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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

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From the 1984 film "The Company of Wolves"

By Mikita Brottman | NOVEMBER 25, 2013 ✓

PREMIUM

Some people have accused me of
misanthropy;
And yet I know no more than the
mahogany
That forms this desk, of what they
mean:—*lycanthropy*

I comprehend; for, without transformation
Men become wolves on any slight occasion.

Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto IX, 20

Don Juan, in Byron's poem, professes himself well acquainted with the wolfishness in man. Feral appetites, he suggests, require no supernatural explanation, nor even a physical transformation. But that opinion is "idle and ignorant," according to Frank Hamel in *Human Animals*. "To the earnest student," Hamel says in reference to lycanthropy, "there can be no rest until this obscure branch of science is cleared up."

*The
White
Devil:
The
Werewolf
in
European*

Human Animals was first published in 1915; here we are almost a hundred years later, and rather than being "cleared up," lycanthropy is regarded as a conceit of fiction. The werewolf remains "in limbo," as Matthew Beresford puts it in *The White Devil: The Werewolf in European Culture*.

Culture
 By **REAGAN**
 Beresford
 (Reaktion
 Books,
 2013)

Even in fiction, the werewolf takes a supporting role to zombies and vampires. While lycanthropic shape-shifters occur in both the *Twilight* and the *Underworld* series, they're subordinate to (and less interesting than) the main man-monsters. The werewolf, as Beresford explains, requires



"reintroduction into society." Happily, *The White Devil* reintroduces us to an old fiend we thought we knew, and shows us there's a lot more to the werewolf than a full moon and a lust for human flesh.

There are legends of men and women who change into lions, tigers, dogs, cats, snakes, seals, birds, hyenas, swans, bears, mice, and other creatures. Why, then, did wolves emerge as the dominant were-animal? Beresford, an archaeologist in Nottinghamshire, England, explains that the wolf is the only one of our natural enemies that we've managed to domesticate. We lived in fear of wolves; then wolves became dogs, and we took them into our homes. The deeper we bonded with our former enemies, the more we made them over in our own image. They are now full family members. The werewolf, then, is the *alter ego* of the dog-man bond, the return of the repressed. Beresford cites the English antiquarian and werewolf authority Algernon Herbert, who writes, "where there is no natural wolf there is no werewolf."

One of Beresford's previous books, *From Demons to Dracula* (Reaktion, 2008), dealt with the Black Devil—the vampire, which the author regards as a manifestation of society's fascination with death. The werewolf, on the other hand, is a White Devil; Beresford's title refers to the revenge tragedy by the Elizabethan playwright John Webster, which shows that evil can exist in broad daylight among those who consider themselves clean and pure. It also indicates that, unlike shadowy vampires and murky ghouls, the werewolf, although nocturnal, was once a creature of light.

In prehistoric and early Roman days, werewolves were admired, not feared.

Archaeological evidence gleaned from talismans and carvings found in proximity to Ice Age bodies in places like Creswell Crags in Derbyshire—the subject of Beresford's last book, *Beyond the Ice* (Archeopress, Oxford, 2012)—suggests prehistoric wolf cults were ubiquitous. Remnants have been found of human body parts along with scorched wolf skeletons. St. Valentine's Day, explains Beresford, probably has its origins in the ancient pastoral festival of the Lupercalia—the Feast of Lupercal—when young men dressed as



THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



wolves and goats and danced in the streets at night. Hugh d'Avranches, the second Norman Earl of Chester and a magnate of early Norman England, was known as Hugh Lupus—a complimentary reference to his legendary strength and ferocity.

Like wolves, werewolves were once admired for their determination, intensity, and vigor. Of course, there was always the chance they might steal your baby and crawl away with it hanging half-eaten from their bloody jaws, as they do in a couple of the wonderfully ghastly woodcuts included in *The White Devil*, but they were just following their natural instincts. It was felt that, like wolves, werewolves naturally exulted in their strength and were eager to use it; in other words, that violence was neither good nor bad but simply part of their nature.

It was medieval Christianity that darkened the werewolf, Beresford explains. In Christian terms, man could only become wolf with demonic assistance. This led to a kind of "werewolf mania" in mid- to late-16th-century Europe. The "werewolf trials" of this time were in some ways the reverse of witchcraft persecutions in that plenty of people, including senior judicial officers, appeared desperate to confess they were werewolves. The vast majority of these self-styled lycanthropes were acquitted, described by their judges as victims of delusion and hysteria. In the 19th century, when wolves had been driven out of much of Europe, werewolves transformed themselves once more, from reality to fiction. No longer a real threat, they became mythical creatures whose body hair grows inward when they take on human form, and reveals itself on the outside every full moon, when they turn into wolves.

Beresford writes with a wolfish enthusiasm until he gets to the 20th century, when his interest seems to fade. The touchstones are all duly noted, including Freud's Wolfman and the Jungian author Robert Eisler's *Man Into Wolf* (1951), which uses werewolvetry as a trope for the nocturnal doubling and shape-shifting that takes place in the unconscious, during dreams and sexual fantasies. The movies are given a rather cursory skim, and only mainstream examples are discussed: *Werewolf of London* (1935); *The Wolf Man* (1941), *Curse of the Werewolf* (1960); *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), *The Howling* (1981), and *The Company of Wolves* (1984).

Those interested in a new take on the lycanthrope's backstory will find a lot to chew on



Beresford's discussion of prehistorical werewolvbery. But those seeking a more thorough treatment of lycanthropy in recent times might wonder whether *The White Devil* offers anything that isn't offered by other authors, notably Montague Summers in his encyclopedic *The Werewolf* (1933), or Sabine Baring-Gould in *The Book of Were-Wolves* (1865).

Also getting short shrift in *The White Devil* is the question of female werewolves. Vampires, ghouls, and zombies come in both genders, but werewolves seem mostly male. Beresford does not explain this disparity, except implicitly, in his discussion of the wolf's legendary strength and vigor. Yet in *Human Animals*, Frank Hamel (herself a woman, despite her name) describes a number of female lycanthropes, including "a fine lady of Saintonge who used to wander at night in the forests in the shape of a wolf," and whose nocturnal excursions were brought to an end when she caught her paw in a trap. Afterward, "she had to keep a glove on the hand that had been trapped to conceal the mutilation of two of her fingers."

Then there is the nameless heroine of Angela Carter's short story "The Company of Wolves" (far more subtle and complex than the Neil Jordan film adaptation), first published in her short story collection, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Though raised in a village where "there is no winter's night the cottager does not fear to see a lean, grey, famished snout questing under the door," the red-caped heroine sets out alone into the dark forest. By the end of the story, grandmother has been eaten, but when the clock strikes midnight, we discover the girl has appetites of her own. "See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf."

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