

The Werewolf Motif in Medieval Irish and Norse Literature: A Study on the Social Effects of Werewolf Characters

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Summary

This paper is an examination of the werewolf character through Medieval Norse and Irish literature, focusing on the societal implications of the werewolf figure. The treatment of the werewolf figure in these societies is complex. Common themes appear across the texts examined, finding that kinship, time, the werewolf as a warning, the role of skin and clothing, and agency, all play a part in how the werewolf is perceived by society. While they occupy a marginalized space in wolf form, it is the human aspects, or lack thereof, that determine how the werewolf is perceived. Those who show less humanity are treated as outside of society. However, those who maintain their humanity are either allowed to exist within society or reintegrate once they have regained their human form.

Forward

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Introduction

The werewolf is a prevalent theme in both Medieval Norse and Irish literature, societies where martial prowess is an important trait. However, this characteristic stops being a virtue and instead becomes overly aggressive and destructive behavior. The wolf, as a symbol of the battlefield and of warriors, allows for the perfect metaphor for medieval authors to explore the idea of what is socially acceptable behavior through characters who embody the potential for both noble and destructive traits. Those that shapeshift into wolves and embody the negative aspects are forced to occupy a marginalized space in society.

Much of the source material for werewolves in the Irish tradition stems from accounts that arguably stem from a single tradition: the werewolves of Ossory. John Carey convincingly argues that four separate accounts all stem from a single oral tradition centered around the ruling family of Ossory. By tracing three of these texts, with a short reference to the fourth, it will become apparent how the werewolf motif was adapted to the changing society and for different audiences. In the Norse werewolf tradition, I have chosen *Völsunga saga* and *Egils saga* to examine. These two prominent sagas feature notable families with distinct wolf features and sometimes struggle with socially acceptable behaviors. Berserkers will be briefly examined as figures who also embody animalistic qualities but who do not physically transform.

Due to the considerable interaction between the Norse and Irish during the Viking Age, significant cultural and literary exchange took place. It has been argued by some that a Celtic variant of the werewolf motif entered Norse literature because of this contact. Regardless of transmission, both cultures saw the werewolf as an “other”, who participated in hostile acts that had the potential to threaten the community. By examining sources from both traditions, I hope to identify a shared tradition between two warrior-based cultures to determine how these shapeshifters were treated by society.

Because of the importance of war-like nature in these societies, it should come as no surprise that some individuals actively seek to gain the power of the wolf. However, it is equally unsurprising to find that others are cast into this role regardless of their own desires as either a punishment or a curse. Several studies have focused on the nature of these shapeshifters, drawing a line between those who voluntarily and involuntarily shift. This paper continues in that tradition, though with a close examination of the societal implications of the shapeshifters, seeking to find if werewolves are capable of reintegration into society following their transgressions, and what role agency plays in this development.

Literature Review and Linguistic Terms

Under what circumstances a werewolf transforms has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Kirby Smith first put forth the distinction between a “voluntary” or “constitutional” and an “involuntary” werewolf in 1894, or those who chose to transform and those who are forced to undergo the transformation. Smith’s study of the werewolf was far reaching, not only covering Irish and Norse werewolves, but Greek and Roman accounts as well.¹ The theory was further developed by Philippe Ménard who suggested that those who are forced to transform retain some measure of humanity while voluntary werewolves transform to “satisfy their bestial nature”.² Camilla With Pedersen applied the voluntary and involuntary ideas to Old Norse and Medieval Irish texts, though she focuses on all types of transformation and not strictly wolves. Her study found significant overlap in the traditions, including Christian ideology and literary concepts.³

Einar Ól. Sveinsson first suggested that there was a significant influence from Celtic and courtly sources in the Norse/Icelandic corpus.⁴ This theory is further expanded by Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir and Minjie Su.⁵ In Sveinsson’s theory, the older, “Germanic” variant represents the voluntary transformation, or those who purposely seek out the transformation as a way of gaining power in battle. The newer, “Celtic” inspired motif represents more involuntary and sympathetic characters.⁶ These figures are forced into the transformation, usually through a curse, and are generally looking for a way to return to their human form.⁷

Werewolves and other canine shapeshifters have also been the focus of Irish scholars. John Reinhard and Vernam Hull were among the first to create a survey of canine

¹ Kirby Flower Smith. “An Historical Study of the Werewolf in Literature.” *PMLA* 9, no. 1 (1894): 1-42.

² Leslie A. Sconduto. *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity through the Renaissance* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2008), 13.

³ Camilla With Pedersen. “The Cursed and the Committed: A Study in Literary Representations of ‘Involuntary’ Shapeshifting in Early Medieval Irish and Old Norse Narrative Traditions.” In *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, edited by Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019) 83-105.

⁴ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir. “The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 3 (2007): 279.

⁵ Minjie Su. *Werewolves in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: Between the Monster and the Man*. Vol. Volume 3. *Borders, Boundaries, Landscapes*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022.; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2007.

⁶ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2007.

⁷ Su, 17-8.

shapeshifters.⁸ Reinhard and Hull's study not only sought to identify individuals who transformed into canines in the literary corpus, but to identify the terminology associated with these beings. John Carey's study on Irish werewolves more closely examined figures who transformed into specifically wolf figures, including a major group of interest for this paper, the Wolves of Ossory.⁹ Another important work is that of Kim McCone, who examined the role of hounds and warriors, finding close associations with hero figures and dogs.¹⁰ While not specifically wolf shapeshifters, the canine associations and martial element of the individuals makes them a direct parallel to figures discussed in this paper.

Words associated with werewolves can be complex. In the Norse context, two words are mainly used for wolf, *úlfr* and *vargr*, but have different connotations. *Vargr* can also be used to describe an outlaw. These terms are reflected in Norse laws. A *vargdropi* or *vargdragi*, meaning "wolf cub", is the son of an outlaw and is disinherited. Similarly, terms such as *morðvarger* "murderer" and *vargtré* "wolf tree/gallows" demonstrate the adverse nature of the term.¹¹ *Úlfr*, on the other hand, does not carry the same negative connotation and is often used as a name.

Additionally, the terms *berserkangr* and *hamrammr* are used to describe the state of the person as they change. *Hamrammr* is associated with shapeshifting, as the word means "shape-strong", and those who change shape *hamask*, "shift".¹² *Berserkangr*, or 'going berserk', is a more difficult word to define and scholars have not yet come to a consensus on what exactly the word means. Ármann Jakobsson describes the ambiguity surrounding the word 'berserk'.¹³ The difficulty stems from the first part of the word, *ber-* which might mean either "bare" or "bear". Depending on how it is translated, it could refer to a warrior who charges into battle without armor, or a potential shapeshifter with bear characteristics. It is possible that this ambiguity reflects the differing opinions of the medieval audience as to what a berserker was. To Ármann, this term is used to describe something occult, which makes it's "primary signifying function to represent the strange and the terrifying"¹⁴.

⁸ John R. Reinhard and Vernam E. Hull. "Bran and Sceolang." *Speculum* 11, no. 1 (1936): 42-58.

⁹ John Carey. "Werewolves in medieval Ireland." *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 44 (2002): 37-72.

¹⁰ Kim McCone. "Aided Cheltchair Maic Uthechair: Hounds, Heroes and Hospitallers in Early Irish Myth and Story." *Ériu* 3 (1984): 1.

¹¹ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 283.

¹² Rebecca Merkelbach. "Eigi í mannligu eðli: Shape, Monstrosity and Berserkism in the Ísendingasögur" In *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, edited by Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 84-5.

¹³ Ármann Jakobsson. "Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in 'Egils Saga.'" *Scandinavian Studies* 83, no. 1 (2011): 29-44.

¹⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, 34.

Certainly these characters, as I will examine later in this paper, are entities to be feared. Rebecca Merkelbach suggests that a berserk is a change in mindset, not necessarily a physical change.¹⁵ This means that an individual can experience both changes simultaneously. Lastly, some characters are said to be *eigi einhamr*, or “not of one shape”.¹⁶

In the Irish context, the words surrounding werewolves are closely related to those for dogs as well. Reinhard and Hull give the words *cú* for dog and *fael* for wolf when standing alone. However, they list several instances where the two are combined in ways suggesting werewolfism: for example *conoel*, literally “dog-wolf” but glossed as “she-werewolf”.¹⁷ The term *conricht*, sometimes seen as *conrecht*, is seen frequently in these contexts. The term means “dog-shape” or “wolf-shape” and is listed as meaning a werewolf.¹⁸

Because of the multitude of terminology used to describe these shapeshifting figures, I will use the term werewolf throughout this paper unless a discussion of the specific terminology is necessary.

Wolves in Medieval Society

The perception of the wolf was complex in medieval society, holding both noble and negative connotations. They are strongly associated with warriors and with families and individuals who are particularly martial. In some cases, the wolf can represent the elite of a society. In Anglo-Saxon England, development of an increasingly hierarchical society from the fifth to the eighth century coincided with the adoption of iconography centering around predators. While birds are the most popular of these motifs, boars, dragons, and wolves are also present in designs of physical artifacts. This is mirrored in Scandinavian material culture.¹⁹ In Scandinavia, the wolf became a common martial identity in the second half of the first millennium AD, which is reflected in the material culture.

Wolf associations can be found in names and poetry. Pluskowski notes that the East Anglian family known as the Wuffings had a strong association with wolves. Their name itself can be translated to “little wolf”.²⁰ This trend occurs in the Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, and Irish cultures where many personal names include the word for wolf. Two such

¹⁵ Merkelbach, 85.

¹⁶ Merkelbach, 84-5.

¹⁷ Reinhard and Hull, 49-50.

¹⁸ Reinhard and Hull, 49-50.

¹⁹ Aleksander Pluskowski. *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages*, (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 136.

²⁰ Pluskowski, 143.

individuals, Kveld-Úlfr and Laignech Fáelad, will be discussed later in this paper. The association with the battlefield has been seen often in Old Norse poetry, where many kennings involving warriors and battlefields feature wolves.²¹

This martial identity of the wolf and wolf like characters is not always a noble connotation. It is also linked to outlawry, banditry, and murder. This has been observed linguistically through many Indo-European languages. In Old Norse the word *vargr*, as stated above, not only means wolf, but an outlaw.²² In the Irish tradition, a war band, *fianna*, has been linked to wolves.²³ In these cases, the martial identity associated with the wolf was taken to a negative extreme, beyond the socially acceptable boundary into a destructive one. In the Christian tradition, the wolf is also linked to the devil. Medieval English bestiaries stated that wolves only gave birth in May when it thundered, which was associated with when the Devil fell from Heaven.²⁴ They play the role of predator in many Christian sources, preying on lambs, with the metaphor for the danger to the Christian flock being evident.²⁵ While wolves tend to target wild prey when available, sometimes they prey upon livestock.²⁶ This fact is evident in medieval literature where wolves attacking domestic animals is a prevalent theme.²⁷ These comparisons highlight the savage nature of wolves and the acts of violence against humans. Authors, theologians, and philosophers have long compared the negative qualities of rulers to wolves. Socrates in *Republic* likens a tyrant to the story of Lycean, who was turned into a wolf after trying to deceive Zeus. Likewise, the Bible calls bad leaders “wolves ravening prey”.²⁸

While women were not typically present on the battlefield, the wolf identity was applied to them as well, though the association is exclusively negative. Even in cases of similar aggression or blood lust, the woman who exhibits these traits is automatically negatively viewed.²⁹ It also carries a sense of negative sexual aggression that would never be associated with men.³⁰ Medieval bestiaries list the greedy nature of wolves as the reason why

²¹ Su, 92.

²² Geir T. Zoëga. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2004.

²³ Kim McCone. "Werewolves, Cyclopes, Dibergera, and Fianna Juvenile Delinquency in early Ireland." *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (1986): 1-22.

²⁴ Pluskowski, 128-9.

²⁵ Pluskowski, 73.

²⁶ Pluskowski, 73.

²⁷ Pluskowski, 79.

²⁸ Sconduto, 184.

²⁹ Su, 84.

³⁰ Su, 85.

prostitutes are called *lupae*, the Latin word for she-wolf.³¹ These implications make the human she-wolf a monstrosity, one who transgresses against the sexual norms.

This complex nature is reflected in the Norse god Óðinn. Óðinn is associated with wolves as the god of war and is accompanied by two wolves, Geri and Freki.³² However, he also meets his end during Ragnarok through the wolf Fenrir.³³ He is both represented by the wolf and is destroyed by the wolf. This duality of embodying both the noble warrior qualities and the negative aspects of an outlaw are apparent in all werewolf characters.

Christian Influences

Christian doctrine had a clear influence on society as a whole which is reflected in the tradition of the werewolf. Saint Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei* wrote on transformation of the body and specifically references the stories of werewolves of Arcadia. His writing states that transformation is impossible, except through the direct actions of God. Those who are seen to transform are actually participating in a kind of illusion created by demons.³⁴ Augustine stresses that the illusion is neither a transformation of the body nor the soul, as that ability is outside the power of demons. Instead a phantom is projected, which happens when the body is asleep. He does not dismiss the stories of transformation, but suggests that it has happened in the way described, naming the gods responsible for the Arcadian transformation as demons.³⁵ This theory was incredibly influential in regards to medieval thought on transformation. Augustinian thought was reflected in the ca. 900 *Canon episcopi* which made belief in metamorphosis blasphemy.³⁶

As stated earlier, there is a strong relationship between the devil and wolves in Christian writing. This is unsurprising given the association between wolves devouring sheep and the Christian metaphor of the flock.³⁷ It is interesting then that so many saints have associations with wolves. In the Irish context, several saints have wolves perform tasks for them, while others, such as St. Brigit, were known to be friendly to them. Pluskowski suggests that this may have served to “a theological function, reflecting the fulfilment of the

³¹ Pluskowski, 128-9.

³² Jesse L. Byock. *The Prose Edda : Norse Mythology*. (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 47.

³³ Pluskowski, 154-7.

³⁴ Sconduto, 22

³⁵ Aurelius Augustinus. *Concerning The City of God against the Pagans*. Translated by Henry Bettenson, (London: Penguin Books, 1984), Book XVIII, chapter 18.

³⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum. *Metamorphosis and identity*. (Zone Books, 2000), 82.

³⁷ Pluskowski 133.

prophesies of Isaiah (the ‘Good wolf’ in 11:6-9) and bringing the saint closer to the original ‘natural’ harmony of the Garden of Eden”³⁸. These demonstrations not only proved the saint’s divine power, but the power of God over a terrifying creature. In the Norse context, the tale of St. Magnús is a well-known example of a wolf miracle where he revives a man who was eaten and then regurgitated by wolves. This may be a local tradition, as a similar account is attributed to St. Oláfr. This theme shows the “protective and redemptive function of saints”³⁹.

Christianity was an important influence on medieval literature. This is clearly seen in werewolf texts as well, where Christian characters and themes are present. In the case of the Irish werewolves, Christianity may have influenced the tradition, changing the narrative.

Involuntary Shapeshifting

In this chapter I will be examining instances where the werewolf characters are forced into their transformation by either an internal or external force. The most common example of this kind of transformation is the result of a curse. This is one of the most popular motifs, especially in courtly literature, where the werewolf is forced into contact with something related to wolves, such as a pair of wolfskin gloves. However, I will also be examining cases where there is an inherited component to the transformation.

Another important marker for this category is that the shapeshifters are unable to control their transformations. The werewolves of this category may use their powers to their advantage, such as in battle, but they are unable to enter their wolf form of their own volition. Smith describes these werewolves as the “innocent victim of a malignant power” and considered many of them to be “kindhearted, beneficent werewolves”⁴⁰. While these are certainly more acceptable shapeshifters to many in society, this does not mean they are not dangerous.

For this section I will be considering the texts *Egils saga*, *Topographia Hibernica*, and *Konungs Skuggsjá* as the main sources, but will supplement where necessary from the Old Norse and Medieval Irish corpus.

³⁸ Pluskowski, 167.

³⁹ Pluskowski, 168-9.

⁴⁰ Smith, 5.

Egils saga

Egils saga belongs to the Íslendingasögur genre of Icelandic literature, a group of texts that presents the history of notable Icelandic families. Its authorship has been a topic of debate with some supporting the idea of Snorri Sturluson, the author of *Heimskringla*, as a potential candidate.⁴¹ Others have suggested that the narrative structure is different enough in the first and second parts that there may have been two authors.⁴² The saga was written down sometime between 1220 to 1240 and describes events taking place from 850 to 1000.⁴³

While never explicitly referred to as werewolves, the central family in *Egils saga* demonstrates not only shapeshifting abilities, but occasionally behaviors associated with outlaws. The oldest family member in the text is Kveld-Úlfr, or “Night Wolf”. He is said to be a reasonable person in the daytime, but at night he “*hamrammr*” or changes himself.⁴⁴ This combined with his name heavily implies that he transforms into a wolf at night. In one instance, when conducting a raid against Haraldr hárfagri’s kinsmen, he is said to go into a frenzy and that many of his men did this as well.⁴⁵

While fighting King Haraldr hárfagri’s men, Kveld-Úlfr is described as *berserkgangr* (going berserk). This should not be taken to mean that he is a berserker though. Merkelbach notes that while the term *berserkgangr* is used, Kveld-Úlfr is never called a berserker.⁴⁶ The term *hamrammr* is also used during this scene, suggesting that Kveld-Úlfr undergoes his transformation during the battle. Because *berserkgangr* refers more to a mental transformation than a physical one, it is possible that Kveld-Úlfr was experiencing both states simultaneously, shifting in both a physical and mental sense. Perhaps then it comes as no surprise that this state exhausts him to the point that he passes away shortly after.⁴⁷

One of Kveld-Úlfr’s sons, Skalla-Grímr, also exhibits the same tendency to fly into a frenzy. While he is never said to shapeshift like his father, Skalla-Grímr also becomes frenzied in the raid against Haraldr hárfagri’s kinsmen and again when he is losing a ball game against his son, Egill, and another boy.⁴⁸ This attack happens later in the day, echoing

⁴¹ Torfi H. Tulinius, and Cribb, Victoria. *The Enigma of Egill : The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*. Vol. 57. Islandica. (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Library, 2014), 1.

⁴² Torfi Tulinius and Cribb, 19-21.

⁴³ Bernard Scudder. “Egil’s Saga” In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000), 3.

⁴⁴ Anne Holtmark. "On the werewolf motif in Egil's saga Skallagrímssonar." *Sciantia Islandica* 7-8 (1968): 7-9.

⁴⁵ Scudder, 45.

⁴⁶ Merkelbach 88.

⁴⁷ Scudder, 46.

⁴⁸ Scudder, 63.

Kveld-Úlfr's night-time transformation, and only ends when Egill's nanny interferes to rescue him from Skalla-Grímr's blind rage.

The last person in this family to exhibit wolf-like behaviors is Egill himself. Egill is even less of a shapeshifter than his father, never falling into the blind frenzy that Kveld-Úlfr or Skalla-Grímr were capable of, but while traveling to Norway he engages in a duel and tears out the throat of an enemy with his teeth.⁴⁹ While this is certainly not as extreme as a full bestial transformation, Egill is exhibiting the same behavior that a wolf does when hunting prey, demonstrating that while the wolf trait may be diminishing in this family, it is still present and deadly.⁵⁰ Also of note is Egill's skill as a poet. This is a talent that is usually attributed to the god Óðinn. In the poem "Sonatorrek", in which Egill laments the loss of his son, he thanks Óðinn for his ability to compose poetry.⁵¹ In this way, Egill has been blessed twice with talents under Óðinn's control: poetry and wolf-like qualities.

Unlike other instances of werewolf transformation, there is no explanation on how or why the characters have such a strong wolf connection. In fact, it is never explicitly stated that Kveld-Úlfr fully transforms into a wolf, making some question to what extent these characters can even be referred to as werewolves.⁵² It is, however, heavily implied to the point that many have suggested they can be read as werewolves.⁵³ Furthermore, a genealogy of the family is included in the first chapter, which shows connections to wolves and the occult even farther back than Kveld-Úlfr. Kveld-Úlfr's mother, Hallbera, was the daughter of a man named Úlfr inn óargr (wolf the fearless) and the sister of Hallbjörn hálf troll. He also married a woman who was the daughter of Kári, a berserker and Kveld-Úlfr's raiding partner, introducing another berserker element to the family.⁵⁴ It would not be surprising to learn that other members, further back in the family tree, may have also had shape shifting abilities. This suggests that Egill and his family are suffering from an involuntary, inherited shifting ability that they do not necessarily control, but in some cases do benefit from. The uncontrollable aspect is perhaps most obvious when Skalla-Grímr nearly attacks Egill and

⁴⁹ Scudder, 128.

⁵⁰ Holtmark, 9.

⁵¹ Torfi Tulinius and Cribb, 143-4.

⁵² Ármann Jakobsson, 37: Ármann Jakobsson has suggested that this is a family of trolls, referencing their magic links, bestial nature, and appearance as indicators.

⁵³ Holtmark, 7-9.

⁵⁴ Sigurður Nordal, trans. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Vol. 2 Íslensk Fornrit, (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1933), 3.

kills both Egill's friend and nanny. Egill and Skalla-Grímr certainly have a strained relationship, but Skalla-Grímr's attack is extreme and unwarranted.

It is possible that it is not only the wolfish association of this family that creates tension with those around them, but their foreign ancestry. Ármann Jakobsson links Egill and his family to trolls, a categorization which includes shapeshifters and other bestial behaviors. The troll link begins with Kveld-Úlfr's uncle, Hallbjörn hálftröll. In *Ketils saga hængs*, Hallbjörn is presented as a different race or ethnicity. Ármann links the idea that foreigners, particularly the Sámi, are often magically inclined, trollish, and bestial in Old Norse literature. Because this family is so bestial and trollish, a point emphasized throughout the saga, they might have foreign origins through Hallbjörn's family.⁵⁵ Again, these characterizations are linked to physical appearance such as when Egill is referred to as "mikill sem troll"⁵⁶ (as huge as a troll)⁵⁷ when he appears in York.⁵⁸

Werewolves of this family exhibit questionable and socially unacceptable behaviors at times, but all are also respected members of society. Kveld-Úlfr is often sought out for advice, so long as it is done at a time where he is known to be more human than wolf. Skalla-Grímr is described as being industrious and a great ship builder.⁵⁹ Egill is arguably the most difficult of the three and is often described as a troublemaker; yet, he is also recognized for his skill as a poet and a viking. People generally seem to accept the family despite their social transgression, but it is always a factor when either discussing or making deals with them.

It is worth noting that shapeshifting or wolf-like behaviors do not affect every member of this family. Kveld-Úlfr's other son, Þórólfr, and Skalla-Grímr's other son, also named Þórólfr, are both presented as agreeable and popular men. Both are favorites of kings and are described as accomplished, handsome, and strong. This is in sharp contrast to the "werewolves" of the family, who can be described as ugly and difficult. The werewolves are marked not only by their behavior, but by their physical appearance. From the perspective of the audience, this creates an obvious and intentional differentiation between the werewolves and non-werewolves of this family. Even while not in the physical form of a wolf, the wolf shape or wolf skin is somehow evident in their appearance. The skin here still reveals the other nature of the werewolves. Su relates this to the concept of a Skin-ego.⁶⁰ Essentially the

⁵⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, 35.

⁵⁶ Sigurður Nordal, 178.

⁵⁷ Scudder, 110.

⁵⁸ Ármann Jakobsson.

⁵⁹ Scudder, pg 48.

⁶⁰ Su, 38

skin, which will be discussed particularly in relation to the Völsungs, reveals the inner nature of an individual and gives clues to outside observers as to their real identity. In the case of the Völsungs, the skin is that of an actual wolf, but in the case of Egill and his family, it is the human skin that reflects the wolfish nature within.

The wolf element of this family weakens through the generations. Torfi Tulinus even notes that the names of the family reflect this change: instead of sons named Þórólfr (wolves of Þór), there is a Þórsteinn.⁶¹ None of Egill's children are described as having personalities that reflect wolfish behavior, nor are any of them described negatively with regards to their appearance. Instead, Egill's son Þorsteinn is described as being a devout and orderly man. He is the first member of this family to convert to Christianity. The introduction of Christianity as well as a move away from Norway may explain why the family as a whole is becoming less wolfish. Iceland, interestingly, also does not have a native wolf population,⁶² making the creature an outsider in that regard. The saga has clearly paints Iceland in a favorable light, especially in comparison to the country they were fleeing, and as the family moves farther away from their Norwegian roots they become more socially acceptable to both the audience and the people around them.

There are clear indicators that this clan of werewolves are different from the people around them. They might occupy a respected place in society, but there is always a reminder that they are an "other". Not only does their behavior mark them as different, but their physical appearance and, potentially, their foreign ancestry.

Topographia Hibernica

Gerald of Wales, or Geraldus Cambrensis, was born in Pembrokeshire, Wales, circa 1146. Gerald traveled to Ireland twice before writing *Topographia Hibernica* in circa 1187, a work where he describes Ireland extensively. The first of these visits occurred in 1183 with his family, who had been instrumental in conquering Ireland, and the second time in 1185 with Prince John.⁶³ The account is mostly on the wonders or marvels of the country and recounts many fantastical events and miraculous features of Ireland. It also extensively discusses the Irish people.

⁶¹ Torfi Tulinus and Cribb, 129.

⁶² Pluskowski, 130.

⁶³ Giraldus Cambrensis. *The History and Topography of Ireland*, Trans. by John J. O'Meara, (Middlesex England: Penguin Books, 1982), 11-12.

In one such wonder tale, Gerald recounts the story of a traveling priest who is approached by a talking wolf. The wolf informs the priest that he is part of the tribe of Ossory who were forced into exile following the imprecation of Saint Natalis. This exile takes the form of not only expulsion from the territory of Ossory, but from the human form as well. For seven years a man and woman of the tribe must live as wolves, and at the end of that time two more take their place.⁶⁴ The male wolf approaches the priest and pleads for him to not be afraid. He “catholicum in omnibus responsum præbens”⁶⁵ (gave a Catholic answer in all things)⁶⁶ and only asked for the last rites for his partner. The female wolf likewise only asks for the last sacrament and thanks the priest for all that he has done. They are not the savage wolves that appear in other stories. They maintain their humanity and reason, and furthermore only use it as a means of practicing their faith. In many ways, they are the opposite of many werewolves. However, this does not mean that they are not met with fear. The priest is not only hesitant to offer the last Communion to wolves, no matter how human they may be, but only does so out of fear once the wolf skin has been removed. Here, unlike other stories, the external form does not necessarily mirror the internal.

Unfortunately, it is not certain if the individual wolves in this story volunteered for this position or how exactly they were chosen to become the two individuals who were expelled. However, it is clear that the tribe is not doing this of their own will, but due to the curse of a saint. The actual cause of the curse is unclear in this narrative. Given the time period for the Christianization of Ireland and Gerald of Wales, this curse has been happening for several centuries, with no indication of its ending. Meaning that the current wolves would not have been alive at the time of the offense, but are still being punished for their family’s transgression.

Despite Gerald’s emphasis on the humanity of the werewolves, other passages in *Topographia* provide insight into how Gerald perceives the Irish as a people. The image that Gerald paints is one of a primitive and unculture society. He calls them barbarous on several occasions and notes that “Est autem gens hæc gens silvestris, gens inhospita; gens ex bestiis solum et bestialiter vivens”⁶⁷ (they are a wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts,

⁶⁴James F. Dimock. *Giraldi Cambrensis Topographia Hibernica Et Expugnatio Hibernica*. Vol. 21:5. *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores, or Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*, (London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), chapter 52.

⁶⁵ Dimock, 101.

⁶⁶ Dimock, 70.

⁶⁷ Dimock, 153.

and live like beasts)⁶⁸. This reference to beasts makes the wolf form all the more uncivilized in Gerald's eyes. He draws out the negative imagery of the wolf in another passage where he describes Irish wolves having pups in December due to the mild climate or "vel potius proditionis et rapinae incommoda, quæ præmature hic pullulant"⁶⁹ (as a symbol of the evils of treachery and plunder which here blossom before their season)⁷⁰. There is no positive light within which to paint the Ossory wolves. Not only as Irish people, but as wolves, they are described as lesser in Gerald's account. Cohen states that medieval writers would attaching "allegorical meanings"⁷¹ to animals. In the case of Gerald, it is clear to see that he likens the entire Irish people to bestial forms.

Gerald is very familiar with Augustine's theories on transformation and quotes them several times during his episode on the wolves. He appears to agree with Augustine's view that God is the only being capable of true transformation stating:

Sed omnipotentem Deum, sicut naturas creare, sic et easdem cum voluerit in se invicem premutare, seu vindicando, seu divinam potentiam declarando, vel unam in alteram penitus transferre.⁷²

It is, however, believed as an undoubted truth, that the Almighty God, who is the Creator of natures, can, when he pleases, change one into another, either for vindicating his judgments, or exhibiting his divine power.⁷³

Gerald also discusses how demons and wicked men use illusions to create the image of a wolf. He concludes that the wolf form here is a miraculous one, not the work of demons or illusion.

⁶⁸ Giraldus Cambrensis. *The History and Topography of Ireland*, Trans. by John J. O'Meara, 101.

⁶⁹ Dimock, 112.

⁷⁰ Giraldus Cambrensis. *The History and Topography of Ireland*, Trans. by John J. O'Meara, 77.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain : On Difficult Middles*. The New Middle Ages, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 86.

⁷² Dimock, 106.

⁷³ Giraldus Cambrensis. *The History and Topography of Ireland*, Trans. by Thomas Forester: Digireads.com, 2013.

In many werewolf accounts, the skin or clothing is an important factor in transformations, a theme that will be explored in greater detail in the discussion section of this paper. This motif is clearly present in this story. To dispel the priest's fears about performing the last Communion, the skins are removed to reveal two humans, still perfectly intact. This further drives home the idea that these are, in fact, people who have been cursed and not actual wolves. As will be discussed later, clothing or a wearable animal skin is a common method to cause a voluntary transformation, i.e. someone putting on a wolfskin to embody the wolf. As there is no description as to how these two became the chosen wolves for the tribe, it is hard to say if they had to put on the wolfskin to complete their transformation, if it was put on them, or if some other method is used. It is also noteworthy that the wolf skin returns to covering the woman as soon as she receives the sacrament. She is human for a Christian ritual but then returns to her exiled form outside this context.

The very nature of this punishment removes the afflicted wolves from society. It is described as an exile, both in terms of the territory and their physical form; however, it doesn't appear that they are beyond redemption. At least one priest was convinced, albeit partially through terror, that the she-wolf was human enough to receive the last rites. Additionally, there is a fixed period of their transformation, after which the wolves are allowed to return to the tribe. The return means that the wolves can be reintegrated and accepted once again into the tribe and society as a whole.

Konungs Skuggsjá

Konungs Skuggsjá is a thirteenth-century Norse text presented as a dialogue between a father and son, where the son is asking for knowledge from his father.⁷⁴ It was possibly written for the sons of King Hákon IV by an unknown author. However, it has been noted that there are links to the Norwegian royal court.⁷⁵ A large portion of it is devoted to detailing the Wonders of Ireland, which is where the account of the Irish werewolves is included.

The werewolf episode takes place in a single chapter, which details a family who was cursed into becoming wolves after Saint Patrick prayed to God to punish them for howling while he preached. The account goes on to describe that while the men have the intelligence of a human while in wolf form, they still behave as wolves, eating not only the expected prey

⁷⁴ Su 185; C. Etchingam, J. V. Sigurðsson, & M. M. Ní. "The 'Wonders of Ireland' in *Konungs Skuggsjá*: Text, Sources, Context" In *Norse-gaelic contacts in a viking world*, (Brepols Publishers, 2019), 43.

⁷⁵ Etchingam, Sigurðsson, & Ní, 44.

of wolves, but also other men. This transformation either comes every seven years or once for a seven year period. Those who transform for a seven year period do not transform again.⁷⁶

There is a clear overlap with the story from Gerald of Wales's account; one family taunts a saint and is punished through divine retribution. It has been suggested that this is the same story adapted for different audiences.⁷⁷ Saint Natalis would be well known to Irish audiences, but a far more obscure figure to those living in Scandinavia. Saint Patrick, on the other hand, would be much more recognizable to foreign audiences.⁷⁸ Interestingly though, the curse doesn't come from the saint, but from God himself in this account. This brings the story into line with Augustine's theory on transformation. There is no trace of magic or sorcery in the transformation. Instead, God initiates the transformation, making it a true and real transformation as opposed to an illusion.

Carey notes that the howling instance in this story is of particular interest and is firmly rooted in Irish tradition. By howling, the family is exhibiting wolf-like behaviors while still in human form. The transformation then is one that causes the outside to match the inside of the offenders. The curse simply brings the two into alignment, making it easier to identify metaphorical wolves. Several groups have been identified in the Irish context for howling or barking at Church members.⁷⁹ Saint Patrick compared enemies of the Church to wolves in *Epistola ad Milites Corotici*, proving that this was a known theme in Irish literature.⁸⁰ Carey states in a footnote that the exact phrase used is *lupi rapaces*, a phrase Patrick took from Mathew 7:15, which famously warns against wolves in sheep's clothing.⁸¹ This association with wolves and lambs or sheep, therefore, would have been a well known motif to the audience of the time.⁸²

The word used throughout this story to describe the wolves is the more pejorative *vargr*, as opposed to the more neutral *úlfr*. Using a word with such a negative connotation is to be expected given the negative portrayal of the wolves throughout the chapter. In fact, the text goes on to describe them as worse than wolves for their behavior. Linguistically, several words in Irish have been linked to Latin and Greek words for dog or barking. For example, in the gloss of *De Origine Scoticae Linguae*, the word *cáinte*, meaning "satirist", is listed as

⁷⁶ Etchingham, Sigurðsson, & Ní, 56.

⁷⁷ Carey, 51.

⁷⁸ Carey, 50.

⁷⁹ Carey 52-3.

⁸⁰ Carey, 52.

⁸¹ Carey, 52.

⁸² Pluskowski, 71.

coming from the latin *canis*, meaning “dog”. The gloss continues “for the vocation of both is iniquity and tumult”⁸³. The canine link here is telling and shows the language reflecting this unfavorable slant.

Like Socrates’ *Republic* and the Bible, *Konungs Skuggsjá* can be read as a warning to princes not to act like wolves.⁸⁴ At the time of writing, Norway had converted to Christianity. The tale of a family offending God so severely that he transformed them into wolves is a strong lesson and reminder to not participate in any behavior that can be seen as wolfish. This family can likely be linked to the ruling family of Ossory through a related text, *De Ingntaib Érenn*. This related text is another retelling of the story and will be discussed later. It has been suggested that the son in *Konungs Skuggsjá*, who is asking the questions in the dialogue, is in spiritual danger and is prideful.⁸⁵ This makes the lesson of the werewolves incredibly relevant. Su also notes that the episode is “essentially a story of misjudgement on the part of a ruling class and its consequences.”⁸⁶ This compliments the theory that the story overlaps with Gerald’s wolves of Ossory and later Irish werewolf stories which tie the shapeshifters with the ruling family of Ossory.

Discussion of Involuntary Shapeshifting

All werewolves in this chapter can shapeshift as a result of an inherited family trait and do not have any control. The *Egils saga* wolves do so either at night or when, like Skalla-Grímr, are in a state of heightened emotions. The wolves of *Topographia Hibernica* and *Konungs Skuggsjá* do so as the result of a saint’s curse. Christianity plays a role in all transformations discussed, but unlike the Irish wolves, the wolves of *Egils saga* begin to lose their ability as the family moves closer to conversion. This is likely due to the warning being delivered. As they become more Christian, Egill’s family becomes less wild and instead is integrating with the social norms of the time. The Irish wolves, on the other hand, offended the Christian saints and are being punished as a result. Their actions go against the Christian norms.

It is important to note the differences in genre with regards to the text. In both Gerald’s account and *Konungs Skuggsjá* the wolves are presented as wonders of Ireland.

⁸³ Carey, 52.

⁸⁴ Su, 190.

⁸⁵ Su, 188.

⁸⁶ Su 190.

Egils saga, however, is presented as a factual account of a real family in Iceland. This naturally creates a different tone when dealing with the werewolves. The marvelous accounts strive to shock and awe their readers and so the accounts are certainly fantastic in their language and presentation.

Only Gerald's account references any kind of skin that is related to these transformations. Interestingly it is the only account of those discussed in this section where the wolves retain a measure of humanity while in the wolf form. The transformation in *Egils saga* is accompanied by some disagreeable emotion: Kveld-Úlfr becomes more irritable, Skalla-Grímr loses control and his ability to reason, and Egill becomes enraged. Likewise, the *Konungs Skuggsjá* wolves retain human intelligence, but still behave as wolves. John Carey notes that the additional details to the Wolves of Ossory tale presented in *Konungs Skuggsjá* portrays them as more of a hazard to their neighbors than in Gerald's account.⁸⁷ There is no description of any attacks committed by Gerald's wolves. The impression given is that they live quietly away from the rest of the territory until it is time for them to return. *Konungs Skuggsjá*'s wolves, however, are described as attacking men and being worse than wolves.⁸⁸ Meanwhile the wolves of *Topographia Hibernica* are described as neither aggressive nor harming their environment. In a way, the wolf nature is limited to the skin in this account whereas the other transformations penetrate farther into the individual's psyche.

Aside from the level of humanity left to the wolves themselves, there is also the difference in the number of wolves. The family from Gerald's account only need two representatives to receive the punishment on behalf of the entire clan. In *Konungs Skuggsjá*, however, the entire family suffers from the transformation. Their punishment is much more extreme than the one displayed in Gerald's account. It is difficult to explain why, as Gerald did not include a description of the Ossory wolves behavior which caused the curse from Natalis. It may also simply be a matter of audience. Gerald's account is meant for natives of Britain who had just invaded Ireland. *Konungs Skuggsjá*, on the other hand, is written for a Norse audience and as an instructional text for future rulers. If the text is meant to show a ruling family who miscalculates and offends God, then it would make sense for the family to suffer harsher consequences, if only to set an example. Gerald, however, is not trying to convey a lesson. Instead, *Topographia Hibernica* is a narrative from the perspective of a colonizer, who describes a fantastic tale from an "uncivilized" land. Rhonda Knight reads the

⁸⁷ Carey, 52.

⁸⁸ Carey, 52.

interaction between the priest and the male werewolf as the active, willing participation of an Irishman in his own colonization. This then is Gerald's "fantasy of colonial complicity"⁸⁹. Knight also notes that the colonized population has to be an "other" while also being similar enough to the colonizers that they are able to be assimilated.⁹⁰ Gerald's account constantly "others" the Irish, describing the oddities he has heard and noting their supposedly lack of a Christianity. However, the wolves are described in a way that makes them more accessible to Christians through their actions and logic.

The wolves here are kept at a distance from society as a whole. Gerald's wolves live in continual exile during their transformation. *Egils saga* depicts a family of difficult people who constantly fight against the royal family. However, both of these groups are arguably sympathetic. The *Topographia* wolves behave nobly, waiting for their chance to become human again and still actively participating in religious rituals. Egill's family find their place in Iceland and become a prominent family there. *Konungs Skuggsjá*, however, shows an entire clan that is described as worse than humans and wolves. There is no sympathy in this depiction despite the same circumstance that takes place in *Topographia*, the offending members of the family are long dead. This demonstrates that while some involuntary shapeshifters receive piety and some level of understanding, this is not a rule. Instead, the werewolf motif is adapted to fit the theme of the text.

Voluntary Shapeshifting

In this chapter I will examine werewolf figures who choose to transform, specifically from *Völsunga saga* and *Versus sancti Patricii episcopi de mirabilibus Hibernie*. The reasons for this transformation vary, but generally the main reasons for the transformation are a need for enhanced strength and fighting ability. I will additionally be looking at the berserk figure. While these characters do not physically transform, they willingly undergo an animalistic transformation, mirroring the questionable behaviors of the werewolf figures making them marginalized and bestial. There are some positive aspects to this mental transformation,

⁸⁹Rhonda Knight. "Werewolves, Monsters, and Miracles: Representing Colonial Fantasies in Gerald of Wales's '*Topographia Hibernica*'". *Studies in Iconography* 22 (2001): 74.

⁹⁰ Knight, 66.

however, the berserker figures more often are presented as a villain or an obstacle to overcome.

Smith described werewolves of this category as those who “either from a gift inborn or from the use of certain magic arts... is in the habit of changing himself into a wolf from time to time”⁹¹. The wolf retains a level of human intelligence, but the wolfish instinct is always present and detectable to those around them when in human form. It is a “flimsy disguise which he may throw off at any moment”⁹². As will be discussed, the wolf nature is present in all werewolves from this section, even while in human form. But in the case of *Völsunga saga*, the literal transformation is a one-time event, though the metaphorical wolf qualities of this family are apparent.

There is an aspect of inherited werewolfism in both *Völsunga saga* and *Versus sancti Patricii episcopi de mirabilibus Hibernie*. However, unlike the werewolves of the previous section, shapeshifters in this story have a level of control and agency with regard to their transformations. They may be born with the ability or tendencies, but in theory they could choose to never actually transform into a wolf.

Völsunga saga

Völsunga saga belongs to a “semi-historical or legendary” genre of literature known as the fornaldarsögur.⁹³ The prose text, which was first written down sometime between 1200 and 1270, was composed by an unknown author who likely drew heavily on traditional eddic verse, which in turn were based on a rich oral tradition. Codex Regius, one of the most important manuscripts for Icelandic literature, contains eighteen eddic verses featuring material about the Völsungs.⁹⁴

The Völsung family presents an interesting case study in terms of wolves and shapeshifters. Several members of the family are at one point or another linked to wolves. The progenitor of the Völsung family, Sigi, commits murder, making him not only arguably wolf-like, but a *vargr*. He is declared a “wolf in hallowed places”⁹⁵ or a “varg í véum”⁹⁶. As a

⁹¹ Smith, 4.

⁹² Smith, 4.

⁹³ Ronald G. Finch, ed. *The saga of the Volsungs*. Nelson, 1965, 2.

⁹⁴ Jesse L. Byock. *The Saga of the Volsungs : The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 3.

⁹⁵ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 35.

⁹⁶ Finch, 1.

result he is banished, but is guided by Óðinn. Sigi's grandson, Sigmundr, and Sigmundr's son, Sinfjötli, participate in the most wolfish episode of the saga but turning into literal wolves while living in the forest. The rest of the Völsungs are characterized by their skill in battle and their fearlessness, making them metaphorical wolves. Another of Sigmundr's sons, Sigurðr, arguably one of the greatest warriors, perfectly embodies the Völsung warrior status. He is responsible for killing a dragon and many princes through the saga. He is, however, betrayed by his brothers-in-law, and is killed by one, Guttormr, after he consumes wolf meat. After consuming the meat, the Guttormr becomes irritable and eager to attack. By consuming the wolf meat, Guttormr begins to manifest all of the worst traits associated with the wolf. It is only through this heightened state, brought on by the wolf, that Sigurðr is able to be killed, destroyed partially by the wolf nature that his family exemplified.

Given this prevalent and repetitive link to wolves, there is a level of inherited wolf-behavior that is passed from one generation to the next, similar to the main family in *Egils saga*. However, the Völsungs are not treated as the marginalized group that Egill and his family are. Instead, they are arguably the most famous German warriors, glorified for their battle prowess and hailed as important kings and warriors. All of these warriors seem to have an intrinsic battle prowess associated with werewolves, even without literally transforming.

While there is a level of wolfishness expected of all Völsungs, there is one particular scene of voluntary transformation. While living as outlaws in the forest, Sigmundr and Sinfjötli put on wolf skins and turn into wolves for nine days. During this time they roam the forest and kill several people, until Sigmundr attacks and seriously injures Sinfjötli by biting his throat.⁹⁷ It is only at this point that any negativity is attributed to putting on the wolf skins. After Sigmundr returns Sinfjötli to the hut and is unable to cure the wound he “en það troll taka úlfhamina”⁹⁸ (cursed the wolfskins, bidding the trolls to take them)⁹⁹. Sinfjötli recovers after Óðinn again interferes and guides Sigmundr to a cure through one of his ravens. Afterwards, both lay low until they are able to remove the skins and then burn them.

Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's transformation is interesting because it doesn't necessarily need to happen. There is a sense of inevitability when dealing with any Völsung and their link to wolves. They are inherently linked; every Völsung is a wolf. This particular point is demonstrated by the fact they are also known as the *Ylfingar* or “wolflings”.¹⁰⁰ But the

⁹⁷ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 44-45.

⁹⁸ Finch, 11.

⁹⁹ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 45

¹⁰⁰ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 284.

physical transformation is missing in other members of the family. It has been suggested that this episode of literal transformation is an older insertion of an already established motif.¹⁰¹ Sinfjötli is in the middle of training and this episode of killing bandits in the forest may be linked to an initiation ritual, especially in a family linked to wolves.¹⁰² But, while the wolf motif is so intrinsically linked to the family, the absence of physical transformation of other members, including the very man the dynasty is named after, is interesting. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir suggests this may actually be an instance where the Celtic werewolf has influenced the story. The wolf pelt is a prevalent theme in Celtic sources and there is no evidence for when this episode entered the story.¹⁰³ If so, the original text, which would have simply had the pair either in some kind of mantle, acting as metaphorical wolves, would contain an episode more authentic in terms of a coming-of-age rite. Though it is difficult to prove if this change is the result of Christian influence trying to cover a pagan rite with a more palatable variant, it does suggest that a Norse audience found the Celtic werewolf to be acceptable enough to be incorporated into one of the most popular sagas. The literal transformation drives home the concept of a liminal space and that they are able to put away the wolf, and their life in the forest, in a much more final sense, than a metaphorical one.

At this point Sigmundr is already an established warrior and Sinfjötli has been training for some time, so both would have been formidable opponents for any enemy. Both could have easily continued as they were without any enhancements, as they had already killed several bandits in the forest before their transformation. However, the savageness of Sigmundr is enhanced; while Sinfjötli does disobey his orders, the punishment of biting his throat seems extreme. Sigmundr also appears to immediately regret his actions, carrying Sinfjötli to a safe place until he is able to be healed.¹⁰⁴ Without Óðinn's timely intervention, it is possible that Sinfjötli might have died from this wound. A similar instance is seen in *Egils saga* when Skalla-Grímr attacks and nearly kills Egill. Egill is likewise saved by the intervention of a guardian figure. The loss of control among werewolf figures in moments of rage reflects the very anxiety about these figures and the harm that wolves can do to humans.

The wolfish nature of the Völsung is reinforced by their relationship to Óðinn. Sigi himself is said to be the son of Óðinn and Óðinn guides him after he has been declared a *vargr*.¹⁰⁵ Afterwards, he assists in the conception of Völsung and arranges for Sigmundr to

¹⁰¹ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2007.

¹⁰² Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 285.

¹⁰³ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 287-8.

¹⁰⁴ Su, 130.

¹⁰⁵ Byock . *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 35

have the greatest weapon possible, a sword that others fail to pull from a trunk.¹⁰⁶ His constant interference in the lives of the Völsungs makes it obvious that he acts as their patron. Given Óðinn's own link to wolves¹⁰⁷, it comes as no surprise that a family fathered by him has the same connections. It also explains their war-like tendencies. As a god of warfare and a king himself, he favors the family that he has not only created, supported, and maintained, but the one that, perhaps because of his constant involvement, exhibits the behaviors of a true wolf-warrior clan. This link to Óðinn may also explain the nine-day transformation. Óðinn himself hung on the world tree for nine days to gain knowledge.¹⁰⁸ In this case, Sinfjötli spends nine days as a wolf to finish his training process and to take up his rightful place as a Völsung and join Sigmundr in his revenge.

Völsunga saga also presents an interesting juxtaposition to most figures who practice voluntary werewolfism. Instead of the feared, marginalized characters of other stories, the Völsungs are the heroes of their stories. Their wolfishness reflects their outstanding fighting abilities and ruthlessness, but this seems to be part of their appeal. They are the ultimate example of an outstanding warrior. As such they do not exist as part of society as a whole; instead they are in many ways above it. They serve as an ideal that can never be fully achieved but always emulated.

Unlike the family of *Egils saga*, the Völsungs are described in positive terms with regard to their appearance. All the children of Völsung, including Sigmundr, are described as imposing. In terms of personality, they are described as ambitious and surpassing most men.¹⁰⁹ Sinfjötli is described as being handsome, strong, and “ok mjök í ætt Völsunga”¹¹⁰ (very like the Völsung stock),¹¹¹ a clear compliment in this context as his mother tried very hard to conceive a child that fit these criteria for her revenge. This mirrors the generally positive representation of the Völsungs.

Besides the Völsungs, there is another wolf transformation that takes place. After Sigmundr and his brothers are taken captive by King Siggeir, a she-wolf comes every night to devour one of the brothers. On the tenth day, only Sigmundr is left. However, with the help of his sister, he is able to distract the wolf with the scent of honey so that she licks his face. Sigmundr is able to kill the wolf by biting her tongue and pulling it out by the roots. This

¹⁰⁶ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 36-8.

¹⁰⁷ H.R. Ellis Davidson. *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 48.

¹⁰⁸ Carolyne Larrington, ed. *The Poetic Edda*, (Oxford University Press, USA, 2014), 32.

¹⁰⁹ Byock . *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 37.

¹¹⁰ Finch, 10.

¹¹¹ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 43.

chapter ends by saying that men thought this wolf was Siggeir's mother who transformed by means of witchcraft.¹¹²

Again we have the inclusion of a voluntary shapeshifter who embodies the negative qualities of the wolf. The wolf explicitly participates in anthropophagy, an act that is often skirted around by other authors, or even the characters of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli. This likely takes on another level of horror when the gender of the shapeshifter is considered. There is a sexualized nature to the encounter, where the she-wolf is licking honey off of a man's face.¹¹³

The inclusion of a female werewolf is interesting and rather uncommon. One is mentioned in Gerald's account, but in a much more passive role. This she-wolf not only plays an active role in the story, but participates in arguably very wolfish behavior. Interestingly, the character of Signý, who behaves in a very wolf-like or unsocial manner, is never described as a wolf. Signý seduces her brother under the guise of magic, knowingly participates in incest, and even orders two of her sons killed. This behavior is in line with the idea of a wolf clan in that these are socially unacceptable behaviors that would normally cause an individual to be ostracized. However, in order to further the clan, her actions are not criticized to the extent they would normally be. To some, they may even seem necessary in order to extract revenge on behalf of her father and brothers. These actions lead to the birth of Sinfjötli, so they bring about the desired result. Signý seems to have realized that her actions were not excusable as she willingly ended her life following the death of King Siggier declaring: "Hefi ek ok svá mikit til unnit at fram kæmisk hefndin, at mér er með engum kosti líft" (Everything I have done has been to bring about King Siggeir's death. And I have done so much to achieve vengeance that to go on living is out of the question).¹¹⁴

Interestingly, during Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's transformation, the word most often used is *úlfr*. The wolf-skins are referred to as *úlframr* and they communicate through *úlfrödd* "wolf voice".¹¹⁵ Considering the behavior these two are engaging in, killing people in a forest while in a literal wolf form, one might expect to see the term *vargr* used. However, in the context of the story, the killings and wolf form are a necessary part of Sinfjötli's development and therefore not seen as negatively as a normal slaying. Their actions are not in line with societal norms nor are they necessarily acceptable, but they serve a purpose in achieving revenge for Völsung's death.

¹¹² Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 41-2.

¹¹³ Su, 100.

¹¹⁴ Finch, 13-4.

¹¹⁵ Finch 1965; Zoëga 2004.

Versus sancti Patricii episcopi de mirabilibus Hibernie

Versus sancti Patricii episcopi de mirabilibus Hibernie is another potential retelling of the Wolves of Ossory story. This work is attributed to Bishop Patrick of Dublin, who acted as bishop from 1074 to 1084.¹¹⁶ This work, as the name suggests, gives several instances of Irish wonders and does so with less derogatory language than Gerald of Wales does in *Topographia Hibernica*. No place of birth is given for Patrick, but when recommending him to become the Bishop of Dublin following the death of the former bishop, he is said to have been known to the people and of noble birth.¹¹⁷ This suggests that he was not as much an outsider to the Norse-Irish inhabitants of Dublin than Gerald was to the Irish. It is not surprising then to find that his work does not frame the entire Irish people as uncivilized or bestial, but that does not mean that his portrayal of the wolves is a positive one.

Only a short, fourteen line section of *Versus sancti Patricii* is dedicated to the account of the werewolves. Once in wolf form, they are able to tear flesh with their teeth, but also exhibit a skittish nature when confronted by men. These werewolves project themselves into a wolf form, leaving their “corpora uera” (true bodies)¹¹⁸ behind, where they are not to be moved. This does not mean that the body is separate from the actions of the wolf. Any injury or damage inflicted on the wolf is mirrored in the “true body”, which would not be present.

The main difference between this story and the others of the Irish werewolves is that this group is said to transform whenever they wish. This is not a punishment or a curse, but rather a marvelous feature of this family. The link to a specific family is still present; the shapeshifting ability is associated with a group of men “Miram naturam maiorum ab origine ductam” (who have this wondrous nature from ancestry and birth).¹¹⁹ There is no mention of the length of the transformation nor of the circumstances in which they transform. While this suggests some level of inherited shapeshifting, it does not appear that anyone is compelled to transform as they do so “quando uolunt” (whensoever they will).¹²⁰ Instead of a curse, it is presented as a “special power, which enables them to prey upon their neighbours.”¹²¹

Again, the portrayal of these werewolves is not positive, though it does not have the same fear that was present in Gerald’s account. These wolves rend flesh and attack sheep, but

¹¹⁶ Aubrey Gwynn. *The Writings of Bishop Patrick 1074-1084*. Vol. 1. *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1955), 1.

¹¹⁷ Gwynn, 2.

¹¹⁸ Gwynn, 62-3.

¹¹⁹ Gwynn, 62-3.

¹²⁰ Gwynn, 63.

¹²¹ Carey, 54.

are quick to run when confronted. Their behavior is presented as very cowardly. These wolves do not transform to participate in battle or to act as warriors of any kind. Instead, “Unde uidentur oues occidere sepe gementes”¹²² (often are they seen slaying sheep that moan in pain)¹²³. There is no trace of the warrior werewolf present here. However, this story, once again, appears in a collection on the marvels of Ireland, even specifically stating that “quod nos miramur et omnes” (we all wonder at the sight).¹²⁴ The point of this tale is not to frighten or scare, but merely to entertain.

Unlike other stories, *Versus sancti Patricii* seems to exclude women from the transformation. The text states that while a wolf they must leave their bodies behind and “atque suis mandant ne quisquam mouerit ill” (and give orders to their women not to move them).¹²⁵ Other Irish stories either do not make a distinction of the werewolf with regards to gender or specifically states that there is a male and a female wolf. The female werewolf is less common, but this is the only text examined among those examined that specifically excludes them.

Berserkers and úlfheðinn

While not a physical change, the berserker represents an animalistic battle rage that metaphorically turns a human into an animal. The names berserker, meaning “bear shirt”, and úlfheðinn, meaning “wolf skin”, make their animal links quite clear.¹²⁶ The link between berserker and úlfheðinn is demonstrated in the poem *Haraldskvæði* where a raven describes the berserker as ““úlfheðnar þeir es í orrostu blóðgar randir bera’ (wolf-skins who bear bloody shields into battle)”.¹²⁷ Olsen suggests that the shared animalistic nature may have made the two groups interchangeable, at least in certain cases.¹²⁸

This warrior group can be traced back to the battle god Óðinn, as can be seen in a passage from *Yngling saga*:

¹²² Gwynn, 62.

¹²³ Gwynn, 63.

¹²⁴ Gwynn, 63.

¹²⁵ Gwynn, 62-3.

¹²⁶ Christa Agnes Tuczay. “Into the Wild - Old Norse Stories of Animal Men”. In *Werewolf Histories*, edited by Willem De Blécourt, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 65; it is also noted here that originally Jon Erichsen attributed berserker to mean “bare shirt” without considering this word might also mean “bear shirt”.

¹²⁷ Karin E. Olsen. *Conceptualizing the Enemy in Early Northwest Europe : Metaphors of Conflict and Alterity in Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, and Early Irish Poetry*. Vol. Volume 6. Medieval Identities, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 99. Olsen here is quoting an edition and translation by Robert D. Fulk.

¹²⁸ Olsen, 99.

Óðinn kundi svá gera, at í orrostu urðu óvinir hans blindir eða daufir eða óttafullir, en vörn þeira bitu eigi heldr en vendir, en hans menn fóru brynjulausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða griðundgar. Þeir drápu mannfólkit, en hvártki eldr né járn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr.¹²⁹

In battle Odin could make his foes blind or deaf or terrified and their weapons were as nothing more than sticks; but his own men went about without armour and were mad like hounds or wolves, and bit their shields and were strong as bears or bulls; they slew men, but neither fire nor steel would deal with them. This was called a berserk's-gang.¹³⁰

Because of this association, it has been posited that berserkers and úlfheðinn are part of a warrior cult dedicated to Óðinn.¹³¹ Battle frenzy is a common marker of berserker behavior.¹³² Additionally, these warriors are said to have strength beyond that of a normal man.¹³³ The behavior of these individuals also borders on the animalistic. There are several occasions where berserkers are said to have howled.¹³⁴ One such instance can be found in *Grettis saga*, where after discovering they have been tricked by Grettir and locked in a privy “kemr á þá berserksgangr ok grenja sem hundar”¹³⁵ (go berserk and began howling like dogs)¹³⁶. This howling association echoes the behavior of the Irish werewolves of *Konungs Skuggsjá*, and demonstrates the feral nature of these characters. While the physical state of berserkers doesn't change, the mental state shifts to a more animalistic one.

The stereotypical berserker battle frenzy isn't necessarily a negative trait. Several berserkers are notable members of noble or royal retinues, a place where increased strength

¹²⁹Snorri Sturluson, and Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. *Heimskringla* : 1. Vol. B. 26. Íslensk Fornrit, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska Fornritafélag, 1941), chapter 6.

¹³⁰Erling Monsen and A. H. Smith. *Heimskringla, or The Lives of the Norse Kings*, (New York: Dover, 1990), 5.

¹³¹Olsen, 98.

¹³²Tuczay, 65.

¹³³Tuczay, 71.

¹³⁴Merkelbach, 89.

¹³⁵Guðni Jónsson, trans. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Vol. 7. Íslensk Fornrit. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1936.

¹³⁶Bernard Scudder and Örnólfur Thorsson, eds. *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, (Penguin UK, 2005), 46.

and battle prowess would be an asset.¹³⁷ King Haraldr hárfagri has several at his disposal as shown in *Haraldskvæði*, as do King Aðils and King Hrólfr in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.¹³⁸ However, without attachment to a retinue, the berserker represents a disruption and danger to society as a whole, as they are essentially left to roam among society while still exhibiting violent tendencies. This is specifically true with regards to their treatment of women. Sexual predation is a significant marker of berserker behavior. Not only is this a horror to any potential victim, but as Merkelbach describes, this is an attack on her honor and, by extension, her family's honor.¹³⁹ As kinship and honor are the foundations of medieval Norse society, these traveling figures threaten society at its core.

Like werewolves, there is an inherited component to berserkism. The characters Halli and Leiknir of *Eyrbyggja saga* and Þórir þömb and Ögmundr illi of *Grettis saga* are examples of brothers who are said to be berserkers.¹⁴⁰ This presents another affront to basic Norse society: the berserker trait can enter a family through procreation, creating a social problem for the family involved.¹⁴¹ The marginalized behavior of the offspring will become the problem of the kin-group and would damage their reputation. Additionally, that child would likely be unable to marry and continue to form ties between other kin groups.¹⁴²

An interesting figure to consider here is the legendary Irish hero, Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn, featured heavily in the Ulster cycle, is a warrior of unsurpassed skill, delaying an advancing army nearly single handedly while the men of Ulster were unable to defend themselves. As a boy, then known as Sétanta, he kills a hound belonging to a blacksmith named Culann. To atone for killing the hound, he vowed to protect Culann and his property, essentially becoming the hound.¹⁴³ In recognition of this new role he changed his name to Cú Chulainn, meaning Culann's hound.

While Cú Chulainn is neither a werewolf nor a berserker, he does undergo a type of frenzied battle transformation that is reminiscent of these werewolf figures. He experiences what is known as a *ríastrad*, “warp spasm” or “distortion”,¹⁴⁴ where he becomes unrecognizable. The description is long and vivid, but to name a few of the changes Cú

¹³⁷ Merkelbach, 99.

¹³⁸ Olsen, 98.

¹³⁹ Merkelbach, 99-100.

¹⁴⁰ Merkelbach, 94.

¹⁴¹ Merkelbach, 99-100.

¹⁴² Merkelbach, 100.

¹⁴³ Cecile O'Rahilly. *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, Edited by Cecile O'Rahilly. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), 162-3.

¹⁴⁴ O'Rahilly, 181.

Chulainn undergoes: one eye is sucked into his head, the other eye was on his cheek, his inner gullet protrudes from his jawbone, and his lungs and liver became visible in his mouth and throat.¹⁴⁵ This is clearly not a recognizable animal transformation, but it is a monstrous and horrific one.

Cú Chulainn is “the embodiment of the canine and martial virtues of strength, frenzied fierceness and fidelity”¹⁴⁶ in the Irish context. His association with canines is unsurprising, as the dog is not only associated with warrior virtues, but also with an aspect of guarding, which Cú Chulainn not only does as Culann’s guard dog but in his defense of Ulster.¹⁴⁷

Cú Chulainn is also subject to both the positive and negative associations of canine figures. He fills his role as the guardian of Ulster during Ailill and Medb’s invasion, but as a child he nearly harms his own people. After completing a feat of strength, Cú Chulainn returns to Emain still in a frenzy. He is only calmed after the women of the town meet him while naked to shame him and while he is hiding his head in embarrassment, he is dunked in three vats of cold water.¹⁴⁸ This behavior is outside of the norm, but can be an expected outcome given the nature of these figures.

The berserker is perhaps the best example of how a human with animalistic qualities is a threat to society. There is no sense of horror or wonder as with physical transformation. There is no evidence of a work of God or even of magic. There is no literal wolf destroying society, simply a metaphorical one. Berserker behavior still attempts to distance itself from the human, copying animal behavior. But the danger they present is one directly to society. It is their behavior and not their appearance that is the problem.

Discussion of Voluntary Shapeshifting

The marker of all figures described in this chapter is that they exhibit some level of control over their transformation that others lack. This does not mean that they actively seek the transformation. The Völsungs accidentally arrive at a situation where they have the option to become a literal wolf, while the Irish are born to it. However, no one compelled Sigmundr or Sinfjötli to put on the wolfskin, nor are the wolves of *Versus sancti Patricii* being pushed

¹⁴⁵ O’Rahilly, 201-2.

¹⁴⁶ McCone, “Aided Cheltchair”, 10.

¹⁴⁷ McCone, “Aided Cheltchair”.

¹⁴⁸ O’Rahilly, 170-1.

into the transformation via a curse. This suggests that they could choose to not be literal wolves, though in the case of the Völsungs, the wolf clan aspect would still be present.

The family aspect of the Irish werewolves is present and arguably expanded in the fourth version of the Werewolves of Ossory tradition. The text, *De Ingntaib Érenn*, so closely mirrors *Versus sancti Patricii* it seems certain that Bishop Patrick took inspiration from this source. The text, found in two different versions, describes a family of werewolves from Ossory who kill livestock.¹⁴⁹ One version adds the name Laignech Fáelad as the progenitor for the family, a name that also appears in *Cóir Anmann*, a list of personal names with explanations of epithets. There are several versions of this text, a shorter and longer version which have been long recognized, with a third, even shorter version suggested by Sharon Arbuthnot.¹⁵⁰ The entry for Laignech Fáelad only appears in the longest version of this text, which appears in three manuscripts dated from 1621 to sometime in the seventeenth century.¹⁵¹ The entry reads:

Laighnech Fæladb .i. fer eissidhe no theghedh fri fæladh .i. i conrachaibh, .i. a rachaibh na mac tíre, téghedh in tan ba háil dó. *Ocus* teighdís a síl ina dheóidh. *Ocus* do mharbhdaís na hindile fó bás na mac tíre. Conadh aire sin isberthí Laighnech Fáelad frissium. Ar is é *cétma* dochóidh i conrecht díbh.¹⁵²

Laighnech Fáelad [<fáel ‘wolf’], i.e. he was a man who used to engage in ‘wolfing’, i.e. he used to change into wolf-forms, i.e. into the forms of wolves, whenever he wanted. And so did his descendants after him. And they used to kill cattle in the manner of wolves. For that reason he used to be called Laignech Fáelad. For he was the first of them to change into the form of a wolf.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Carey, 54-5.

¹⁵⁰ Sharon Arbuthnot. *Cóir Anmann : A Late Middle Irish Treatise on Personal Names : Pt. 2. Vol. 60*, (Irish Texts Society. London: Irish Texts Society, 2007), 1.

¹⁵¹ Arbuthnot, 4.

¹⁵² Arbuthnot, 58.

¹⁵³ Arbuthnot, 131.

Laignech Fáelad's relationship to wolves is emphasized several times in this short passage. Additionally, the reference to killing cattle and the reference to changing whenever they wished demonstrates the similarity to the wolves of *Versus sancti Patricii*.

None of the Christian or curse elements appear in these two Irish sources. Instead, the men transform into wolves by their own choice and project themselves while leaving their bodies behind. Instructions are left not to move the bodies and, in both cases, any damage done to the wolf is reflected in the human form. Again, we see that the ability to transform is limited to a single family. Therefore, despite the voluntary nature of all figures discussed in this section, there is also an element of the ability being inherited. This includes berserkers, considering evidence more than one berserker can be born in a single family.

The werewolves of *Versus sancti Patricii* are notable for their more cowardly portrayal compared to other wolves, particularly within the voluntary group. Normally these characters are renowned for their battle prowess and increased strength. The point of their transformation is arguably to be able to confront and dominate any human they encounter. While their behavior is not overly aggressive, these wolves still embody a negative trait, that of cowardice. The werewolf then still stands for socially unacceptable behavior in this instance, just not the behavior that most wolves are meant to portray, especially when compared to a renowned warrior clan, the Völsungs, and characters who embody a wolf like mentality for the sake of battle.

Both the berserker characters and the wolves of *Versus sancti Patricii* are represented as potential threats to property and livelihood. Aside from their propensity for sexual violence, berserkers often destroy or pillage property.¹⁵⁴ This is mirrored in the accounts of the Irish werewolves attacking livestock. In both cases, the threat to the victim's ability to maintain their household and standard of living is on full display. This mirrors the medieval association with wolves preying on livestock. Not only are they preying on humans, but on property as well.

Discussion

There are several common themes that occur across the various werewolf accounts, whether or not the shapeshifter chooses to transform. By examining the themes of kinship,

¹⁵⁴ Merkelbach, 95.

time, the werewolf's role as a warning, the role of skin and clothing, and agency of the shapeshifter, it becomes apparent how complex the werewolf figure is. Each text adapts the motif to meet its needs; the common thread being the negative associations of the wolf and the danger these figures represent. The werewolf then allows the medieval audience to explore what these negative behaviors mean with the social context and what, if any, redress there is for shapeshifters.

Kinship and Wolves

The idea of family ties and werewolfism is an understated but prevalent theme throughout the werewolf tales. The Völsungs, Egill's family, and the Irish wolf stories center around a kin group who transform. While in all cases there is an aspect of an inherited trait passed down through generations, the Irish stories, with strong Christian overtones, feature the punishment of an entire family, even if it is evident that all offending members of that group have since died. The kin group is the basis of society in both of these cultures. Therefore it follows that punishments or afflictions of such extreme outcast behavior are reflected throughout the family. It is interesting that in both *Egils saga* and Gerald's account of the Ossory Wolves, it is only select members of the family that are afflicted, while others remain human.

Werewolfism can occasionally be traced through the family back to a notable ancestor. Both the Völsungs and the Irish wolves of *De Ingantaib Érenn* have notable ancestors to whom they can trace the wolf powers. Óðinn, the father of the first of the Völsungs, is notable for his association with wolves. The Irish ancestor is named Faelad, from "fael 'wolf'".¹⁵⁵ While this figure is not presented as a god, there is a level of mythology attached to this identity and a sense that the lineage can trace itself back to a single wolf figure. Both these clans not only serve as a wolf pack, but as a ruling family. However, their treatment in the stories is very different. The Völsungs are a notable warrior family while the Irish werewolves are portrayed more negatively. This is not to say that there are no negative aspects to the Völsungs and their wolfish behavior. At times they are forced out of society by the very violence they themselves represent, as shown by the initial outlawing of the first Völsung and Sigmundr time in the forest, and it is through violence that this wolf clan eventually meets its end.

¹⁵⁵ Carey, 55.

This focus on the family not only has its ties in the fabric of society, but also in how wolves themselves operate. Wolves are a pack animal, and in a way, the family or kin group's ties to werewolfism is a type of pack mentality. It makes sense to see a pack hunter being used as a representation of a warrior family. The berserker group also operates on both a kin and pack level. As discussed earlier, there does seem to be an inherited aspect due to multiple members of a family exhibiting berserker tendencies. Additionally, many berserkers are shown traveling in groups. In the case of *Hrólf saga Kraka*, twelve berserkers are said to serve King Hrólf¹⁵⁶ while King Aðils has a large number at his disposal before they are killed or defeated.¹⁵⁷ The defeated berserkers who had previously been sworn to King Aðils proceeded to raid and destroy the country after being defeated and dismissed, echoing the concerns about traveling warbands. This fear is not just a Scandinavian one. The presence of the Irish *fianna* also demonstrates the idea of a roving pack of figurative wolves and the anxiety around the destruction of which they were capable. These figures do not always attack in packs, there are several instances where a single berserker is present and capable of inflicting great damage. However, the pack imagery, particularly of a group of berserkers howling together as they do in *Grettis saga*, makes a chilling impression.

A related motif that deserves attention is that of the bear shapeshifter. There are some stories that seem to interchange the wolf transformation for one of a bear, which is a more solitary creature. It may be that the transformation of werewolves and werebears are interchangeable for some authors and works, though this is certainly not a rule. The actions of these individuals mirror and in one Old Norse adaptation of an Old French text, Marie de Frances' *Bisclavret*, is completely substituted for a werewolf, suggesting that the bear tradition perhaps sought inspiration from the wolf tradition. *Bisclavret* was a French lai of a courtly werewolf figure, which was adapted into Old Norse as *Tíódéls saga*. The main character, however, transforms into a bear instead of a wolf like in the original French.¹⁵⁸ This demonstrates that, at least in this specific case, the two were perhaps interchangeable, and that despite the bear form, the character maintains the attributes and role of the wolf motif. This can be seen throughout the text where *Tíódél* is said to have both "vargs ham" and "hvitbiarnar ham".¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Jesse L. Byock. *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, (London: Penguin, 1998), 32.

¹⁵⁷ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 23-30.

¹⁵⁸ Marianne E. Kalinke. "A Werewolf in Bear's Clothing." *Maal og minne* 3-4 (1981): 137-144.

¹⁵⁹ Kalinke, 142.

In *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, two characters, a father and son, transform into bears. The father is cursed to transform after his stepmother strikes him with a wolfskin glove. The son is able to project his spirit into the form of a bear and does so to great effect during a battle. Like the wolves of *Egils saga*, there is a generational aspect to the transformation that weakens as it is passed down, however, the transformation stems from a curse. Interestingly it is wolfskin gloves and not bearskin gloves that cause the transformation.¹⁶⁰ As the character goes on to rampage and destroy nearby farms, the bear transformation mirrors the wolf transformations in intent and effect. It is an uncontrollable force that causes terror and ultimately he has to be killed, much like the Irish werewolves. Additionally, the bear, much like werewolves, attacks livestock. This character is named Björn “bear”, which, like Kveld-Úlfr, may inform the transformation. The fact that Kveld-Úlfr and other members of the family have names with wolf connections is seen as evidence by some scholars that the transformation is wolf-like.¹⁶¹ In the same way, it may be that a character named “bear” transforms into a bear. This can also be seen in the name Bisclavret. The lai states that this is the name in Breton and that it is called *Garwaf* by the Normans. Scoduto states that this is the equivalent of the French *garou*, meaning werewolf.¹⁶² These examples suggest a pattern, connecting the name of the shapeshifter with the creature they transform into.

Böðvarr bjarki, Björn’s son by Bera, mirrors the older Irish traditions where the animal form is projected. He remains in a tent away from the battlefield while his bear form rampages on the battlefield. Once Böðvarr is disturbed, however, the bear disappears and he is forced to fight as a human. This is a considerably weaker form and the battle turns against his side. Like his father, his name may inform his bear transformation as Böðvarr bjarki means “warlike little bear”.¹⁶³

Once werewolfism is introduced into a family, it continues through the generations. This demonstrates that the unacceptable behavior is the responsibility of the entire kin-group and affects them all. This can be seen as a warning. If the transgressions are severe enough, the family can even be punished through the generations, past even when the offending members have died.

¹⁶⁰ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 37.

¹⁶¹ Holtmark 1968.

¹⁶² Scoduto, 39-40.

¹⁶³ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 83.

Time and Werewolfism

In several werewolf texts, the amount of time the character spends in the wolf form is fixed. This fixed time period of transformation allows for the afflicted to return to society after either a punishment has been completed or, in the case of the Völsungs, a choice to reintegrate has been made. Bynum notes that mankind's inability to maintain a form, and thus constantly change, was considered a failing in need of redemption. God was the only one capable of maintaining a continuous form even through death and resurrection. Given the anxiety surrounding the changing of human form, the ability to return to a stable, recognizable human form would have been of the utmost importance.

The length of time or specific timing of each transformation is slightly different in each of the traditions. The Völsung transformation lasts for nine days, while the wolves of *Konungs Skuggsjá* either transform once every seven years or for seven consecutive years. Both nine and seven had significant importance for these cultures.

The Völsung transformation lasts for nine days, where they are unable to remove the wolf skins no matter the circumstances. This includes when Sinfjötli is seriously injured and only saved through the interference of Óðinn. The Völsung transformation may also be reflective of a quest for knowledge. As stated earlier, Sinfjötli is ending his training, the wolf transformation is his last challenge before he is deemed ready to take his place as a true Völsung and help Sigmundur achieve revenge. In many ways the transformation therefore is a coming-of-age rite and Sinfjötli is learning to become a proper warrior. This directly parallels Óðinn, who hangs from Yggdrasil for nine days to acquire wisdom. It should then come as no surprise that the descendents of Óðinn, with their close relationship to wolves, would mirror the amount of time spent gaining necessary knowledge. At the end of this time, they choose to burn the wolf skins, signaling the end of the coming-of-age rite as well as their time as literal wolves and living in the forest. While they continue to kill, it is in service of their goal to avenge their kinsman, an action that is not only acceptable in Norse society, but considered to be a necessary one.

Of the Irish werewolves, only the wolves of *Topographia Hibernica* and *Konungs Skuggsjá* are affected by time-based transformations. Interestingly, these are the two accounts where the wolf transformation takes place as a punishment. The wolves of *Topographia* take turns so that every seven years one man and one woman are wolves on behalf of the entire clan. In *Konungs Skuggsjá*, individuals either turn into a wolf once every seven winters and are humans in between or become a wolf for seven years and then turn back into a human

never to become a wolf again. While the punishment of the family seems to be eternal, continuing through generations before after the offending action occurred, each individual is given time to behave as a human. Gerald's wolves even maintain their humanity while in wolf form. Theoretically, after the seven years are over, the *Topographia* wolves can enjoy life fully reintegrated with society. While the wolves of *Konungs Skuggsjá* maintain some level of human intelligence, they are still subject to their wolfish nature. However, they are not subjected to an eternity of being a wolf. They can be a fully functioning member of society in between transformations or after in the case of those who transform for seven years. The other Irish werewolves, however, are not subjected to a time-based transformation, as they are fully in control of wolfishness.

The Irish sources not only have a clear Christian influence simply because of the social climate in which they were written, but the curses come at the behest of a saint. Seven is a well known Christian motif, as seen in Genesis with the number of days it took to create the world. It makes sense then that the Irish wolves are tied to their forms in increments of seven. It is at the end of this culturally significant time that the wolves have the ability to reintegrate into society.

The time period of seven years is also suggestive. The relationship between time and werewolf transformation exists across many cultures, so it isn't at all surprising to see them in the Irish tradition. However, the amount of time differs from story to story. The lack of a time-based transformation in accounts where a saint isn't involved suggests that it might not have been a part of the original myth, but a later addition. Instead, the original myth may contain voluntary shapeshifters who are capable of transforming at will.

Kveld-Úlfr's time-based transformation is the anomaly among those where time is a factor. It happens daily instead of an interval of nine, meaning he is constantly in a situation where he is marginalized and there is no set time period after which he can be fully integrated. However, the saga does mention that earlier in the day, when he is arguably more human, he is a reliable person for advice. Therefore, when he is more human he is regarded as a part of society, but when he becomes more wolf-like he is marginalized. The evening transformation continues with his son. Skalla-Grímr's transformation only happens in the evening as well.

There does not appear to be any correlation between agency and the duration of the transformation. The Irish werewolves who are affected by time are involuntary shapeshifters who are being punished. Egill's family's time restrictions lessen with each passing generation, until the wolf trait disappears from the family completely. The Völsung, who are

voluntary shapeshifters, are tied to time in a way that mirrors Óðinn, their progenitor and a constant presence in their lives. They do still choose to abandon the wolf form and burn the skins, but that is as much their choice as donning the skins had been. The amount of time spent in the wolf form then is of cultural significance.

Werewolf as a Warning and Lesson

Many figures who transform into werewolves act as a warning against wolf-like behavior. Sconduto suggests that the difference between the various Wolves of Ossory stories can be partially attributed to an authorial attempt to warn against a royal family's abuse of power in *Konungs Skuggsjá*.¹⁶⁴ The voluntary Irish werewolves may serve as a warning to those who might behave in a wolfish way, but it is not the purpose of the story. Instead, they exist as part of a Marvels account, detailing the unusual and fascinating qualities of Ireland. But while Gerald's account also features wolves who are being punished, there is more of a focus on the actual meeting between the priest and the wolves as opposed to the punishment itself. The family is still being punished for defying the saint who originally tried to convert them and their wolf state is a punishment for their transgression.

The real danger of the werewolf is in the behavior of the individual while in the wolf form. Su, referencing Ármann, notes that people who are trollish are that way simply because they behave like trolls.¹⁶⁵ In many ways the werewolf reflects this same mentality. As Bisclavret and Gerald's wolves show, the actual wolf form may be scary initially, but so long as the person beneath acts like a human there is little to actually fear. In both of these cases, it is arguably a choice of the werewolf to act like a human. Both situations could easily devolve. Bisclavret attacks his former wife, and while this is seen as a justifiable action because of her arguably wolfish behavior, it shows that the aggression is easily accessible. Likewise, Gerald's wolf could just as easily have harmed the priest, a fact reinforced by the priest's fear of the animal.

Loss of control is another theme that shows in both *Egils saga* and *Völsunga saga*.¹⁶⁶ Both Sigmundur and Skalla-Grímr lose control of their emotions when challenged by their sons. This results in one son being seriously injured, while another only escapes with his life after being saved by his caregiver. In both cases the wolf nature comes to the forefront,

¹⁶⁴ Sconduto, 35.

¹⁶⁵ Su, 115.

¹⁶⁶ Su, 129.

dictating the behavior of the individual. When considered in connection with the family associations of wolves, this aggression towards sons is extremely interesting. The loss of control nearly results in the entire line of the Völsungs and Egill's family to end. In both cases, the father is attacking his only son, and therefore the existence of his descendants. Skalla-Grímr has two sons, but Egill is the only one to survive and have children. At the time of the attack, Sinfjötli is Sigmundr's only son, even if Sigmundr is unaware of this fact, and is instrumental in carrying out the revenge plot. Without him, Sigmundr likely would have failed and the line of the powerful Völsungs (Signý's children may have survived, but according to the saga they did not have the courage necessary to be a full Völsung) would have ended. Therefore, the entire family's future is put at risk by these actions. It makes sense that the destruction of a monstrous line comes from within. Because kinship is the basis of the legal system, and there would be no real way for this murder to be solved legally, it would be the work of the ultimate *vargr*. It would also be a way for the family to atone for any wolf-like behavior. However, the ultimate horror of destroying one's son is the main focus of these instances and serves as a warning that wolf-like behavior can have disastrous consequences.

And yet, for all its warnings, the werewolf often models a path to redemption. The werewolf in itself is a liminal figure, existing between man and animal. This makes it the perfect figure to represent people who occupy a liminal space. So long as the werewolf has the capability to transform they are able to occupy a human space and a bestial space. Su describes this process in three steps: pre-transformation (pre-liminal), the werewolf experience (liminal), and post-restoration (post-liminal).¹⁶⁷ This transitional period allows for the werewolf to reform their behavior. Essentially, they are able to leave the wolf form behind and choose to act in a way more appropriate for society as a whole. The reverse of that point is that they are also fully able to continue to behave as wolfish figures. This may be an attempt to distance themselves from problematic behavior and allow for the peaceful reintegration into society once they have left the wolf form behind.

Likewise, "madness" serves as an opportunity for metamorphosis or personal growth. It is possible to leave behind an old identity and forge a new one through transformation. In the Irish tradition, a deficient ruler can be exiled from society, to live in the wilderness. In the case of *Buile Suibhne*, the character of Suibhne is exiled after he is found to be a deficient ruler by Saint Rónán. During Suibhne's exile, he exhibits many bird-like qualities. This is not a full transformation, but Suibhne does have feathers and is able to fly. He occasionally

¹⁶⁷ Su, 155.

becomes sane again, only to be tempted back to his life in exile.¹⁶⁸ While in this state of madness, Suibhne is physically and behaviorally outside society. His appearance marks his difference, and, as Sayers has suggested, mirrors a biblical precedent set by Nebuchadnezzar's avian transformation.¹⁶⁹ However, as shown by Nebuchadnezzar's reintegration and Suibhne's periods of sanity, reintegration is possible when the individual behaves in a socially acceptable manner. The werewolf follows a similar pattern. By completing the cycle of man-to-beast-to-man, werewolves model a path for people to reintegrate into society after they have transgressed. No matter how dangerous or bestial a werewolf figure acts, they may re-enter society when they regain composure and humanity. In the end, the werewolf figure is fully capable of reintegration while in control and human.

Skin and clothing

There are several instances of overlap between skin, clothing, and the wolf identity. These appear in both voluntary and involuntary shapeshifting, usually by donning a wolf skin, but in the case of Björn in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, by being struck by a wolf skin glove. This happens in both the literal transformations, such as the Völsung, and the potentially metaphorical transformations, as in the case of the úlfheðnar.

In the case of literal transformations, the presence of a separate wolf skin or clothing seems to suggest that the human still resides underneath the wolf. Gerald's wolves exist within a removable skin and are able to eloquently argue that they are human enough to participate in religious rites. The Völsung may become more wolfish when wearing the skins than they are without them, but they are still able to communicate and show remorse for poor decisions. Bisclavret, who is stuck in wolf form once his clothing disappears, behaves in a courtly and noble manner while at the king's court. In theory, once the wolf skin is removed from Gerald's wolves, they would revert back to their human selves, much like the Völsung. Bisclavret, once his clothing was returned, became a respected member of the king's court. Their humanity became prominent again once the human skin returned to the outside.

Once the clothing or the wolf skin is shown to not fully represent the individual underneath, they are allowed to reenter society. In the story of Bisclavret, the werewolf behaves as a human, and is therefore allowed to join the court. However, Su argues that his

¹⁶⁸ William Sayers. "Varia VII The Deficient Ruler as Avian Exile: Nebuchadnezzar and Suibhne Geilt." *Ériu* 43 (1992): 217-8.

¹⁶⁹ Sayers, 1992.

wife, the one responsible for Bisclavret's permanent transformation, becomes the real wolf of the story, something that is marked on her skin once her nose is removed. She then becomes villainized and banished from the court.¹⁷⁰

This naturally brings up the question, what happens when the outside does not reflect what is inside? The considerable anxiety in Gerald's account of the wolves reflects this discrepancy. The wolf-shape here does not reflect the nobility and Christian nature of the wolves. It is possible that this story reflects the anxiety of reconciling a native folktale with religious doctrine. After all, according to Augustine's theory, projecting or becoming a wolf is not possible without the direct action of God, making the tradition that does not involve a curse from God impossible.

Clothing, as Su notes, must fit the person, both in terms of physical fit, but also socially acceptable for the individual's station.¹⁷¹ It is a nonverbal signal to those around as to the station, and in the case of literature, to the exact nature of any individual.¹⁷² The wolf skin then acts as a layer of clothing, fitting the wolfish nature of the individual. However, it also allows for a separation between the wolf identity and the person underneath. The *Topographia* wolves demonstrate this as the wolf skin is removable, showing the good, Christian, human soul and form still exists underneath. Bynum notes that this is not a simply Christian theme. In Teutonic traditions, the eyes of the shapeshifting individuals remain human, showing that the soul of the shapeshifter is not affected by the outside transformation.¹⁷³ This is not a rule though. The animal skin can corrupt. Bynum here cites the *Lai de Mélion*, where the werewolf kills men despite his "intelligence and memory"¹⁷⁴. Similar instances can be seen in both Sigmundr and Skalla-Gímr, where both lose control once in the wolf shape. Throughout the texts, both men hold their emotions in check. Their actions, while not always the most socially acceptable option, such as Sigmundr living in the woods and attacking people, never give any indication that they are behaving irrationally. It is only when in the wolf shape, when the worst part of their nature is heightened in a physically bestial form, that the wolf wins over the human identity. It should be noted that if an individual is corrupt to begin with, before the transformation occurs, turning into a wolf will only magnify the darker side of human nature. This can be seen in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where Lycaon, a figure who had attempted to kill the god Jove and participated in eating

¹⁷⁰ Su, 71.

¹⁷¹ Su, 61.

¹⁷² Su, 72.

¹⁷³ Bynum, 96.

¹⁷⁴ Bynum, 97.

human flesh, continues to do so as a wolf with a sense of joy.¹⁷⁵ Lycaon remains the same in terms of his unacceptable behavior, however, the wolf form not only makes the outer appearance reflect the inner nature, but adds a level of savagery to the image that was not present while he was human.

In two cases of the Ossory wolves, the werewolf projects himself, keeping his body in a safe location. In both of these cases, the werewolf is described as significantly more hostile and terrifying, suggesting that there is no human form underneath the wolf. Instead, the very essence of the person is in the shape of the wolf, regardless of what their physical body looks like. Likewise, when Skalla-Grímr changes he retains none of his human qualities. There is no indication in this text to suggest that the werewolf transformation of this wolf clan is in any way related to clothing. Their wolf status is apparent in their skin though. As discussed previously, the werewolves are identifiable by their appearance. Skalla-Grímr is described as “svarter maðr ok ljótr”¹⁷⁶ (swarthy and ugly)¹⁷⁷, characteristics associated with the more wolfish members of this family, as opposed to his brother, who was described as more beautiful. The relatively less attractive appearance of the wolf members of the family as opposed to the beautiful members reflects the negative wolfish traits as opposed to the more socially acceptable ones. Therefore, Skalla-Grímr’s, like Kveld-Úlfr’s and Egill’s, appearance betrays the wolf within.

The effect of Agency on Shapeshifting

Overall the werewolf character exists as an “other”, one who behaves in a way that is socially unacceptable. This is true whether or not they choose to transform. While in the wolf form, they are expected to kill, consume, and maim livestock and humans. However, there was power in this form. Those with links to wolves were associated with battle prowess. This can be seen in berserker figures who are attached to a retinue. But the choice to engage in this kind of behavior can be a double-edged sword.

There is a level of sympathy with regards to involuntary werewolves. Egill’s family are viewed as respectable while in their human forms. Their werewolfism is weakening, and was never controllable. While they represent a level of danger, as Skalla-Grímr’s attack on Egill demonstrates, the majority of the time they operate within society without issue. Egill is

¹⁷⁵ Bynum, 168-9.

¹⁷⁶ Sigurður Nordal, 5.

¹⁷⁷ Scudder, 8.

more difficult and can cause trouble, he is still a respected poet. The transformations do not keep them from interacting with society and, for the most part, they have a good reputation. There is just also a sense that engaging with them needs to happen when they are at their most human.

The wolves of Gerald's story are perhaps the most sympathetic as they retain their human qualities while in their wolf state. They are being punished by God for the actions of their ancestors, and yet strive to behave in a "Catholic manner", essentially trying to prove that they are not the wolf characters others fear them to be. Bisclavret and Björn, both subjects of a curse by their family members, are viewed in a tragic light. Bisclavret is able to be fully reintegrated and even raised in status after his ordeal. This does not mean that his overall werewolf transformation is viewed positively. He has to hide his initial transformation from everyone because of the negativity associated with it. Björn likewise hides his transformation from everyone but his lover. But Björn's death is viewed as a tragedy and Bisclavret is welcomed back to court once he has regained human form.

The sympathetic light on involuntary werewolfism is not a rule though. The wolves of *Konungs Skuggsjá* do not enjoy the same treatment. They are described as being worse than wolves because of their human intelligence and also willing to consume humans. The harsh treatment of these wolves is likely due to the text's purpose of warning against improper behavior. They are still acting as wolves in the most villainous sense, but it is not apparent if they are in control of these actions. Certainly, compared to Gerald's wolves, they do not have the same level of control. Instead, they are painted in a terrifying lighting, warning off any potential future transgressors.

The difference between the voluntary and involuntary Irish werewolves is likely an attempt to reconcile the tradition with a Christian narrative. The shift to a curse as opposed to an inherent ability moves the source of the transformation from a magical, pre-Christian ideology to a divinely inflicted curse. This shift reflects the Augustinian ideology that God is the only one capable of changing the human form and that all other transformations have been done by a demon. As Augustine likened the Acadian gods to demons, this shift away from an inherently pagan tradition allows for the Christian God to claim control over the shapeshifting narrative.

Unlike the other werewolves, the Völsungs' wolfish behavior is not treated with the same harshness, despite still being objectionable. They are considered the ultimate warriors who carry out many brave heroics. They experience many challenges to their rule, but they are ultimately always able to regain their throne until the last Völsung is killed. However, this

is partially because of the genre of the story. These are legendary warriors. They are not part of society. Instead they exist almost above and apart from society as an ideal warrior; something to be envied and admired, but not necessarily to be imitated. Óðinn himself intervenes to protect, guide, and even proliferate the Völsung line. Not only is he the father of the first of this family, but he intervenes to ensure the continuation of the line when Völsung's parents have trouble conceiving a child. Because of this, the time spent in wolf form does not serve as a punishment, nor does the text present it as such. This is simply another trial in Sinfjölti's training. Additionally, many of the Völsungs participate in questionable behavior. Sigmundr and Sinfjölti live in the forest, completely away from society as a whole. Signý actively participates in incest in order to birth a worthy Völsung successor. However, despite these anti-social and unacceptable behaviors, many of these actions seem acceptable in the context of the story as it ultimately results in achieving the family's goal.

The level of awareness and humanity varies between accounts. Gerald's tale of the werewolf emphasizes the humanity of its wolf characters more so than any of the other texts. However, it is not the only text where the wolf is said to either possess human thought or shown to have it. The Völsungs are able to formulate a plan while in their wolf form and understand each other while transformed. They have control over their wolfish actions, at least until Sigmundr lashes out. The other Irish werewolf stories specifically say that the wolves are as intelligent as humans, but still have the hunger of the wolves, making them inherently worse. In these cases, the outside werewolf transformation reflects the inner wolfish nature. But Gerald's werewolves are far more sympathetic and behave in a noble way. There is no indication that they have any wolfish behaviors or terrorize their neighbors. They are simply exiled to a wolf form. This reflects a certain anxiety within the story: what is human and are these wolves actually human? The priest may have erred significantly if he administered the last rites to an animal instead of a human. The level of humanity displayed by the shapeshifter and their ability to control their emotions while a wolf is the most important factor in determining how the text presents their transformation: as a monstrosity that embodies the worst of both humans and wolves or as figure who must spend some time as a wolf before reintegrating and becoming human again.

Conclusion

The werewolf figure is a tool to examine what is socially acceptable behavior and what is not. As previously explored, the nature of the wolf, perceived as both positive and negative, certainly had something to do with the choice to use that particular animal. Through their animalistic nature, these figures occupy a marginalized and “other” position. However, this does not mean they are one dimensional, villainous characters. Sympathetic werewolves can be found among the cursed or those who inherited their werewolfism. Like Egill and his family, these characters can be difficult, but have redeeming qualities that allow them to function within society. Those who choose to shapeshift are generally portrayed in a more sinister light. Again, an exception exists in the *Völsunga saga*, where the wolf qualities of the clan are celebrated.

Egill and his family struggle against the rule of a Norwegian king. As they move away from this conflict and as conversion comes closer, the werewolves begin to lose their power. They assimilate to Icelandic society until the wolf trait is gone. They can be dangerous, but are ultimately socially acceptable, particularly when more human.

Gerald’s wolves are victims of a divine curse that was established long before anyone in his account is born. Still, the transgression of the family filters through the generations. Their form might be monstrous, but underneath the wolf skin are human beings who are actively participating in Christian rites. After their seven years as wolves are completed, they can put off the wolf and return to reintegrate to society.

The wolves of *Konungs Skuggsjá* may suffer a similar condition to those of *Topographia Hibernica*, but the behavior of the wolves cast the text in a different light. As opposed to Gerald’s wolves, the *Konungs Skuggsjá* wolves are vicious and terrifying. Their actions reflect the dangerous wolf nature. They exist as a warning. The transgressions against God of a poor ruling family led to the punishment of an entire kin-group and made them dangerous. In the case of the *Völsungs*, Óðinn’s direct involvement in their lives contributes to their wolf-like qualities. His constant interference continues through their time as wolves, even saving Sinfjötli’s life. Therefore, this is not seen as a punishment for the *Völsungs*, nor is it truly different from their time as humans. They live the same as men as they do as wolves. It is interesting that the *Völsungs* choose to burn the skins after removing them. This suggests that they have finished with this part of their life and are moving forward. The wolf skins served a specific function, training Sinjötli, and with that task done, the time for the literal wolf transformation has ended. It wasn’t a punishment, but it was a liminal time period.

The wolves of *Versus sancti Patricii* have full control over their transformation. They are able to willingly change back and forth at whim with no indication that time is a factor. The trait still remains tied to a single family unit, but is treated as an inherited wonder. Their depiction is negative in a way that others are not: they are cowardly. The wolf aspect still embodies the negative trait of the family and there is some aggression, but there is not the same terror that is present in the other accounts.

Finally, berserker figures undergo a voluntary mental transformation that represents a danger to the fabric of society. It can be passed through a family, like literal werewolves, and seems to be accompanied by bestial behaviors like howling and traveling in packs. Almost the exact opposite of Gerald's wolves, these figures maintain a human form, but a wolf mentality. In this state they are capable of extreme violence and destruction, making them the villain in many stories. But when this bestial power is properly harnessed, such as in a retinue, it can be an asset, making it a useful though dangerous skill.

Perhaps the most apparent conclusion to come to is that the werewolf motif is complex and adaptable. Still, the purpose remains the same, to highlight and explore negative behaviors. In each of the texts, the wolf represents something feral and "uncivilized". What seems to matter more to the perception of the character is how much of their humanity they retain while in the wolf form. Even if the individual is violent while in the wolf form, they can reintegrate into society once they can choose instead to behave in a more human manner, choosing a more "civilized" life. There is theoretically always an opportunity for them to reintegrate themselves into society through their own choice, though it does not appear that they wish to, even if they are forced to transform. Therefore, it is the decision of the individual which ultimately determines whether or not they are a true wolf, outside of social norms and beyond redemption.

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