



Book-Review:
She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves

Jonathan W. Thurston

Priest, Hannah, editor. *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*. Manchester UP, 2017. ISBN 978-0719089343.

At first glance, what struck me about Hannah Priest's *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* was the crimson highlighting of the word "she" on the cover. In recent years, scholars have tackled the complex cultural myth of the monstrous feminine, applying historical stances (*Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe*, 2009), gender studies (*Grotesque Femininities*, 2010), and cultural analysis (*The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair*, 2006). Priest's new book provides an innovative addition – and response – to this scholarship. On one hand – or paw – werewolf literary discourse has remained dominantly masculine, whether examining the oft-cited Brian Frost or even the much older Sabine Baring-Gould. And on the other hand the scholarly discourse of wild women has largely avoided the "popular werewolf" as worthy of serious study. This text, far from just a cultural history as the subtitle suggests, is the first serious collection of essays on female werewolves, and it offers scholarly examinations of the female werewolf in history, literature, cinema, and gender as well as sexuality studies.

Priest organizes the book into three major sections. The first begins with an introduction by Priest that details many of the threads integral to the following chapters, namely the domestication of the female werewolf as well as the masculinisation and hypersexuality frequently attributed to the female werewolf by Western culture. Her introduction serves also as a generalized survey of the literary character of the female werewolf across history, reaching as far back as the 12th-century *Topographia Hiberniae* by Gerald of Wales and delving into such recent media as Disney's TV series, *The Wizards of Waverly Place*. First and foremost, though, Priest claims that, if we are to see werewolves by themselves as creatures of contradiction, female werewolves will demonstrate what a true contradiction is (20).

The rest of section I then proceeds to trace some of the historical significances of the female werewolf, such as the legends collected in Saaremaa or the werewolf trials in early modern French Burgundy.

Along these same lines, Merili Metsvahi in “Estonian Werewolf Legends from Saaremaa” provides a summary of the 1,400 werewolf folkloric archive entries from Estonia – the third largest national archive of folklore in the world – while noting in particular that, although many of the traditional European motifs of the werewolf story appear here – such as the silver bullet or many of the modes of transformation – the tales contain a unique twist in how their female werewolf tales allow for more opportunity for female empowerment. Estonia’s history of gender equality has generally been much more progressive than Western Europe, and Metsvahi is persuasive in making these historicist connections.

What happens when we take this historicist–folkloric approach, though, and shift it more gradually into a historicist–legal one? Rolf Schulte summarizes several of the judicial cases of female lycanthropy in “She-werewolves in Early Modern French Burgundy”. What makes his study captivating is his combination of quantitative research methods – such as his statistical analysis of both male and female lycanthropy cases in court – and qualitative research methods – such as the examination of evidence of transformation or the lack of eyewitness accounts of the beast. By doing this, he differentiates the two sexes as both victims of this early modern court system, with men labeled sexual aggressors and women adulterers, and he also creates a comprehensive portrait of the gender implications of these cases.

The second section – the bulk of the book – is a series of literary chapters analyzing the varying faces of the female werewolf figure in specific fictional texts and film. While the section starts with a work, discussed by Jay Cate, as far removed from the werewolf literary canon as the roleplaying board game *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, the section quickly moves onto Clemence Housman’s classic *The Werewolf*, analyzed by Carys Crossen, before Hannah Priest tackles Angela Carter’s more recent collection of darker fairy tales *The Bloody Chamber*. While these chapters cover substantially different periods (from the Gothic to the 21st-century), different cultures (across the West), and different works (both textual and non-textual), they manage to weave together a much more nuanced figuring of the female werewolf as the product of cultural mythos, often a response to contemporary cultural and sexual mores.

A good starting place for this analysis is in popular culture itself. Jay Cate in “Participatory Lycanthropy” tackles the often underrepresented genre of the tabletop roleplaying game by academia, particularly *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. Much of the chapter serves as a primer on the imagined universe of the game, and what follows is a series of close readings of the core rulebooks that help to establish a gendering of the universe. While the author does discuss “lunar determinism” in addressing the potential for female characters in *Apocalypse*, he seems to dance around extant terms in feminist studies, even ones as frequent in this volume as the “monstrous feminine”. His language is grounded heavily in genre studies – certainly a necessity for such a rarely studied mode of literature – but, for a thesis centering on concerns of gender representation, his attention to feminist studies at large seems cursory at best.

Perhaps nothing better represents the study of the monstrous feminine than examining the werewolf through its animal appearance, much as Jazmina Cininas does in her chapter. The 2006 text *The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair* does much in terms of examining a long Western cultural history of both loathing and fearing the wild woman aesthetic. But, as Cininas argues in “Fur Girls and Wolf Women”, the werewolf becomes more than just a caricature of that aesthetic. She builds upon Priest’s introductory claim that female werewolves are even larger contradictions than

werewolves in general. The chapter relies on Justine Larbalestier's novel *Liar* as a case study for examining the significance of the trope of fur in werewolf stories – not just the hair itself but the method of gaining it as well. Cininas is ambitious in her scope, cycling from Pliny to Carter, mingling schools of history, literature, gender, and culture fluently throughout. Still, she keeps *Liar* at the core of the study. Readers can now approach this novel with a stronger grasp of the multiplicity of the layers of meaning. Furthermore, the essay serves as an alternative means to read the werewolf story: one attached to the *aesthetics* of the werewolf.

However, if the aesthetics of fur are one indicator of a literary figuring of the werewolf, then the skin beneath the fur represents another aesthetics entirely. Thus, we can begin to connect the werewolf not just with women but even with racial minorities. Honore Beaugrând's story, "The Werewolves", is the subject of study in Shannon Scott's "Female Werewolf as Monstrous Other". Largely, the chapter is what might be termed an old historicist reading of the story's treatment of the werewolf as indicative of the dehumanization of indigenous women in America in the late 19th-century. While Scott only in conclusion connects the story with the larger corpus of werewolf literature, she employs in-depth historical and cultural research, grounding the tale firmly in its contemporary contexts. My greatest concern for this chapter, however, was in the lack of any clear implications for the analysis. The article leaves much to be explored in terms of what the indigenous female werewolf *means* and how we as scholars should approach this character when we encounter her in literature.

While much in the volume regards *reception* of these werewolf tales, Carys Crossen changes tack by focusing on authorship, particularly in Clemence Housman's *The Werewolf* and Rosamund Marriott Watson's "A Ballad of the Were-wolf". Both these tales of female werewolves are united by being written *by* women. Crossen lays out the historical context for these works, the biographical information on the authors, the plot synopses, and even the works' factoring into the larger werewolf literary corpus before turning to the gendering of the werewolves. What fascinates Crossen is how the she-werewolves are not overtly sexual or violent so much as they simply deviate from societal norms and expectations.

Social norms are further challenged in the editor's own contribution to the volume, "I Was a Teenage She-Wolf: Boobs, Blood and Sacrifice". As the title suggests, Priest tracks the motif of the female adolescent werewolf in fantasy and horror literature, starting from the film adaptation of Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves* to *The Twilight Saga*. With this specific scope, Priest is able to address not just the general concerns of femaleness and femininity but also those of puberty, adolescence, and menarche.

The book returns to Angela Carter in Willem de Blécourt's "Angela Carter's Werewolves in Historical Perspective". Rather than trying to provide a "new interpretation" on Carter's famed werewolf tales, de Blécourt works toward an envisioning of these stories as collages of an already diverse werewolf tradition; that is, these stories are not *just* a re-telling of "Little Red Riding Hood" but are chimeras of folklore, essentially literary collages of multiple werewolf folktales. De Blécourt is persuasive in his tracing of various motifs throughout the corpus.

As one can imagine, many of these folkloric motifs appear even across film. In "The She-Wolves of Horror Cinema", Peter Hutchings traces the evolution of the female werewolf in the film industry. He prefaces his analysis with the acknowledgment that there are few she-werewolves in cinema; however, the films that do have such characters, he notes, alter the transformation to be more about loss of identity than loss of physical comfort, as is the case for many male werewolves. His primary case study is *She-Wolf of London*, but he does examine twenty-first century

films such as *The Descent* (2005) and *Trick 'r Treat* (2007) in the second half of the chapter.

The final section of the book focuses much more specifically and explicitly on the gender and sexuality approaches to understanding the female werewolf, outlining how scholars should address the werewolf as a representation of feminine concerns, not just as a product of bestial folklore. Barbara Creed in "*Ginger Snaps: The Monstrous Feminine as *Femme Animale**" points to two terms often thrown around – the monstrous feminine and *femme animale* – to show not just the subtle differences between them but also how that distinction should ultimately alter the way we study hypersexuality and the masculinisation of women in literature. Laura Wilson follows this chapter with the question of how these literal and often visceral transformation scenes affect – or should not affect – the reader's understanding of female subjectivity. When this question compounds with Derrida's conception of – and fascination with – the animal gaze, Wilson's findings are provocative. How would, for example, we address the cat in *The Animal That (Therefore) I Am*, if the cat's gaze included such implications as hunger or carnal desire?

For Barbara Creed, the female werewolf signifies an exploration of natural – as opposed to civilized – femininity, femaleness, and sexuality. She does this by reading the female werewolf as a type of *femme animale*, like the Sphinx or gorgon. This feminist interpretation takes the character as an archetypal uprising against patriarchal and phallogocentric structures, and she reads the character as possessing more agency in this uprising than many of the other authors in the book have claimed.

Finally, Laura Wilson takes the 2002 film *Dans Ma Peau* as a case study in female werewolves and the concerns of female subjectivity. Seeing the werewolf as more than just the "fur, the teeth, the claws, the label" (197), Wilson argues that the female werewolf myth is much more about the embodiment of dichotomies than about the "body" in general. The analysis defies claims of essentialism – that the werewolf has to be on one side of multiple dichotomies at all times – to call back to Priest's ideas of female werewolf contradiction, that the female werewolf can indeed embody *both* sides of the dichotomies used in this discourse.

Due to Priest's introduction, readers should have a clear sense of the themes that connect the chapters, both of sexuality and of folkloric types. We as readers follow these concerns of wild womanhood, of menarche, of the monstrous feminine, across film, culture, history, and literature. Each of these themes evolves and shifts through the chapters, becoming more and more nuanced and complex, painting us a complex cultural image of the she-werewolf, in all her many faces and forms. The chapters address many of the standards in werewolf literature but, ultimately, they strive to *challenge* this canon, arguing both that werewolf literature is not restrictively a masculine archetype and that feminist studies of the wild woman should not simply sweep she-werewolves under the monstrous feminine rug. But by the end even with these complications – and contradictions – they merge at last, readers will find, into a multifaceted beast who stares readers in the eye and grins wickedly, hungrily. For, after all, like the adolescent protagonist giggling in the burly wolf's arms in Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves", "[we are] nobody's meat".

Biography: Jonathan W. Thurston is a PhD student at Michigan State University, specializing in animal studies, early modern literature, horror literature, and queer theory. His own fiction has been recognized by *Publishers' Weekly* and is under consideration for the Lambda Literary Award. For some of his historicist work, check out the upcoming *Horse Breeds and Human Society: Purity, Identity and the Making of the Modern Horse*, edited by Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfeld (Routledge).