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Animal Shapeshifting: Between Literature and Everyday Life. An Introduction

In "Animal Pragmatism", an episode of the American television series *Charmed* (season 2, episode 13, orig. aired 10 February 2000), three wannabe witches hijack a spell from a real witch and manage to transform three animals, a serpent, a rabbit, and a pig, into young, attractive men. These cause havoc, since although they have kept their animal instincts, they try everything to remain human. The combination of human appearance with animal behaviour is obviously attractive. It also presents an inversion of the more common theme of humans who have turned or have been turned into animals. One may ascribe this to an increased attention to animal rights, or to an attempt to reinvigorate the older motif. Other examples of a similar inversion are visible elsewhere in what may tentatively be called "popular culture": in *Angel: Aftermath* (2009), the sixth cartoon season of another American television series, *Angel*, by guest author Kelley Armstrong, whole groups of animals have been turned into humans: cats, dogs, rats, monkeys, birds. And to stay in the comic domain: as early as 1986 a story in the Dylan Dog series, *Le notti della luna piena* by the Italian scenarist Tiziano Sclavi, featured wolves who metamorphosed into humans. Or take the recent interpretation of *SinBad* (2008-2010) by the French scenarists Christophe Arleston and Audrey Alwett, in which a panther can change into a woman. These are chance encounters, not systematically researched, but they may nevertheless point to a trend of exploring the humanization of animals rather than the animalization of humans. However, the means of transformation has remained the same: a spell cast by a witch or a sorcerer. In that way modern representations are linked to a literary tradition several centuries old, manifest in medieval romances as well as in the later fairy tales. And one should not forget the ever present Homerean sorceress Circe, who had a habit of changing men into wolves, lions, or pigs.

Thanks to the European education system, classical metamorphoses have been an integral part of western ways of thinking, at least since the twelfth century, mostly through the poetics of Publius Ovidius Naso. Thus most readers will be familiar with (to restrict the enumeration to the animals) Cygnus changing into a swan, Io into a cow, Lycaon into a wolf, Tithon into a cricket, Acteon into a stag, Alcyone into a halcyon, Ariadne into a spider, as well as the many changes of Proteus.¹ But these changes were generally caused by gods, not by humans. Within the Christian pantheon there was no place anymore for gods who either

¹ Cf. Michel Jeanneret, *Perpetual motion. Transforming shapes in the Renaissance from da Vinci to Montagne* (Baltimore/London 2001).

metamorphosed others or themselves and the corresponding narratives lost most of their religious connotations. Tentatively, this points to a relationship between the kind of metamorphosis discourse, or the narrative genre, on the one hand, and the particular mechanism of metamorphosis on the other. When caused or initiated by gods, animal shapeshifting can naturally be classified as part of a religious discourse, at least initially, with an ensuing literary tradition within western history. When the changing agent is a magically versed human, the tradition is foremost literary. Medieval romances primarily feature human-animal shapeshifting as the result of a curse. Roges the fox in the South-Netherlandish thirteenth-century *Walewein*, is likewise cursed by his mother in law. There is even a rare instance of a medieval literary sorcerer who provides an unknowing king with animals which he has given the shape of the queen, which allows him to conduct an affair with the multiplied woman.

Only when late medieval and renaissance demonologists, the theorists of the dark side of Christendom, became interested in the possible reality of animal shapeshifting did the literary discourse develop into an intellectual one. A number of the cases they referred to may have remained those of the classics, among them Apuleius' second-century Latin novel *Metamorphoses*, later entitled *The Golden Ass* (*Asinus aureus*).² Others were explicitly omitted; Fischart in his reworking of Jean Bodin's *Daemonomania* found that Ovidius had mixed truth with fantasy ("Fabelen" as he called it) too much to deserve extensive attention. Enough instances remained for him to argue that shapeshifting was nevertheless genuine.³ Such cases were now framed within a discussion about how much illusion the devil was allowed to produce. When not excerpted from the literature, they mostly involved circulating legends about the transference of wounds from the animal back to human shape.⁴ Yet in the writings of the demonologists the focus had also shifted as the devil merely provided the means of metamorphosis, but was not considered as the ultimate cause like the previous gods. The responsibility, the wish to turn from human into animal, now lay with the human actor. Instead of a passive victim, the metamorphosing human had become an active perpetrator. Furthermore, the devil himself was portrayed as the shapeshifter par excellence, most often in the form of a black dog, but also as a goat or occasionally a cat.⁵

Beyond the literary tradition it becomes possible to discern something more substantial, a kind of human to animal shapeshifting that is no longer the prerogative of gods or sorcerers and as such a literary tradition among the educated, but a part of everyday-life concepts. While artistic works, however embedded within their own traditions and society, can be considered as products of imagination, everyday-life concepts, especially when they result in concrete actions,

² Cf. George Mora (Hrg.), *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance*. Johann Weyer, *De praetigiis daemonum* (Binghamton 1991) p. 193 (Book III, ch. x).

³ Book II, ch. vi.

⁴ Cf. Francesco Maria Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, tr. Ashwin (London 192.), book I, ch. xiv.

⁵ Ülo Valk, *The black gentleman. Manifestations of the devil in Estonian folk religion* (Helsinki 2001); Christa Tuczay, *Die Herzesser* (Wien 2007) p. 105-112.

surpass mere fantasies. In the criminal trials against witches and werewolves, the reality of shapeshifting was mostly taken for granted, with deadly consequences for the men and women accused.⁶ People slandered as witch cat or as werewolf were genuine people whose sense of honour was damaged.

The differences between literature and every-day life may of course sometimes be very slight, their boundaries blurred, and the two can also be considered as merely opposite ends of a spectrum. A creation by an individual author may theoretically still be grounded in everyday-life concepts, rather than be part of a literary tradition; he or she may have acted as a key informant. Subsequently, a prose narrative, a fairy tale, a poem, a painting, or a film (when in the twentieth- or twenty-first century) may have caught a more general mood or fashion, or it may have become so popular as to be generally accepted. The way a work of art relates to the society in which it is produced as well as the way it affects that society is often difficult to determine. In any case it requires both extensive reception research, which more often than not is only presumed, and a knowledge far exceeding that of a single author. This particular issue is further complicated by a work's reception abroad, whether or not in translation. The compilation *Arabian Nights*, already highly influential within Europe some centuries before Antonie Galland's early eighteenth-century translation, figures a number of stories of men turned into dogs and birds,⁷ and the question still remains whether any of those tales influenced the twelfth-century *lais* by Marie de France, or indeed whether it was rather the other way around.

The everyday-life manifestations of human-animal metamorphoses can be divided into language and actions. Language would include the telling of stories, often legends with recognizable motifs, but it also concerns metaphors, ways of speaking, and comparisons. In German, women can still be addressed with a number of animal nouns, such as "Ente", "Eule", "Käfer", or "Schnepe". Insults with which a human is compared with a cat or a pig occur in many languages. These at least provide the environment of shapeshifting narratives and in some cases even the basis. Stories about a gatherings of cats which attack the man who has wandered in their midst are closely related to the naming of whores as "cats". The saying "she has seen a wolf", occurring both in English and in French, meaning that the girl is being assaulted, probably served as the basis of a particular werewolf story in which a lover or a husband attacks his girlfriend or wife.

Among other things actions concern animal disguises, which may or may not take place in a ritual setting. One can think of people who nowadays put on an animal suit for advertising purposes, but there is no telling what other kinds of practices are indulged. To mention one of those other popular American television series, *CSI*: although its plotlines are usually highly improbable, its underlying research is mostly correct and when a convention of furry animals is featured as in "Fur and Loathing" (season 4, episode 5, orig. aired 30 October 2003), the series

⁶ On werewolf trials: Rolf Schulte, *Man as witch. Male witches in central Europe* (Basingstoke 2009), p. 1-35.

⁷ Such as: 'Abdallāh ibn Fādil and his brothers', the Eldest Lady's tale, the second Shaykh's story, the third Shakh's story, Sīdī Nu'mān, Alī Jawharī, Jullanār, the Anklet, see: Marzolph & Van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara 2004).

acknowledges the (international) community of 'furies' whose public profile has risen through a relatively strong web presence. Another instance, now of men turning into horses during a weekend retreat, is shown in the episode "Death in the Saddle" of another crime series, *Bones* (season 3, episode 3, orig. aired 9 October 2007). There are, of course, also fancy dress parties, carnival and role-playing games. Actual animal metamorphoses are far from merely past fantasies. They can be considered as a kind of animal transvestism, which in European history was often accompanied by male to female transvestism.⁸

In contrast to the claims of medical theorists who try to explain animal shapeshifting away as a number of rare diseases,⁹ the phenomenon has never occurred in a cultural vacuum. Stories, from medieval romances, via fairy tales to fantasy films, are set in their own universes which are to a certain extent informed by the influences the author has undergone. Everyday-life metamorphoses are likewise framed by surrounding cultural quantities, be it opinions about the body or about the soul, which in their turn are related to matters of religion, philosophy or medicine, also in their popular forms. The soul may actually be more important than is usually assumed, for a major feature of shapeshifting that has received surprisingly little attention from researchers concerns the concept of the second body. It is not the human body of the shapeshifter that changes into an animal as portrayed in modern movies, but his or her soul, or at least some kind of soul which outside the human body was thought to take on an animal form. This may very well have been the most common and general form of shapeshifting within Europe (although perhaps not everywhere), before both the Classical literary tradition and the theorists of Christendom made the issue more complicated. The difficulty is that the concept of the double is transmitted in a very fragmentary fashion and whether it ever constituted an overarching system remains to be seen.¹⁰

If there could ever be a more general approach to the subject of animal metamorphosis, it should be sought along the lines of differentiation and contextualization, the latter inside the text as well as outside. Any "general", global treatment, which necessarily omits the local contexts, would miss the important particularities and is only possible in terms of communication and translation. The suggestion that metamorphosis stories may prosper in "transitional places and the confluence of traditions and civilizations" is merely an interesting but unsubstantiated observation and in any case suffers from its denial of indigenous notions.¹¹

One of the major questions that needs to be further investigated concerns the specific kinds of animals people were said to have changed into. This may seem less important in the case of individual writers than in the case of more widely,

⁸ E.C. Cawte, *Ritual animal disguise* (Cambridge 1978); P. Grimaldi (ed.), *Bestie, santi, divinità: maschere animali dell'Europa tradizionale* (Torino 2003).

⁹ Cf. W.M. Davis, H.C. Wellwuff, L. Garew & O.U. Kidd, "Psychopharmacology of lycanthropy", *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 146 (1992), p. 1191-1197.

¹⁰ Cf. Régis Boyer, *Le monde du double. Le magie chez les anciens Scandinaves* (Paris 1986).

¹¹ Marina Warner, *Fantastic metamorphoses, other worlds* (Oxford 2002), p. 18.

also orally circulating stories, although it also depends on the reader's perspective. Authors obviously made a conscious choice of a particular animal and just had to wait and see whether their public would accept or reject it. Would a film such as *The Fly* (1958, remake 1986) have been possible without Kafka's beetle? Within everyday-life the choices were restricted (no European witch was deemed to have changed into a camel), but nevertheless demand more urgent explanation if only because of their more general occurrence. Moreover, both regional and gender differences need to be taken into account. Men, for instance, were hardly reported to have changed into cats; in some places werewolves were conspicuously absent. It only partly depended on the kinds of animals available, whether domesticated or wild, genuine or symbolic; it certainly did not follow that every indigenous animal presented an option for metamorphosis. On the other hand symbolic animals could easily transcend the local fauna, whether it concerned the Christian pelican or even phoenix, or the heraldic lions and dragons. Even between men and women, certain animals were still left out, such as the centipede or the chaffinch, the salmon or the squirrel.

It nevertheless remains debatable whether it will be possible to consider all these different fragments as the pieces of a huge puzzle and the issue is further complicated by internal variations. When Europe's most prominent metamorphosed animal, the werewolf (which recently gave its prefix to other "were" animals) is considered, it is necessary to be aware of changes in form as well as changes in meaning. Is the werewolf warrior, operating in a group, the same werewolf as the sexually charged creature of later centuries? How does the werewolf brigand relate to the female werewolf? Would a seventh son automatically change at the full moon? For the time being, such questions can merely be posed. And they apply to other animalized humans, too.

The contributions in this volume present further illustrations of the width and diversity of human-animal shapelifting. Restricted to European history and including products of European imagination, they necessarily only show small pieces of much wider phenomena. Far from presenting exhaustive coverage of the range of issues related to the subject, in their randomness they (like this introduction) show a range of possible subthemes and approaches. They consequently offer a multi-layered kaleidoscope of metamorphoses belonging to various traditions. This, in turn, presents the possibility of interaction of currents with different directionalities and perhaps further investigations. Animals that are changed into humans do not suddenly acquire the faculty of free will and the issue of responsibility still lies with the human who caused the change. In that respect they are far less interesting than the humans who were deemed to change into beasts.