other saints and holy-men on the Welsh and Irish tradition are depicted transforming their enemies into pools of bubbling slime just as does this jealous druidess, even if this is not typically followed by the transmigratory sequence that is relayed in *Tochmarc Étain*.

That there was either a moral or affective element to these transformations is also often suggested by the medieval sources. In the tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, the monstrous king of *Twrch Trwyth* was transformed into a boar-like creature by God ‘because of his sins’, and hunted like a beast in the wilderness of Ireland and Wales (a regressive transformation that has been compared to the fate of the biblical Nebuchadnezzar). The aforementioned *Myrddyn Gwyllt* seems to have undergone an experience similar to his Irish counterpart Suibne, having been struck by a debilitating fear, before retreating to the tree-tops of the Calidonian forests. As we have already suggested (p. 111 above), this experience would seem to have

228 This social institution – sometimes known as the *fían*, otherwise the *díberga* – is apparent through a close analysis of the legal, narrative and hagiographical literature of medieval Ireland. Close parallels can be found with certain African and Native American systems..

229 ‘Use of the word "wolf", more often than not a reflex of the IE form, as a personal name or a designation for outlaws is found in early Celtic, Germanic, Greek, Indian, Iranian and Hittite sources ... notable further support for an Indo-European ‘Männerbund’ of youthful werewolves is provided by Rudra and Maruts in Old Indic myth, ancient Greek accounts of Arcadian, Spartan and other customs, the Roman legend of Romulus and Remus, and the particularly well researched early Germanic material’ McCone (1990) pp. 213-214

230 McCone (1990) p.213

important similarities with the state of koinoniac instability attested in other traditional cultures. What is significant here is that such experiences were often regarded as *both a physical and a psychological metamorphosis*.

So it would appear that in the medieval Celtic world it was believed that involuntary transformations of this kind could be occasioned in two different ways: through the aggressive psychic onslaught of a druid or a saint, or through some kind of subjective mental breakdown similar to the regressive state of *koinonia*. However, there was also a third form of shapeshifting that played an important part in traditional folk-belief, both in and beyond the Medieval Celtic world. It was believed in such cultures that a person skilled in that particular form of psychic self-control the ancients knew as magic (*hud* or *lledrith*²³² in Medieval Wales) could also voluntarily induce changes to their own physical form. The source of this tradition may lie partly in the ‘magical flight’ of shamanic visionaries. Here, while in a self-induced trance, the sorcerer reports experiencing his soul leaving his body and venturing forth: usually in the form of a bird,²³³ but sometimes as a dog, wolf or some other kind of animal.²³⁴ Such traditions lead naturally enough to the idea of the shape-changing magician – a persistent motif throughout the folk-superstition of the pre-modern world.

An example of this shape-shifting power, here used as an aggressive form of magic, is to be found in Chapter VIII of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. In this sequence, the hero Cú Chulainn is harried by the dark goddess Morrigan, whose sexual advances he had rejected as he stood guard at the ford of Áth Tarteisc:

*‘...an eel flung three coils about Cú Chulainn’s feet and he fell back in the ford. Cú Chulainn rose up...cattle stampeded madly through the[surrounding] army...next a she-wolf attacked Cú Chulainn and drove back the cattle westwards upon him...she [then] came in the shape of a hornless red heifer and led the cattle dashing through the ford and the pools...’*²²³⁵

We might compare this magical attack to an unsettling anecdote recorded by Gerald in the *Itinerarium*, which was alleged to have taken place in the Cemais district of northwestern Dyfed:

*In our own days, a young man who lived in this neighbourhood, and who was lying ill in bed, was persecuted by a plague of toads. It seemed as if the entire population of toads had made an agreement to go and visit him. Vast numbers were killed by his friends, but they grew again like the heads of the Hydra. Toads came flocking from all directions, more and more of them, until no one could count them. In the end the young man’s friends and other people who were trying to help were quite worn out. They chose a tall tree, cut off all its branches and removed all its leaves. Then they hoisted him up to the top in a bag. He was still not safe from his venomous assailants. The toads crawled up the tree looking for him. They killed him and ate him right up, leaving nothing but a skeleton.*²³⁶

We are never told exactly why the bed-ridden young man was subjected to this terrible end but, as with the Mórrigan sequence from the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, there is the distinct suggestion of some kind of malign consciousness behind this amphibian swarm. This might be seen as a medieval echo of that rather more primitive idea that *all* animals were shape-shifting entities, benevolent or malign; and that *any* unusual phenomenon in nature might be suspected of being a god, an ancestor, or a magician in disguise.

231 *ibid.* p.213

232 Both of these words are usually translated (interchangeably) as ‘magic’ or ‘enchantment’. *Lledrith* appears to be derived from the root of the verb *lledu* ‘widen’ + *rith* ‘form,’ ‘appearance’ – suggesting (if this etymology is correct), that this kind of magic was seen as a kind of blurring or distorting of boundaries or surfaces. No less suggestive is the root of the term *hud*, which appears to be related (via the Indo-European root **soito*) to the Norse term *seidr* ‘seething’ – a term used to describe an old kind of magic particularly associated with women and indigenous Lappish shamans.

233 Mircea Eliade *Shamanism: Techniques of Ecstasy* (Arkana: London, New York, 1989) pp. 477 ff.

Such a notion draws us back towards the pre-rational horizons of animistic thinking, to which we will return in the section below. For now, however, we must consider through what sources these archaic apprehensions been preserved in the medieval Welsh thinking. One possible conduit might have been the ancient druidic belief of *transmigration*, for which we have found traces elsewhere in the more esoteric bardic writings of Ireland and Wales (c.f. pp.99-100 above). As well as these bardic writings, we find traces of the commonplace belief (by no means confined to the Medieval Celtic world) that the soul took the form of a bird after death (re.: p. 516 ff. above), which we also might regard as related to this doctrine of transmigration.²³⁷ Also relevant to this question is the legacy of *totemism*,²³⁸ apparently one of the oldest and most widespread systems of human thought. Traces of totemistic thinking can be found in the mythological lore of Medieval Wales and Ireland. It is far from uncommon for the narrative representations of the old Celtic godforms to exhibit zoomorphic associations. The Irish *Boanda*, for example, is associated with her beautiful white-coated, red-eared *cattle* (appropriately enough for a faery river goddess). The psychotic warrior-hero Cú Chulainn exhibited strong signs of an affiliation to a *canine* totem – having a taboo on the killing of dogs, and a name that literally meant ‘Hound of Culan (the smith)’. *Conal Cernach*, like the ancient Gaulish horned-god Cernnunos (*Herne the Hunter* of English mythology), was associated with both the snake and the stag. In the Welsh tradition, Rhiannon is unambiguously an equine goddess (see pp.191 ff.) whilst the name of the great hero Arthur literally means ‘The Bear Man’. Llew is the ruler of birds. Culhwch was ‘the slender boar’, born in a pig-run. The iconography of the pagan British world of Iron Age and Roman Britain confirms this suggestion that such zoomorphism was very much a part of the druidic conception of the Divine.

The folklore recorded by Gerald in Wales and Ireland in the late-twelfth century should be seen against this background. The animalistic subconscious is the natural place to regress when the ego can no longer sustain the pressures of conscious control, hence the enduring popularity (and validity) of these myths of lycanthropic transformation. That the medieval ‘presence’ could be so consummately destabilised by the chanted curse of the saint or the swipe of druid’s wand is perhaps no less strange than the idea that such regressions were believed to involve a physical as well as a psychic metamorphosis. Likewise, the idea that a swarm of toads might converge on a man ‘as if by agreement’ is by no means incongruous with the belief that there were certain supernatural beings who could move in and out of animal form at will. One might assume it was through Late Iron Age magico-religious doctrines such as druidic transmigration, or possibly the legacy of some kind of theriomorphic totemism, that these forms of magical thinking in Medieval Wales were to acquire those particular shades of association that we find so clearly exposed in the lurid metamorphoses of the Mabinogi.

234 *ibid.* p.467

235 TBC trans. Thomas Kinsella (OUP: Oxford, 1970) p.135

236 *Itinerarium* BK II, Ch. 2

237 The Egyptian idea of bird-like soul, the *ba*, would be the oldest instance of this idea. Higley (1993, p.123) also points out that there were scriptural and patristic precedents.

238 There have been a variety of explanations and definitions of this archaic magico-religious complex, the best known being those of Sigmund Freud, James Frazer and Claude Levi-Strauss. The common elements of the extant systems recorded in anthropological literature include a close affinity between a person or a group of people and a certain species of animal. In some cultures this has evolved into a complex system of kinship and exogamy. Elsewhere, its residue is apparent in the shape-shifting powers attributed to certain individuals and their taboos on killing or eating of certain kinds of animals.