

WEREWOLVES: THE OUTSIDER ON THE INSIDE IN ICELANDIC AND FRENCH
MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

BY

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary viewpoint of the werewolf is mostly dominated by a horrific image of a misshapen beast that must be slain. This narrow view of the Monster as always Monstrous is incorrect. The werewolf was never meant to be an irredeemable thing and to distance ourselves from it as an audience is to miss the point of the metamorphic creature. Through examining two Medieval texts, the *Völsunga Saga* and *Bisclavret*, I show that the shape-shifter always had a chance for redemption. It is the actions of the Monster within the culture it originates from that shows it to be an individual that might be recovered from the margins of society. By placing a cultural understanding around the violence done by these creatures, their actions can be seen through the proper lens and their location within their society, as insider or outsider, can be determined.

INTRODUCTION: The Place of the Shape-Shifter

“*Lykanthropy*, I comprehend for, without transformation, Men become wolves on any slight occasion.”

-Lord Byron's *Don Juan*

A ‘Monster’ is a creature that is understood as something to be feared. The fictitious werewolf is one such monster, considered a violent individual that is neither man or wolf, but something that sits at the intersection of the two. The lesson of the werewolf has been lost amidst the representation of it as a beast of horror. While it exists to transform into the threatening form of something ‘Other,’ it also has the chance to return to its original form. It seems obvious when stated, but the point of the werewolf is lost when it is reduced to only a beast that should be extinguished. In losing focus on the humanity facet, the actions of the monster cannot be properly assessed. Only in putting both in perspective of the culture from which they derived can the hybrid be understood.

The word ‘Werewolf’ has become ambiguous. Modern cinema and literature has obfuscated what an actual ‘man-wolf’ is, often with liberal creative license in the process. There have been so many iterations of the werewolf that everyone has their own definition pulled from various sources (both historical and fictional) that they liked or felt was distinctive. In either movie or text, the shape-shifter generally falls into two categories: horrific monster that loses control and goes on a rampage; and misunderstood individual attempting to fight the ‘beast within’ and come to terms with what it is in some manner. It is ironic that a shape-shifter can be easily summarized when it’s meant to be “an archetype that implicitly resists categorization” (Stypczynski 62). The reason that the werewolf can be framed in such a manner is because of the dichotomy it represents. The

word itself is from the Old English for *wer-*, or man, and *-wulf*, or wolf. “A wer-wulf is a man-wolf” (Blécourt 2). These are two very different existences: humankind, that seeks to civilize and create order in the world around it, and the wolf that is governed by its instincts and primal desires. Each should be at each other’s proverbial throat, fighting for dominance over the other until only one remained. Historically, literature reinforces these differences, “two main werewolf traditions exist: the feral tradition, which reaches back to Ovid and other classical sources, and the sympathetic tradition epitomized by Marie de France” (Ward 26). The feral tradition is defined by a person giving in to base desires, “an emblem of the periodic eruption of the bestial from within the human” (Bynum 94). In contrast, the sympathetic werewolf is an individual that wears the shape of the wolf but retains its humanity and intelligence.

Both the feral and sympathetic traditions exist in one piece of modern literature (or cinema), *Harry Potter*, created by J.K. Rowling¹. They are embodied in the characters of Remus Lupin and Fenrir Greyback. Lupin chooses to stand with the forces of ‘good,’ working as an educator and mentor for the protagonist. Throughout the book series, despite his work to be an upstanding citizen and the precautions he takes, he is still treated as a threat by a majority of the public when his dual nature is found out. He works to change the public perception, but his efforts appear to be in vein. In a fantasy world of magic and the inclusion of fantastic beasts, the werewolf is still firmly shown to be undesirable. Lupin’s polar opposite is Greyback, a name used as a threat against others (akin to the bogeyman). While one attempts to fit into society, Greyback shuns it,

¹ See Figure I: ‘*Fantastic Beasts*’ and *Where to Find Them*

working violence on the outskirts, attempting to infect others with his ‘disease.’ Despite his choice to side with the forces of evil, Greyback’s goal is to create a new society, just one where the werewolf is able to exile the forces of good to the margins.

The difference between these two werewolves is self-evident, but the similarity is a bit more obscure. “...the two aspects of the archetype [shape-shifter] work together as a reminder that a lapse of control and character could easily turn the educator and moral guide into the slaving beast. Greyback, once he finally appears, is thus both Lupin’s antithesis and that which Lupin could easily become” (Stypczynski 64). Remus Lupin’s character is similar to Marie de France’s sympathetic werewolf while Fenrir Greyback belongs to the feral tradition, like the wolves of Norse mythology. Even his name is derived from Fenris, son of Loki, the giant wolf that is destined to eat Odin and help bring about Ragnarok. Despite their differences, they both have a single similarity that drives each of them to do what they do. Both of them “ultimately desires inclusion: a community in which to belong” (Stypczynski 99). Lupin seeks to find a place for himself in the current social order while Greyback seeks to use violence to destroy what exists and start anew. They are both ostracized as ‘Outsiders,’ seen as monsters not belonging to the civilized space that they live in, but both still seeking to find an ‘Inside’ or community which they could inhabit without reprisal.

The creation of the werewolf in mythology comes from the long history that humanity holds with wolves. The relationship has hardly been a pleasant one though. During the medieval period in Europe (roughly the fifth to the fifteenth century), wolves

were both vilified and respected. For example, in the *Aberdeen Bestiary*² (ca. 1200), wolves were shown opposite dogs, acting as a mirror between the civilized and desirable canine and the predatory beast meant to be hunted down. “Darkness and savagery are symbolized in the wolf, while enlightenment and civilization are symbolized in the tame wolf, the dog” (Lopez 209). While some bestiaries were also full of misinformation such as using the wolf’s tail as an aphrodisiac, and the idea that the wolf ate mud to weigh itself down when it hunted, they did capture the truth that wolves were the ultimate wild ‘Other.’ It is no wonder people cast the wolf as both worthy of their admiration and something that is meant to be feared, for in the wolf they might have seen a reflection of themselves: like humans “wolves live in packs with fairly refined social structures” (Lopez 26). They live, cooperate, hunt, eat, and raise their young together as a single social unit, no different than the communities humans establish. “Wolves vary their hunting techniques, share food with the old who do not hunt, and give gifts to each other...like primates they spend a good part of their time with their young and playing with each other” (Lopez 3-4).

Despite the highly developed social aspect of wolves, humanity constantly battled them over both territory and sustenance. As people expanded their settlements and developed new towns and societies, wolves were constantly on the move, spreading to new dens and hunting grounds. “Territory is too frequently understood to mean something rigid and well defined, like a city block. Wolf territories are highly plastic, more or less depending on factors already mentioned [prey density, seasons, mating]”

² *Aberdeen Bestiary*, Special Collections Library, University of Aberdeen, f. 18r.
<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f18r>.

(Lopez 64). As these two species competed for space, food became a point of contention. A community's livestock was not just meat, it was also income. The sheep, cows, goats, or poultry meant a continued existence in a location and by-products like wool, milk, and eggs. "...and it could all be wiped out in a single night by a pack of wolves" (Lopez 208). It is because of this threat posed to their existence that humankind decided that the wolf, powerful and able to survive in the harsh world outside the borders of their civilized space, was a monster that needed to be hunted down and killed. "When you depend on the produce of your domesticated animals, you can no longer afford to identify with other animals that might threaten your flocks, whether by attacking them or by competing for their fodder" (Sharpe 180). It is easier to kill that which is detested instead of respected. In Iceland, a "wolf-free country" (Guðmundsdóttir 277) far from the mainland of Europe where most wolves roamed, it would have been easy to view the wolf with respect and admiration. The savage landscape itself would have been a greater enemy than the non-existent beast. In contrast, a very different approach to the beast could be found in medieval France, where "wolves trapped...were flayed alive with various appalling refinements" (Sharpe 182). Mary Midgley in her book, *Animals and Why They Matter* commented on this particular French practice, "Perhaps this was rather cruel, but then the wolf is itself a cruel beast."³ (27).

³ France has a tumultuous relationship with wolves. Their most famous 'monstrous wolf' was the Beast of Gévaudan: "Painful news was spreading everywhere in the regions of Gévaudan and Vivarais : some were saying that "the 3rd of July 1764, in the village of Habats, in the parish of Saint-Etienne-de-Lugardères, in Vivarais, a 14 years old girl had just been eaten alive. The 8th of the next month, another 15 years old girl, from Masméjean, parish of Puy-Laurent, in Gévaudan, had become the prey of an unknown Beast. The inhabitants of these villages were in a well-justified state of emotion and it quickly spread to the neighboring villages... What could be this cruel Beast, bold enough to pounce on human creatures and how could one stop its ravages? What it was, no one knew exactly: it had, even though it was more agile and stronger, the shape and appearance of one of those ferocious wolves that could often be seen in this mountainous area." (Myl Translation of Ch. 1, *La Bête du Gévaudan* by François Fabre, 1970.)

It is ironic that these wild animals had to be framed in human social terms. “This projection of human vices onto animals serves the purpose of making people in settled society feel justified in killing them [wolves] for their own convenience” (Sharpe 182). By viewing the wolf as a monster instead of an animal, it can be given attributes like avarice or savagery as opposed to nobility or strength.

In the first canto of Dante’s *Inferno* in the *Commedia* the wolf appears in one of the oldest and most durable associations in its history, as a symbol of greed and fraud. In the eighth circle of Hell, Dante finds those condemned for “the sins of the wolf”: seducers and hypocrites, magicians, thieves, and liars. (Lopez 205)

Despite these negative associations with the wolf, it is still an extraordinary creature and symbol. Wolves survive where humanity cannot, thriving in the wild as part of it, without having to conquer it. They move where they want (if a wolf can be said to ‘want’) and do not question the consequences of their actions later. Their focus is entirely on survival. It is no wonder that there is an appeal to associating with the wolf in many cultures. It is an existence that does what needs to be done free of any social restrictions. If something feels good, then it can be done without questioning the morality of it. There’s a magnetism to the lycanthrope that draws an audience in at the same time that it repels them. It is equally plain that the wolf could be interpreted as a vicious animal that enacts violence without remorse. This was the creature that humanity had to contend with despite the fact that wolves rarely attacked humans. “So in the wolf

we have not so much an animal that we have always known as one that we have constantly *imagined*⁴ (Lopez 204).

The monster that is spawned from the imagined human-given animal attributes is inevitably a thing of mythology: the werewolf. The question stands why are mythology and its subsequent texts so important? A modern audience might hear the term ‘myth’ and reduce the narrative down to simple entertainment. For a majority of people, it is no different than going to the movies and watching a film and in a sense, they would be right. Mythology was spawned from the oral tradition of storytelling, which did have the purpose of entertaining those who listened. Before movies, television, radio, and even books, narratives were designed to be told aloud to an audience. Mythology was a form of recreation, but it was not the only purpose for the telling of stories. Lore was crafted to affect those who heard it. “...the past consists in divergent stories told in the present, and...our own histories and desires contribute to, sometimes dictate, the shape and purpose of those stories” (Overing xiv). Mythologies were also used as a form of cultural heritage education. They could be passed on to the next generation to instruct them who they were as a culture and where they came from. For the Norse, telling the stories of divine beings and their interactions with the mortal world was a way to elevate their leadership to more than just mortals. “...men and women of all levels of [Norse] society identified with the struggles of gods and heroes who represented or were claimed as ancestors by the leaders on whose success their own fortunes depends” (McKinnell 34).

⁴ See Figure II: *The Beast in the Wolf*.

Oral narratives were also a way to bring a community closer together in more than just their belief of their leadership.

At the feast or gathering, or by the fireside, as men made nets and women spun, these tales were told over; in their frequent repetition by men who believed them, though incidence or sequence underwent no change, they would become closer knit, more coherent, and each an organic whole. (Magnússon 21)

Aside from the audience of the time, mythology also informs the modern reader about a people and a culture far gone from their time period. The stories of King Arthur and his knights gives insight into the era of chivalry and the kind of values that were esteemed in their time period. They also show some of the fears of the time period through the actions and inactions of the knights and their great implications. Fears of civil wars within the kingdom were present in the schism between Lancelot and Arthur.

Legends also allowed cultures to explain the world around them and interpret things in a digestible and understandable way. “Every folk has from the beginning of time sought to explain the wonders of nature, and has, after its own fashion, set forth the mysteries of life” (Magnússon 9). Why does the sun rise and travel across the sky before setting and the moon begins to show its face? This was the kind of question that mythology could answer, so that someone did not have to fear the day becoming night for they had an understanding of it. There was also a matter of ethics and morals that fantastic stories were meant to pass on. The story of heroes going on a long journey and what they experienced allowed for young adults to be inspired by the characteristics of the protagonist. This individual would have qualities that a culture wanted their people to emulate. In the same vein, the antagonist (in whatever form they came in) held qualities

that the culture did not want to propagate. The monster in such stories was always wicked in some manner and must be detested. By telling of the best and worst of humanity (and gods), standards would be set for what they would consider as right and wrong.

Most important to this thesis, myths and folklore were also told as a warning. This might be considered part of the ethical aspect, but it stands in a separate vein. Stories told children what not to do or what to fear. There were reasons to listen to your parents or to not go out into the woods by yourself. These served as a way to help sons and daughters and to protect them so they could mature to adulthood. One shouldn't stray too far from the path or dawdle while traveling through the wild, for there were savage things that lived out there. These warnings could be literal or metaphorical, but the purpose remains the same. In their truest essence, myths were stories that were a product of the community, as they were told from person to person, telling people who they were, what they should be, and why things were done in certain ways.

It is from this mythological basis that the concept of the monster is conceived. The modern understanding of what it means to be a monster creates two categories: a metaphorical monster, meaning someone whose actions reflect an internal beast, placing them as a deviant outsider of humanity itself; and literal monsters, such as vampires, unicorns, and werewolves. These are the creatures of fantasy that do not exist in the real world. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines 'monster' as:

Originally: a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size

and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, frightening.

This suggests that the difference between animal and monster “is not the degree of terror it induces, how horrible it is, how hodgepodge in appearance or apparent construction, but its reality or lack thereof” (Mittman 5). The point of this paper is not to argue whether people in the twelfth and thirteenth century believed that monsters were real or whether they saw them solely as symbolic. Instead, this paper looks to the impact monsters, specifically the werewolf, had on them through their mythology and stories. In other words, my aim is to draw out the meaning of the werewolf from Norse and French medieval literature to see what they actually feared in the shape-shifter and its terminal place within those societies. A working definition of what is a ‘monster’ is essential, as is the difference from the external symbolic beast to the internal depraved individual. I am working with definitions in *Monster Theory*, using scholars like Jeffrey J. Cohen and Asa Mittman to help extrapolate deeper meaning from this terminology. I have created these definitions to frame the studied texts and I understand that they may not perfectly fit every situation, but the very idea of what a monster is continues to be redefined as our understanding of the world and its people deepens. A monster by its very purpose is meant to defy “the human desire to subjugate through categorization” (Mittman 7). A monster is a symbol or being that exists to reveal what a people, society, and/or a culture fear in some manner. By a culture’s creation of that symbol, the fear is removed from the intangible and whatever is difficult to dwell on to a tangible and concrete thing. The monster also serves as a measure against which people can compare themselves, a foil, in order to create a sense of certainty (often false) that they are incapable of committing

those acts and become a monster themselves. The result reinforces the delineation between the self and the 'Other'. Ever present with any monster is the fear of becoming one.

For the purpose of my thesis, I would like to suggest another classification that is often erroneously used synonymously with the word 'monster.' That is the category of the 'monstrous,' or that which is so extreme that it transgresses societal boundaries. I understand that I am trying to define something that is amorphous and ambiguous because there are so many factors that contribute to it, such as the cultural and political aggregation of elements. To fully establish what any society's boundaries are would take more than this paper can provide, therefore I will try to simplify it to the internal behavior of an individual in the context of the world surrounding them. What is monstrous is more subject to the idea of change and transformation because it is a culturally bound idea. To be monstrous is to take us beyond what it means to be human. A monster's actions can be monstrous, but they do not have to be so. Similarly, someone who is not a monster can be monstrous. An audience can admire and respect the monster, but not that which is monstrous.

If I'm going to look at the monstrous in terms of what is done, or the behavior, not what an individual looks like, but the actions they are capable of, then I have to acknowledge that violence is what outlines what a monster is and what is monstrous. I have also created this definition in order to serve my argument. Violence is an act that walks the proverbial line between acceptable and unacceptable based on the conditions that surround it and cause it. It becomes a matter of perspective and interpretation instead of an absolute. A modern audience looking back at mythology from another culture and

time period might be quick to identify something as monstrous due to the violence enacted, but within the context of that society the actions might be justifiable. It is this loss of perspective when interpreting the monsters of the past that leads to a misreading of mythology. In *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide* by Malcolm Scott, werewolves were categorized as “Creatures of Darkness.” While wolves were associated with the twilight and dawn, they never solely restricted their hunting to periods of nighttime. The only darkness they actually live in is the “darkness of superstition” (Lopez 72) that humanity has put on them. Werewolves were monsters, but not all of them were truly monstrous due to their behavior in the literature that has survived. It is only in the context of a culture and its way of life that the violence done by a werewolf can be judged.

It is not my goal to try and say that the werewolf, as a monster, should not be feared. It is the fears that the werewolf carries that need clarification. This can be done through an examination of the stories that a society tells of the lycanthrope. “The fear of the werewolf is deeply ingrained and manifests itself in a wide variety of ways, some of them extremely subtle” (Copper 40). I will be using the model I have established through these definitions to examine two medieval texts, the 13th century Icelandic *Völsunga Saga* and the 12th century Anglo-Norman *Bisclavret*. As my argument focuses on medieval texts, it is important to note that I will not engage in contemporary understandings of medievalism as a modern study, as I don’t want to simplify the past for the purpose of the present. I am not going to engage with this modern view, as I want to anchor my argument in the medieval context. In the analysis that follows, I am going to use this model, but I am also conscious that there will be overlap and ambiguity. My model will

raise questions as well as answering them, but I hope to show that popular culture has mislabeled the werewolf as a permanent monster. The werewolf was never meant to be an irredeemable thing; the point of the shape-shifter was the potential for it to be brought back from the margins to the inside of the community. This incorrect branding leads to a lack of empathy for the monster that potentially is part of the audience. While there have been occasional attempts in recent years to show the werewolf as something other than monstrous, the savage shape-shifter remains largely misunderstood as we try to show the end result without the base understanding that would explain it. “Werewolves are cultural concepts, and thus not absolute but relative entities that are defined by their contexts” (Blécourt 1). Without that context, the symbol becomes one-dimensional.

In my first chapter, I will discuss the *garwaf* (Normal word for the savage werewolf) in the context of the Nordic saga. There, the hybrid form of the werewolf will be shown as “someone outside the ‘world,’ a socially deviant outsider” (Blécourt 2). These monsters, in their cultural context, will show that despite their outward appearance, they are not all monstrous in their actions. Those that do exhibit monstrous behavior are also shown to still have the potential to be retrieved from their outsider status. Internally, some still hold their humanity intact, waiting for the time they can transform back into an external physical and metaphorical shape of civilization. I will do this through the Völsung family, from its supposed progenitor, Sigi, to Sigurd, though there are other opportunities to examine how the family is tied to the wolf. The monster in this culture’s saga will be shown to be tied to the fear of losing one’s land, which represented more than just a desire for property. “Clearly the Icelandic relation to land involves more than

a simple territorial imperative of violence and domination...” (Overing 52). To hold land was to have an identity and legal protections, to belong to civilization.

In my second chapter, I will look at the French context of the *loup-garou* in the context of a short, narrative poem (*lai*). The monster of this piece will be shown to enjoy the outside space he has found while in the monster form but will fear the discovery of it by those who consistently exist inside society. The monstrous interior of another character will be discovered, and the monster will invert its position, gaining acceptance while the monstrous is exiled. In this way, a new equilibrium is found in this piece as the one who is forced to live excluded for a period will be allowed inside permanently. The monster displayed here will be shown as the fear of destabilized identity as read by political militaristic upheaval, once again bringing into light the fright of losing one’s identity in the social world.

These two chapters will synthesize to create a renewal of an old perspective on the werewolf, one that the modern audience has largely forgotten. While the superficial reading of the werewolf leads to it becoming a menace that needs to be put down, a closer reading shows that the violence portrayed by the werewolf is not always monstrous. This distinction allows for the creature to hold the fears placed upon it while also allowing veneration. The admiration placed on these fantastic creatures becomes more understandable when they are given the chance to absolve themselves in some manner.

CHAPTER 1: The Ostracized Werewolf-*Völsunga saga*

“...the werewolf—is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply as a wolf is decisive here. The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.”

-Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*

Iceland, or 'Snow land' (*Snæland*) as it was once called, is a country with a rich literary history, which began in the twelfth century. Unlike many of the surrounding cultures, which were altered “in a thousand ways by foreign influence” (Magnússon 2), Iceland's geographical isolation allowed for its oral stories and poems to be preserved in text without external factors shaping them. The histories, stories, and myths, told from person to person, allow for a unique vantage point into the existence of the Norse people living in Iceland from the ninth century onwards. As one Icelandic literature critic, Thomas Shippey (qtd. in Overing), points out:

...it was a country that ought to have been a Utopia. It had: no foreign policy, no defence forces, no king, no lords, no peasants, no dispossessed aborigines, no battles (till late on), no dangerous animals, and no clear taxes. What, given this blank slate, could possibly go wrong? Why is their literature about killing each other? (51)

This 'violent' medieval literature can be broken down into three recognized forms: the Eddic poetry (or *Edda*), the Skaldic poetry, and the Sagas. The *Völsunga saga* belongs to the latter category and is more specifically, a legendary saga (*Fornaldarsögur*). While

many of the sagas that have endured the passing of time deal with Icelandic family history, the legendary sagas are comparable to the Norse *Prose Edda*, sharing mythology and stories of gods interfering with humans' lives and tales of troll magic and giants. This saga in particular, an example of thirteenth century Icelandic prose, tells the story of one family, the Völsung clan. While other Icelandic literature has examples of monsters and monstrosity, "the werewolf motif is found in fourteen indigenous sources, i.e., *Gylfaginning*, *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, *Völsunga saga*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (*Völsungakviða*), *Gibbons saga*, *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, the *Skjöldunga saga* of Arngrímur "the learned," *Ala flekks saga*, *Úlfhams saga*, *Tiódels saga*, *Jóns saga leikara*, *Sagan af Þorsteini glott*, and *Hvað þýðir "sár"?*" (Guðmundsdóttir 278). Among these fourteen texts, the *Völsungas saga* stands, "apart from other Icelandic sources in that the werewolf motif occurs throughout the narrative, such as in the origin and descent of the Völsungs (also called *Ylfingar*— "Wolflings") ..." (Guðmundsdóttir 284).

The first of the Völsung clan introduced in the saga is called Sigi, son of the one-eyed god, Odin (*Óðinn*), who was associated with wisdom, healing, battle, death, royalty, knowledge, and more. This connection to the gods allows for Sigi and his heirs to be recognized as more than just mere men. When first introduced, Sigi is described as a mighty man, mightier than those around him. While no description is given of his appearance, he is already placed apart, "according to the speech of men of that time" (Magnússon 31). When Sigi goes hunting for deer with another man's thrall named Bredi, he is outdone despite his power. Rather than giving congratulations to the other for his skills, Sigi "fell on him and slew him, and buried the body of him thereafter in a

snowdrift” (Magnússon 31-32). This act, a deed of violence while out hunting where no one could see it, emulates a predatory animal such as a wolf. When he returns from his excursion, Sigi fully transforms into the monstrous by lying about Bredi, claiming he simply fled into the wild. Icelandic law might have allowed for the slaying of a thrall if Sigi compensated the owner via a wergild (*wergeld*-man money) without heavy penalty upon Sigi, but he instead chose to lie to the chieftain (*goði*), Skadi. By lying to the representative of his community, he betrayed the trust society placed in him. “Society was divided into two classes of men, the free and unfree...*goði* and thrall ate the same food, spoke the same tongue, wore much the same clothes, and were nearly alike in life and habits” (Magnússon 16). It is because of this lie that Sigi’s actions became a threat. The unspoken danger is that Sigi could kill anyone of them if they bested him at anything, for if he could kill a thrall, it was no different than killing a free man of the community. This monstrous act changed Sigi’s status, “so he is given forth to be a wolf in holy places (*vargr í véum*-a man put out of the pale of society for his crimes, an outlaw) and may no more abide in the land with his father” (Magnússon 32). Despite the fact that he is cast out from his home, Odin still shows a sort of favoritism to him (as a father might to his son) and helps guide him until he finds a warship. From there, Sigi sails away to another land where he wars in Hunland until he wins land and lordship and becomes a “great and mighty king” (Magnússon 32). The ending almost seems to not benefit the crime, as Sigi is recognized as a murderer, a monstrous individual, yet he goes on to still become a ruler and is recognized as the greatest of warriors.

In the moment Sigi kills the thrall, symbolically while hunting in the wilderness away from the community, he becomes a beast, no longer belonging to his community.

He figuratively ‘shapeshifts’ into an outlaw (*vargr*-which translates to wolf) and an outsider when he lies to his chieftain and is caught in the act. It is this unsanctioned violence that exiles him. It is through sanctioned violence, making war in another land using his own strength, that Sigi is able to fight to cast off his bestial title of outlaw and become a ruler. It is this sanctioned violence, acceptable in the Icelandic culture of warriors and voyagers, that makes Sigi into the metaphorical werewolf. He becomes a man once more through his actions, redeeming his honor.

The understanding of what it means to be an outlaw in the *Völsunga saga* and in Norse society is essential to understanding why the werewolf was a monster to be feared, but not eternally. Iceland’s landscape is described as, “eerie, stark, overwhelmingly beautiful, and overwhelming in its contrasts of beauty and unrelenting hostility, of reassuringly familiar fertile valleys and unimagined extraterrestrial vistas spewing smoke and sulphur” (Overing 53). For someone to thrive in this subarctic harsh land, it would take the strength of a group as opposed to an individual. In this way, community became important. Early settlers to Iceland “laid claim to large tracts of land, but the concept of private ownership coexisted with claims of certain members of the kin group and of articles of law” (Overing 51). The land was held not just for the current generation, but for the clan, for the generations to come. To hold land was to have a future, to have a people, and to have a place to which one belonged. Violation of the laws of the land could lead to temporary or full outlawry. This included the “confiscation of property” (Overing 65). To become an outlaw in Iceland was not a noble Robin Hood story, but one of survival and living on the outskirts of society. To further distance an outlaw from being human, “an outlaw could be killed with impunity” (Overing 65). Those who had

once been human were now considered animals with no punishment if they were killed. This was what it meant to be a *vargr*. “In addition, a wolf or a bear could actually be outlawed at the þing [Icelandic legal parliament of chieftains], further reinforcing this legal connection between the animal and the outlaw” (Breen 37). Not only were they beasts outside of society, but they also had no legal recourse to defend themselves. “Dependence on outlawry exempted Iceland from the need to maintain a policing body to oversee the imposition of corporal punishment, execution, or incarceration” (Byock 29). While an outlaw could be killed, a temporary outlaw, such as Gunnar of *Njal’s Saga*, can receive a punishment period (three years in Gunnar’s case). After this period of time has elapsed, the *vargr* can become a human being again. This was the ‘Monster’ that the Norse stories told of, the moral lessons passed on from generation to generation: the fear of becoming landless, of losing one’s future prospects, of turning into a wolf for even a bit of time. In the same breath, for a culture like the Norse that privileged male adventurousness and the willingness to take risks, there was also something enticing to becoming the metaphorical werewolf as long as one didn’t stay in the shape of a wolf. Those who gave in to their base desires and committed illegal acts could show their strength of character and regain their humanity through acts of bravery and heroism, or waiting the allotted time (and perpetuating no further illegal acts). These were the Monsters that could be respected and held aloft as heroes in tales, as they represented the struggle between the capacity for violence and social destruction and humanity and society where the civilized world wins.

After Sigi, the next appearance of a werewolf takes place three generations later. Sigi’s grandson, King Volsung, has eleven children, nine nameless sons and twins,

Sigmund (male) and Signy (female). Volsung marries off Signy to another monarch from Gothland (*Götaland*), King Siggeir. When the marriage feast is to be held in Volsung's hall, an old man appears (Odin) and places a sword in the oak tree (*Branstock*-Family tree) that sat in the middle. As he leaves the hall, he says, "Whoso draweth this sword from this stock, shall have the same as a gift from me, and shall find in good sooth that never bare he better sword in hand than is this" (Magnússon 36). Reminiscent of the King Arthur tale, many attempt to pull the sword out, but only Sigmund, the eldest son of Volsung, is able to do so. Siggeir, refusing to recognize the divine recognition that takes place, offers to buy the sword for "thrice its weight in gold" (Magnússon 37), but Sigmund refuses. Sigmund points out that the sword was meant for whomever pulled it out and, therefore, it belonged to him. The wedding night continues, but Siggeir, said to be a double-dealer, is noted as still desiring the sword. The next day, instead of staying to continue the wedding feast, Siggeir leaves for his homeland with Signy, inviting Volsung and his sons to come to his land where they would continue the feast.

When three months have passed, Volsung and his sons travel by three ships to Gothland, where Signy comes at night to warn them that her husband planned to betray them. The monstrosity of this part of the saga doesn't come from the 'Wolfling' clan, but from the king of Gothland. A Norse wedding was a major event that would usually have feasting lasting for a week after. "Feasts were used to show power and power relations; the sharing of a meal strengthened the social ties and the political commitments" (Sigurðsson 24). For Siggeir to leave so soon was a breach of tradition, but he appears to make an excuse for his action by citing the weather as a necessity for traveling home so soon. His offer to continue the feast when Volsung comes to visit is an appeasement, but

his real desire is shown to be the killing of his new in-laws and to steal the 'Excalibur' of Icelandic mythology. While Siggeir is never shown to have the outward appearance of a monster, his violence shows his internal shape to be that of an irredeemable monstrosity. Not only does he break his word, he also murders his newly-forged kin. It was said to be common in Norse, "for the fugitive to disguise himself as a wild beast (often wearing the hides of this animal), and in this guise to carry out his...dastardly deed" (Breen 31). King Siggeir does not put on a wolf pelt to hide his actions, but does them boldly in the open. Instead, while his external form may be that of a human, his wolfish nature is internalized, for he is not to be cast as a hero. "While bird names are assumed by exiles, and hound names by young avengers, the name of the wolf is adopted by assassins" (Breen 33). This violence (assassination) against another monarch identifies King Siggeir as a monstrous beast due to the betrayal he undertakes with deliberate planning.

While King Volsung falls in battle, his ten sons are captured by Siggeir and placed in bonds. Before they are killed, Signy intercedes with her husband, making a strange request. She asks that her brothers not be slain, "but let them be set awhile in the stocks, for home to me comes the saw that says, Sweet to eye while seen: but longer life I pray not for them..." (Magnússon 40). King Siggeir finds her request strange, but grants it, enjoying the thought of torturing the brothers by keeping them alive longer. By his orders, the brothers were taken to

...a certain place of the wild-wood, and there they sit daylong until night; but at midnight, as they sat in the stocks, there came on them a she-wolf from out of the woods; old she was, and both great and evil of aspect; and the first thing she did

was to bite one of those brethren till he died, and then she ate him up withal, and went on her way. (Magnússon 41)

The method of torture exhibited here is downright terrifying. There might be an assumption made that the sons would waste away from hunger, but that would be a misreading of the imprisonment. During the time period that the sagas might have been told as stories from person to person (roughly the ninth century until sometime in the thirteenth century), the world outside of the civilized communities was drastically different from the modern ‘exterior.’ The forest could hide all manner of danger, but it was a necessary danger, always within touching distance of the established order. People’s very existence was bounded by the wilderness. There were not only beasts in the ‘wild-wood,’ but those who also existed outside of the law, those who failed as productive members of society. Individuals could be lost to the ‘wild-wood’ and never heard from again. That being said, a female wolf appears and eats one of the brothers, leaving the other nine to watch the gruesome act. There are two oddities in this part of the prose. The first oddity is the manner of this wolf ‘attack.’ Although this is mythology and open to exaggeration, a wolf boldly approaching a group of humans and only attacking and eating one would not happen. While wolf attacks did happen, they were rare and usually attributed to rabies (Sharpe 185). Wolves are often described as sensible, so this wolf attack (and the subsequent ones) shown has to be more than just a random happenstance. The second oddity is that the wolf is a female as opposed to a male. After Sigmund is freed, there is a strange line in regards to the she-wolf, “But some men say that this she-wolf was the mother of King Siggeir, who had turned herself into this likeness by troll’s lore and witchcraft” (Magnússon 42). It could be dismissed as

rumor, but it fits the two oddities mentioned. The arrival of the wolf, her appearance, and her gender make it seem like King Siggeir's mother, unseen anywhere else in the saga, is more than just a normal woman.

The transformation of the mother makes her into a werewolf, as presumably she isn't permanently one. Her form is described as both "great and evil of aspect," placing her firmly as a Monster in the Icelandic text. She externalizes the interiority of her son, giving a physical form to the wolfish nature shown in the family. At the surface, she's a giant wolf who "nine nights together came the she-wolf at midnight, and each night slew and ate up one of the brethren, until all were dead, save Sigmund only" (Magnússon 41). Once past the superficial reading, the deeper implications of her actions show a woman circumventing the political situation in order to murder prisoners of war. While their kingdom may not have been willing to pay their wergild in order to free them, the king ordered that they be kept in the woods to slowly die while his wife, a Völsung by birth, watches it slowly happen. The mother's act of disobeying her leader (king in this case) is a monstrous choice, but it also shows a powerful female character who willingly dons the wolfish form. She is able to take the initiative to kill the sons and not just sit meekly behind the scenes. Her actions, though monstrous, still work within the confines of what is honorable for the interest of the family. She, like the Volsungs, is acting to protect her family's future. The mother is able to perform an unsanctioned violence, as opposed to the 'civilized violence' of warfare, where a man might die honorably in battle. This violence is underhanded and unacceptable though. "As well as being a protective alibi while committing the deed [taking the name of an animal], it was also a means of avoiding legal responsibility thereafter" (Breen, 38). By becoming the fugitive and

wearing the animal name (or the metaphoric shape in the tale), King Siggeir's mother makes her role as the she-wolf a rumor as opposed to a fact. The consequences of her actions were to place her outside of legal protection. If she could have assumed her 'human' form once more, she would not have been associated with the deaths, for they were done by the she-wolf, not her, and her honor would have remained intact. Yet Sigmund, with Signy's help and some honey on his face and in his mouth, is able to slay her as an outlaw, a person without social ties:

So the next night came the she-wolf according to her wont, and would slay him and eat him even as his brothers; but now she sniffs the breeze from him, whereas he was anointed with the honey, and licks his face all over with her tongue, and then thrusts her tongue into the mouth of him. No fear he had thereof, but caught the she-wolf's tongue betwixt his teeth, and so hard she started back thereat, and pulled herself away mightily, setting her feet against the stocks, that all was riven asunder; but he ever held so fast that the tongue came away by the roots, and thereof she had her bane. (Magnússon 42)

It is a socially acceptable form of violence that frees Sigmund from his entrapment.

Thus, his deeds can be elevated as heroic, not monstrous. "...there is no social principle of execution [in Iceland] (other than the sanctioned killing of outlaws)" (Overing 68).

Sigmund will not be held accountable for the killing of the she-wolf, for he only killed an outlaw, not a person.

Another and the most famous werewolf story of the *Völsunga Saga* is that of Sigmund and his nephew, Sinfjötli. Signy sends her third son to Sigmund to foster him in the ways of the Völsung bloodline, "It is obvious that Sigmund takes Sinfjötli out to the

woods on purpose, to accustom him to hardship and that as a fully trained warrior (Völsungr)...” (Guðmundsdóttir 284). The fostering of a child onto the wife’s brother (an uncle) was a normal practice in Norse culture. Sigmund planned to use Sinfjötli to help him have vengeance on King Siggeir, but thought he was too young (“hardly yet ten winters”). His plan was to toughen him up with ‘manly’ deeds, so the two become bandits in the woods, surviving by killing men and stealing. While they act as fugitives, they come upon a hut in the forest with two men sleeping inside. The two are described as “spell-bound skin-changers”⁵ and “kings’ sons” (Magnússon 46). Hanging over them were a set of wolf-skins that allowed the wearer to transform into wolves. Moreover, they imparted a knowledge with them, “they howled as wolves howl, and both knew the meaning of that howling” (Magnússon 46). It is implied that before they had even found the wolf pelts that they were already engaging in acts of outlawry, but this section of the saga goes into a different depth of detail. A clear picture is painted of the werewolf, as Sigmund and Sinfjötli steal the wolf-skins and put them on. They are transformed into wolves, only able to remove the skins and regain their human form after nine days have passed. This shape-shifting can be seen as a trial to gain wisdom, much in the same way that Odin hung upside down on the world tree, Yggdrasil, for nine days (making it a holy number in Norse culture). As opposed to the knowledge of runes, Sinfjötli must learn what it means to be a warrior of the Völsung clan. Sigmund separates from his nephew with a parting piece of wisdom, “that they risk the onset of seven men, but no more, and that he who was the first to be set on should howl in wolfish wise: “Let us not depart

⁵ “Skin-changers were universally believed in once...Men possessing the power of becoming wolves at intervals, in the present case compelled to so become, werewolves or *loups-garou*, find large place in medieval story, but were equally well-known in classic times. Belief of them still lingers in parts of Europe where wolves are to be found” (Magnússon 46)

from this,” says Sigmund, “for thou art young and over-bold, and men will deem the quarry good, when they take thee” (Magnússon 46). The two become monsters in shape, wolves with men’s intelligence, as they are in a foreign country with no land of their own save for a home in the wilds. Their actions are not monstrous though, but admirable and even worthy of emulation. They hunt like animals, but they fight like mighty warriors, carefully choosing their prey and taking them down as a team. Sigmund runs into a group of men and ‘howls’ for the other, who comes and they easily surprise and kill their enemies. There is wisdom to be gleaned in their actions when ambushing an enemy force. While their shapes are those of a monster, their violence is honorable.

In contrast to Sigmund’s tactics and despite his warning, Sinfjötli encounters a patrol of eleven men, and “he wrought in such wise that he slew them all, and was awearied therewith, and crawls under an oak tree takes his rest” (Magnússon 47). When Sigmund finds him, he questions why he didn’t call for him. The response, “I was loth to call for thy help for the slaying of eleven men” (Magnússon 47). One critic reads this as “Sinfjötli proves to be the more valiant, killing eleven men at one time without letting his father know” (Guðmundsdóttir 284). While that may be the case, it is more likely that the younger Völsung’s hubris is actually monstrous. His egotistical approach did allow him to kill the patrol of eleven men, more than Sigmund had advised, but in the aftermath, he was weakened and was forced to rest. In the first encounter when they worked together, there was no mention of being weary from the battle, as they immediately parted once more. Sinfjötli becomes more like a berserker than a cunning warrior, giving in to bursts of great strength, but weak and tired as soon as the fighting is done. This kind of warrior is easily cut down when battle is over.

Sigmund, still in wolf form and angered over his nephew's actions, rushes Sinfjötli and knocks him over before biting him in the throat. "Now that day they might not come out of their wolf-skins: but Sigmund lays the other on his back, and bears him home to the house, and cursed the wolf-gears [wolf skins]" (Magnússon 47). The two men are still trapped in their wolf forms, until the end of the ninth day, metaphorical monsters until they can remove the skins. In response to the hubris of his nephew, Sigmund bites his throat. This would have been a fatal wound if not for some divine intervention in the form of a raven dropping a magical leaf that heals the bite completely. Sigmund's actions would have been culturally extreme, making it monstrous, but the appearance of the raven (Odin's bird) demonstrates that Sigmund's physical chastisement is allowed and therefore, not so monstrous that Sigmund would also need to be punished. Once the nine days are up, Sigmund burns the wolf skins⁶, "and prayed that no more hurt might come to any one from them; but in that uncouth guise they wrought many famous deeds in the kingdom and lordship of King Siggeir" (Magnússon 47). There is a strange moment in this werewolf saga where Sigmund has an implied realization that wearing the wolf pelt for too long might have come to affect him, taking him too far from the civilized. His retribution against Sinfjötli's violence goes too far. In that moment, Sigmund realizes that the longer he spends as an animal, the more like an animal he becomes. Either the time spent allowed for the depths of the bestial to rise up out of him or the bestial was always right beneath the surface, waiting for the civilized form to fall away. In either case, Sigmund is shown to regret his action of biting Sinfjötli when he uses the leaf to heal him. It was within his power to allow his nephew to die, but he does

⁶ "In tales of shape-shifting, people commonly burn the animal skins, and this appears to be the most secure way of permanently finding freedom." (Guðmundsdóttir 295)

not. “Sinfjötli must come to know his animal nature, the wild animal within him” (Guðmundsdóttir 284-285). If so, then Sigmund also came to realize the powerful pull of the primal lurking under the surface, and how close to monstrous the wolf can go in a moment’s anger.

Among the Völsung clan, there is only one who appears to relate his ‘*canis*’ origins to another. While Sinfjötli is later revealed by Signy to be a son of Sigmund, he is not the true heir of the *Yflingar* blood. Instead, that honor falls to Sigmund’s other son, Sigurd. While Sigmund had successfully retaken his father’s kingdom after it had been claimed by another, he had fallen in battle by the time Sigurd was born. His mother, Hjordis, had married another man (King Alf), who fostered the Völsung child with a dwarf named Regin. Regin raises Sigurd: “he taught him all manner of arts, the chess play, and the lore of runes, and the talking of many tongues, even as the wont was with kings’ sons in those days” (Magnússon 66). Despite the good upbringing, Regin begins to tempt Sigurd for unknown reasons. The first time, Regin tries and fails to shake Sigurd’s trust in the king of the land. The second time, Regin attempts to make Sigurd doubt his treatment in the land by pointing out his lack of horse. To this, Sigurd says that if he were to ask, such a horse would be given to him. Regin challenges him on this, and Sigurd asks the king if he can have a horse of his choosing: “Then said the king, "Choose for thyself a horse, and whatso thing else thou desirest among my matters” (Magnússon 67). With the wisdom of asking for counsel (of a disguised Odin), Sigurd receives a legendary horse, a descendent of Sleipnir (Odin’s horse). A third time, Regin tempts Sigurd, telling him, “Not enough is thy wealth, and I grieve right sore that thou must needs run here and there like a churl’s son; but I can tell thee where there is much wealth

for the winning, and great name and honour to be won in the getting of it” (Magnússon 68). It is not greed that motivates Sigurd to inquire further, but the idea of great honor. In this way, Sigurd is shown to rise above temptation, to have wisdom, and to seek glory in the proper way (through great deeds). He is even given divine recognition in Grani, the horse he receives with Odin’s counsel. Despite all this, Sigurd still sets aside the desire of earning his own honor, placing the vengeance of his family (Sigmund’s death) before the desire to kill the monstrous beast. At this point, Sigurd is shown to be as far from ‘monster’ as one can be. His story is closer to a figure to elevate and emulate instead of fear. Yet on the battlefield in Hunding, Sigurd becomes something ‘Other’:

And now when the fight has long dured in such wise, Sigurd goes forth before the banners, and has the good sword Gram in his hand, and smites down both men and horses, and goes through the thickest of the throng with both arms red with blood to the shoulde; and folks shrank aback before him wheresoever he went, nor would either helm or byrny hold before him, and no man deemed he had ever seen his like...whenas Sigurd was among the foremost, came the songs of Hunding against him, and Sigurd smote therewith at Lyngi the king, and clave him down, both helm and head, and mail-clad body, and thereafter he smote Hjorward his brother atwain, and then slew all the other sons of Hunding who were yet alive, and the more part of their folk withal. (Magnússon 76)

This level of violence and brutality goes beyond the expected, into the possible ‘monstrous’ realm. When it says that “folks shrank aback before him,” there is no mention of only the enemy. His own people shrank back from him as he cleaved his way through the battlefield. The only reason Sigurd can be seen as a hero is because he fights

for one side, following the social expectations of a warrior under a king. In a similar manner to *Beowulf*, the hero appears to be just as monstrous as the mythical enemies he fights. While the argument may be made that his abilities are only due to the ‘magical’ sword he wields, Gram, the description of his arms takes it to an excessively violent level.

Having avenged his father’s death and gained great glory and honor to his name, Sigurd returns to Regin to take on the quest of slaying the monstrous Fafnir, whose sins of patricide, fratricide, and greed have transformed him into a dragon (Magnússon 71). Once again, Odin appears to favor the Völsung line, giving counsel to Sigurd on how to slay the dragon safely. When Sigurd gives Fafnir a mortal wound (death-wound), the dragon asks who he is and what his lineage is. “Sigurd answered, “Unknown to men is my kin. I am called a noble beast⁷; neither father have I nor mother, and all alone have I fared hither” (Magnússon 78). “It can quite possibly be assumed that Sigurðr likens himself to a wolf, as the Völsungs seem to do. At least we should note that in another scene—in the Eddic poem *Reginismál*, Reginn, Fáfñir’s brother, calls him *frekan úlf* (an aggressive wolf)” (Guðmundsdóttir 285-286). Sigurd identifies himself as a wolf, although his actions have not made him an outlaw at any point. By calling the wolf a noble beast, Sigurd is defining his family and their actions as more than just animals howling beyond the established border of the civilized. Their existence, lived outside the

⁷ “This enigmatic reply by Sigurðr works on three levels simultaneously. First, it conforms with the aforementioned practice of the killer providing an animal name when asked to identify himself. Second, his reply provides a metaphoric elaboration on the function of such names when adopted by exiles: the exile is like a wild animal who, unknown to other humans, roams in solitude without kith or kin...Third, his answer is not merely enigmatic, but is also a riddle; Sigurðr is indeed a *gofugt dýr*, as he is of a noble theriophoric wolf tribe, the *Yflingar*. His reply is consequently designed not solely as a concealment of identity, but also to give his listener a genuine opportunity to guess his true identity by means of this riddle. (Breen 35)

bounds of the human world, is something for society to look at and admire. Sigurd acts as a guarantee that the wolf can be seen as something more than an animal to be put down. When Regin comes back and sees the slain Fafnir, he asks Sigurd to roast the dragon's heart that he may eat it. As Sigurd was cooking it, he touched the meat to see if it was done and tasted it. It is the mistake of the dragon's blood touching his tongue that allows Sigurd to know, "the voice of all fowls, and heard withal how the wood-peckers chattered in the brake beside him" (Magnússon 82). The allowance of the monstrous into his own interior places Sigurd as an insider in the outside space. The wild becomes his society through this gift, but that is not the place for a Nordic individual to permanently reside. Once Sigurd understands the language of the birds, he does learn of Regin's plot to kill him and cuts his head off before any misfortune befalls him. After this, he eats the dragon's heart himself. Up to this point, his actions, while certainly violent, have been acceptable in Nordic society. By eating Fafnir's heart, he takes on some of that monstrosity which characterized the dragon, turning into a man who belongs in the metaphorical wolf's world without the chance to remove the skin. He has allowed an unacceptable violence to enter his interior and it is this transformation that begins to change his actions, losing him the *Alfaðir's* (Odin's) favor. The monster and villain slain, the 'hero' goes to claim his treasure.

Sigurd's downfall comes about through another form of consumption, but instead of the monstrous, the internalization is that of the wolf, the symbol of the Völsung family. There is a series of complicated kin incidents that take place in the saga focusing around Sigurd, but it is after he is married to Gudrun that his end comes about. His brother-in-law, Gunnar, marries his former pledged wife, Brynhild. Brynhild, with a grudge against

Sigurd, demands, “Thou shalt lose both realm and wealth, and thy life and me, for I shall fare home to my kin, and abide there in sorrow, unless thou slayest Sigurd and his son; never nourish a wolfcub” (Magnússon 118). Gunnar, having been bound to Sigurd by an oath, finds himself unable to act directly against his in-law. Instead, he and his brother Hogni device a way to circumvent their oath by having their brother, Guttorm, to kill Sigurd. They bribe the ‘young’ brother with gold and land, but they also feed him wolf flesh. “Wherefore with the eating of this meat he [Guttorm] grew so wild and eager, and with all things about him, and with the heavy words of Grimhild, that he gave his word to do the deed; and mighty honor they promised him in reward thereof” (Magnússon 120). As King Siggeir’s mother circumvents the political through the form of a wolf, here Guttorm is able to circumvent his brother’s oaths by taking in the wolf meat, transforming internally into the outsider. While Guttorm doesn’t take on the external form of the monster, he takes in the strength of the wolf (outlaw) to commit an illegal act and fatally wounds Sigurd.

The wolf is a recurring symbol throughout the saga. Like the animal it draws inspiration from, it darts in and out of the forest to take action and then fade back into the shadows. The relationship of the Nordic people to the wolf is one of a thin differentiation between respect and fear. On one hand, “The wolf is Oðinn’s animal and is a scavenger—along with his ravens—the appropriate symbol and agent of the god of war” (Guðmundsdóttir 285). The wolf went to war with Odin, representing a power that is beyond that of mortal men. The Völsung’s association with the wolf can be seen as a symbol of a warrior clan. At the same time, “To call for ‘the wolf’s head’ was to pronounce death on a man accused of wrongdoing. He could be killed by anyone without

fear of legal recrimination” (Lopez 208). The same association with the wolf meant that they were a clan that constantly changing from within society to outside it. It could be said that their heroic actions were only possible because they existed so close to nature, the most primal (and therefore powerful) people. Yet that line exists where one who goes too far becomes the monstrous. In Norse mythology, it is the wolf who is seen as one who brings about Ragnarok. Fenrir, also called *Fenrisúlfr* (Fenris-Wolf) was bound because the gods feared him. It was foretold that he would eventually kill Odin⁸, consuming him, so the gods chained him. He was put outside the divine’s society. The Völsung clan were warriors and their association with Odin is shown in their family tree. They were werewolves, men who became monsters, but who sometimes were redeemed. If they went too far though, the feared beast that was chained would be released and their humanity was consumed.

⁸ See Figure III: *Odin battles Fenrir*

CHAPTER 2: The Sanctioned Werewolf-Bisclavret

“Werewolves were a stark reality in the Middle Ages. Their physical presence was not doubted; at a symbolic level the werewolf represented all that was base in man, especially savagery and lust. If...to love what was good in the wolf was really to express self-love, and to hate what was evil in the wolf was to express self-hate, then the hunting down of werewolves was simply the age-old attempt to isolate and annihilate man’s base nature. That it went on for so many hundreds of years indicates an abiding self-hatred in man.”

-Barry Holstun Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men*

The story of *Bisclavret* was written in the latter part of the twelfth century by an enigmatic woman with the pseudonym Marie de France. Very little is known of her historically aside from the fact that she was originally from France and that she lived in England, where she wrote a series of romantic narrative poems, called *lais*, into a collection called *The Lais of Marie de France*. She is considered by some to be “the greatest woman author of the Middle Ages and certainly the creator of the finest medieval short fiction before Boccaccio and Chaucer” (Clifford 1). In addition, she is the first known female French poet. Her focus was on love as a literary subject— “a subject that it depicted, anatomized, celebrated, and mocked in a series of masterpieces...” (Clifford 1). These medieval romance pieces were all done from a woman’s point of view. At the time, the requirement among the aristocracy in England was to speak French (as a result of the Norman Conquest). Despite this, Marie was still a female figure in a land that was not her own. Her work was exceptional for its exploration of the worth of love, those who give it, and those who are worthy of it. Her work was meant for the court as she says it was written for a noble king, most likely Henry II (ruled 1154-89). The word *Bisclavret*, “being the name by which the werewolf was known in Brittany” (Lopez 235), supposedly confirms Marie’s word that she had heard the stories told in her *lais* from

Breton minstrels and she was merely repeating them in written form. *Bisclavret* comes to be the name by which the nobleman who is afflicted with lycanthropy is identified.

In the introduction to *Bisclavret*, Marie establishes what a werewolf, or “the Normans call it *Garwaf*” (Clifford 4) is. In the very first paragraph of her poem:

In the old days, people used to say—
and it often actually happened—
that some men turned into werewolves
and lived in the woods.
A werewolf is a savage beast;
while his fury is on him
he eats men, does much harm,
goes deep in the forest to live. (Clifford 5-12)

The reader is given an evocative image of the werewolf: “Marie vividly describes the bestiality incarnated by this monster, its sylvan existence of uncontrolled violence, even anthropophagy” (Cohen 353). Like Icelandic werewolves, they were outside of civilization, living deep in the woods. Based on the description alone, the werewolf is shown to be absolutely monstrous by any standard. This complements Marie’s own description of being a werewolf as a curse, something undesirable. It is important to note that there is no trigger shown for the lycanthropy here. The picture painted is of a man becoming an absolute vicious creature, identify the imaginary man-wolf with attributes like rage and gluttony.

Once the opening paragraph concludes, the poem introduces two of the three main characters. The first is the nobleman, *Bisclavret*, followed by his wife, who is left nameless. “She [Marie] describes him as a handsome and good knight who behaved

nobly, was a close friend of his lord, and was liked by all his neighbors (Clifford 17-20). In other words, “he appears to be the ideal knight” (Sconduto 41). Bisclavret could be said to embody all the virtuous attribute of a chivalric man in his position. He was praised by those who spoke of him and had a beautiful wife whom he loved and was loved in return. Yet there was trouble in ‘paradise,’ for three days of every week he would go missing and no one could say where he went. This bothered his wife, for “she didn’t know what happened to him or where he went” (Clifford 92). This is the background that establishes these characters in the tale.

When Bisclavret returns from one of his periods of being gone, his wife inquires where he goes for those missing days. She admits openly that she is afraid of his infidelity, while not quite directly accusing him of it at the same time. So confronted, he ask for her mercy in this matter, saying that if he answered, “Harm will come to me if I tell you about this, because I’d lose your love and even my very self” (Clifford 93). There is an investment in this moment in the life he has been living. “He arrives home from his three wolfen days *joius e liez*, happy and delighted” (Cohen 354). The time spent away from home in the forest creates a private space where Bisclavret feels relaxed. It is a place where he takes a break from the civilized world and indulges in a violence that appears to hurt no one: “...the knight describes himself only as living ‘off prey and plunder’ he says nothing about killing and eating men” (Sconduto 42). His resistance to his wife’s line of inquiry reveals a fear of losing this space he has created outside the boundaries of society where he can channel his violence. Once known, the moral question of how he does this violence is brought into the interior and his space would be violated. Beyond that, the violence he is capable of becomes a threat that he knows

might tear his wife's love from him. Knowing this, he attempts to warn his wife that the knowledge he might impart to assuage her concerns might be fatal to his happiness and their relationship. Despite his warning, "she kept asking him, coaxed and flattered him so much, that he finally told her what happened to him—he hid nothing from her." (Clifford 93).

The reason for his absence is, of course, that he is a werewolf. As no reason is given for his shape-shifting, it can be assumed that either he "is born with the horrible nature of a werewolf" (Guðmundsdóttir 293) or he is cursed with it in some manner. In either case, it is pure speculation to attempt to resolve the cause. When he reveals why he goes into the forest, his wife, rather than relieved that he is still faithful to her and no other, reacts in a strange and unexpected way. "What follows after the knight reveals that he is a werewolf is particularly astonishing: instead of reacting with fear or surprise, the wife does not react at all, but continues her interrogation" (Sconduto 42). There is an absence of any reaction from her that continues for 30 lines as she emotionally batters at Bisclavret to tell her everything. This lack of reaction creates an odd "Other" sense to her. She first wants to know if he kept his clothing on when he transforms, to which he replies that he goes naked. The first inquiry is difficult to evaluate. The wife might be inquiring to know if he has some kind of wolf skin that he wears that might trigger the transformation or if he still carries remnants of civilization with him as a werewolf, and therefore not be a total animal. There is an uncertainty here, as after he replies, she says, "Tell me, then, for God's sake, where your clothes are" (Clifford 94).

This demand for information might be a matter of preserving Bisclavret's dignity or protecting his reputation, but it seems more purpose-driven. This back-and-forth

conversation seems headed towards a specific piece of information that the wife wants to know. Bisclavret reveals that “if I were to lose them [clothing], and then be discovered, I’d stay a werewolf forever. I’d be helpless until I got them back” (Clifford 94). The wife now knows that her husband spends three days as a werewolf in the woods and that the way he returns from his animal form is to put his clothing back on and yet there isn’t a word of emotion given yet. It is only after he tells her where he hides his clothing that she, at last, shows emotion: “she was terrified of the whole adventure” (Clifford 94).

Once she discovers that her husband is a werewolf, she immediately begins to consider how she can remove the threat of him from her life. “The wife’s fear is a normal reaction; who wouldn’t be horrified to learn that their spouse was a shape-shifter? One could even argue that her lack of affect earlier was due to shock” (Sconduto 43). This may be the case, but there is a more intimate possibility. “She didn’t want ever to share his bed” (Clifford 94). In this line, the reader sees the wife’s mind. It is the bedroom, a place where the husband would remove his clothing to lay with his wife, that she perceives the greatest threat. The thing she fears is the werewolf of the introduction, a vicious creature, sharing a bed with her. It is this threat of the animal in the bedroom that causes her to act. With Bisclavret’s secret divulged, the wife sends a messenger to a knight who had, in the courtly fashion, desired her affection for some time. She offers her love and body in exchange for his help to steal Bisclavret’s clothing. “So Bisclavret was betrayed, ruined by his own wife” (Clifford 95). This betrayal was more than just being trapped as a wolf, “. . .he has lost himself, he is no longer knight or husband but is now only Bisclavret, doomed to wander in the forest” (Sconduto 44). A year is said to pass during this time, but no details are given of how Bisclavret survives his time as a

wolf⁹. His position has gone from inside society to more than just an outsider. He is now a hunted outsider. If he were to even approach the civilized world, it would be at risk of death.

The domestic situation presented and how it develops in the poem is convoluted. Before his wife confronts him, the relationship seems fairytale-like. There are no given issues, they love each other, and they appear to be on good terms with those who live in society around them. While Bisclavret does leave the home consistently to become a monster in shape, his actions are “significantly less violent than the vision of lycanthropy with which the *lai* opens” (Cohen 354). He goes out in the woods for three days to hunt prey. This would have been no different from going out to hunt for food or to go on a medieval hunt on horseback, which was a normal pastime for those of rank during the Middle Ages. It was an acceptable hobby which would have been part training for war as well as an outlet for violence without harm to society. In short, it was a culturally acceptable form of violence that would have no association with the monster. “What matters is that unlike the opening gloss, no invitation is extended to consider brutality against specific bodies” (Cohen 354). Once the knowledge of his actions is made known, his wife suddenly “turned scarlet from fear” (Clifford 94).

There is no change to the household situation other than her awareness of his lycanthropy. Yet she allows her fear of him, the potential threat of him in the bedroom

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- ⁹ “This silence [of a year with no details] echoes the silence that Marie established at the beginning of the *lai* regarding Bisclavret’s three-day absences. Now we hear nothing of the wife and her new husband, nor do we hear anything of Bisclavret’s activities. This silence, filled as it must be with the unspoken sadness of the werewolf who has had his life and his identity stolen from him, who has lost his wife and no longer enjoys a happy homecoming, stands in stark contrast to the presumed happiness of the knight who at long last has finally married the woman he loves.” (Sconduto 44)

and what he might do to her, to dominate her thinking, shifting her focus from cuckoldry to how she might get rid of him. Her fear appears to be based on the possibility that he could enact violence against her, though at this point there is nothing to suggest that he ever would commit domestic abuse or sexual deviance. It is this fear of his savagery that causes her to commit an act of violence against him. Her position as the wife in the twelfth century would have been under her husband according to the Great Chain of Being. By her duties, she should have supported her husband, as his position was higher than hers. His responsibility was to care for her well-being, both physically and spiritually. Instead, she usurps his position and removes him entirely, finding another man, who is bound to her by an oath, to fill Bisclavret's role. In this case, Bisclavret's mistake is "to confide the secret of his dual nature to his wife" (Cohen 353-54), who represents a lower position, more prone to sins of the body. In trusting his significant other, Bisclavret loses his markings of civilization and is trapped in an inhuman form. It is his love that appears to drive his life outside of society, creating a perception that his love was misplaced. "Or perhaps things never were what they seemed all along" (Sconduto 43). In either case, this is an odd choice for a romantic narrative, but it sets-up a different and more important relationship later.

A year later the king is out hunting with his hounds and they encounter Bisclavret. "...the hunters and the dogs chased him all day, until they were just about to take him and tear him apart..." (Clifford 95-96). In a similar moment to Actaeon in Greek mythology, Bisclavret, is hunted down by the tools of civilization, hounds. In his current form, he is the beast that is to be chased, tired, and put down. Outside of the tale, wolves are not a good source of meat for the dinner table. There is very little meat on them that can be

salvaged for the dinner table. Hunting one down would either be for sport or to try and protect livestock from predation. This act shows the highest level of society, the king, a representative of the country, riding into nature (the exterior) to guard the borders of their community from potential invasion. Yet, before Bisclavret can be killed, he throws himself at the king's feet, kissing them. By his vassal-like submission, the king recognizes that "This beast is rational—he has a mind.. I'll extend my peace to the creature; indeed, I'll hunt no more today" (Clifford 96). This identification of the beast as reasoned is key. "In spite of the fact that Bisclavret took off his clothing prior to his metamorphosis and is now in lupine form, he is not behaving like a wolf. He certainly has not rejected civilization or humanity; with his comportment he demonstrates that he has retained his reason" (Sconduto 45). Bisclavret's nobility allows him to be brought under the king's protection. It is through this continued deference that the werewolf is allowed to stay close to the king, living as a pet under the protection of the castle and its people. "...Marie emphasizes the incongruity between Bisclavret's appearance and his behavior. Although he appears to be a wild animal, he is still a man" (Sconduto 45). The people living and working in the king's household grew fond of him for, "...he was so noble and well behaved that he never wished to do anything wrong" (Clifford 96-97). The word choice in the original French text uses "...the words "*francs*" (noble) and "*debonaire*" (gentle), which are usually used to describe knights and other nobleman" (Sconduto 46). Bisclavret, though wearing the outer appearance of a wolf, still retains his humanity as revealed through his actions. As the king spends time with the werewolf, even he becomes aware that "the creature loved him," (Clifford 97). Once again, the werewolf shown here does not match the description given by Marie de France in the

introduction. This is the noble knight and loving husband who was seen in the beginning, establishing Bisclavret as the quintessential sympathetic werewolf.

Bisclavret as a werewolf is clearly a monster by his external form. It is his wife's treachery that traps him in this shape, but at no point does he commit a monstrous act. "...any violent acts that he may have engaged in are never actually depicted by Marie" (Sconduto 47). In losing his position in society, he loses his shape, or his identity. As the beast, he is unrecognizable. When the king and his hounds see him, they see an enemy of society (or the nation) that needs to be put down. Even though Bisclavret was shown to be a loyal member of this nation's aristocracy, when betrayed, he suddenly had nothing but the fur on his back. He was landless, a wanderer in his own country. To add to that, he had no voice with which to defend or identify himself. In a similar fashion to the Nordic werewolf, there was no legal path for him to take to regain his identity. He was a stranger in his homeland, for no one recognized him. If he had ever tried to approach a civilized space, his form would cause panic and fear, as a monster should when it intrudes into the civilized interior. Such actions could possibly lead to hunting parties searching for him. If a monster is a reflection of a culture's fears, then Bisclavret becomes a fear of losing what constitutes one's self. "Werewolves' bodies are convenient animal vehicles for meditating upon human identity in the Middle Ages" (Cohen 355).

When considering the author, Marie de France, who wrote in French while in England, it's easy to see possibilities that inspired these fears. There was always the chance of militaristic political upheaval occurring at any time in the land and leadership could change in a moment. Nonetheless, it was only through submission to the king, a

position that represents the head of a nation, that Bisclavret could recover some aspect of himself and be welcomed back into society. He does not regain his identity or his voice yet, but he becomes an outsider allowed to live within the hierarchy of society, closer to a dog while still of the wild. When the knight who betrayed him and married his wife shows up at the castle for a feast, Bisclavret immediately attacks him, sinking his teeth into him. The king intervenes, calling him off, but Bisclavret “Twice that day he tried to bite the knight” (Clifford 97). Despite his violence, the people of the palace said “that he wouldn’t act that way without a reason: that somehow or other, the knight had mistreated Bisclavret, and now he wanted his revenge. And so the matter rested...” (Clifford 97). The violence done here is excused and there are no repercussions.

It is significant that...Marie introduces the notion of combat and chivalric justice...with her choice of the word “*vengereit*” (Ln 210). The knights in the king’s household are thus starting to think of the werewolf as if he were another knight who must retaliate for some mistreatment done to him, as vengeance is not the deed of an animal. (Sconduto 49)

The very people within the castle, surprised at his actions, side with Bisclavret instead of the ‘other’ knight. While his attacks could have been classified as monstrous acts, the violence is seen as deserved instead. This creates a two-way relationship between Bisclavret and the king. While Bisclavret is shown to love his lord, in this moment the king extends his protection to Bisclavret as he might to a knight. It is due to this recognition that he is allowed to enact this violence and remain in the castle.

Not long after the feast, the king travelled back into the forest and sought lodging in the countryside. Bisclavret’s wife comes to present herself to the king, “...bringing

rich presents for him” (Clifford 98). When the werewolf saw her, he attacked her in a rage and tore her nose off. “With the werewolf’s mutilation of his wife, Marie reminds the audience of his bestial side. But in providing motivation for his actions, she transforms his wolf-like behavior into the deeds of a knight” (Sconduto 50). Despite his justification, others are not aware of his circumstance, and the men there, most likely the king’s guards, closed around Bisclavret, ready to kill him. Before they do, a wise man intervenes. The wise man speaks of the beast’s previous virtue and suggests that the wife might have done some wrong against the wolf, and they should torture her to find out. The wife, when put to test, tells how she betrayed Bisclavret and who he really was. It is important to note that while she did divulge the information, it was only after subjected to violence on the part of the king, not before. Once again, the threat of violence appears against her, but this time she does not give in until she physically experiences it. “Torture compels the disfigured woman to reveal her crime, and she admits the stealing of his transfigurative clothes” (Cohen 355).

A werewolf is described by Marie de France as a savage beast, yet Bisclavret, while shown at times to be violent, is not savage. The only savage ‘beast’ shown in this *lai* is the wife, whose very words are twisted from the beginning.

“My lord,” the lady answered, “I love you more than all the world; you mustn’t hide anything from me or fear me in any way: that doesn’t seem like love to me. What wrong have I done? For what sin of mine do you mistrust me about anything? Do the right thing and tell me!” She harassed and bedeviled him so, that he had no choice but to tell her. (Clifford 94)

The wife's claims that she loves him appears even after she has heard that her husband is a werewolf, yet there is no reaction of fear, but instead a claim of great devotion. Her claim of what defines 'love' is that he must not hide anything from her or fear her, implying that she could be something to be feared. Indeed, she is something to be feared. She is the 'real' monstrous creature because she has "devoured the human being who was her husband, having made him, as well as her lover, prey to her own ambitions and pride" (Freeman 294). The monstrous beast here is manifested by her outward actions against her husband. In that way "the bestial erupts from the human during a werewolf's transformation" (Ward 33). Bisclavret may be the one who takes on the shape of the wolf (the physical werewolf), but he is not monstrous. The wife, who didn't originally show any outward signs of her fiendish interior, is the one that needs be feared. By Bisclavret biting off her nose, she "has taken the place of her husband; noseless, she now looks like a wolf. Her appearance thus accurately reflects her monstrous nature" (Sconduto 54). Finally, she is exiled from the nation for her actions, sent beyond society. Bisclavret regains his clothing, his rank, and his self once more. The status of monster is passed off from him to another.

Jean Céard astutely remarks that "medieval monsters function, among other things, to explore both the good and bad limits of human potential and mark thereby the boundaries of what it means to be human" (45). In the poem of *Bisclavret*, this can be visibly seen. While Bisclavret may have lost his form, he "retains his human *sens*, his rationality, while in his wolf form, he recognizes his lord, behaves appropriately, and is ultimately restored to both his human form and appropriate position in society" (Ward 28). It is through the relationship between Bisclavret and his king, a love for his nation,

that he regains what is lost. In contrast, his wife, in her fear of the enemy without that didn't pose a threat to her, she created an enemy within. Her own savage nature overtook her, leading her to destroy her marriage and eventually the civilized life she was already leading. She misplaced her love for herself over her husband and the repercussions branded her for life. In summary, she became her own enemy.

There is a third pivotal figure in this story that needs to be addressed. The king himself, who saves Bisclavret from being hunted. While he is neither monster nor monstrous, he is something else. When the beast (from the king's perspective) capitulates before him, he still could have shot it and had it killed. He shows mercy instead, recognizing something of worth in the werewolf. When he could have shown violence towards the monster within his domain, he instead is forgiving. His tolerance allows for Bisclavret's redemption and vindication in his honor. In so doing, he becomes an extreme opposite of the monstrous, acting as a counterbalance to it. When violence is done by Bisclavret, it is allowed only through the king's space, given approval and thus excused. This homosocial bond between the king and Bisclavret enables the nobleman to embrace his lycanthropy inside the bounds of civilization. At no point at the end of the tale is Bisclavret shown to be cured of his metamorphic state, yet the king can still embrace him once he regains his human form.

Bisclavret's duality is evidently of no consequence to the king, whose only reaction when the werewolf recovers his human form is to celebrate the knight's return: "Le reis le curut enbracier; / Plus de cent feiz l'acole e beise" (Ln 300-301), "The king runs to embrace him / More than one hundred times he hugs and kisses him." ...The king has had the benefit of seeing and living with Bisclavret

in his werewolf form, the form that Bisclavret's wife was so terrified of that she ended up betraying him. She refused the *garwaf*, the traditional monstrous and bloodthirsty werewolf that Marie depicts in the prologue to this *lai*; the king, however, accepted the *bisclavret*, the werewolf who remains a human inside and conforms to Christian doctrine. (Sconduto 53)

He is even given more than he had at the beginning by the king, recognized and rewarded as a knight and a werewolf. It is the king's choice to accept the monster within his nation, giving his blessing to the Other in this tale.

CONCLUSION: The *Wer* in the *Wulf*

“The monster is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce. The monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint. This simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster’s composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity, for the fact that the monster seldom can be contained in a simple, binary dialectic (thesis, antithesis...no synthesis). We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair.”

-Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*

In Korea, there is a colloquialism taught to young women that is similar to a phrase sometimes heard in the United States. “Men are Wolves ($\frac{\text{ㄴ}}{\text{ㄷ}}\text{ㄷ}$ ‘neug-dae’),” which mirrors the expression, “Men are Pigs.” In Korea, it is used as a cautionary tale that men are like wolves that hunt down women for the kill. In Korea, the Mongolian Wolf is endangered and nearly gone, only living in one region (Paektu Mountain) of the small peninsula nation. An average Korean citizen can go their entire life without seeing a wolf and most likely will. Yet the impression of the wolf remains in their common vernacular as a negative reference to the lust of men on the prowl for women. In the France, they have an idiom, “*elle a vu le loup*, “She’s seen the wolf,” meaning she’s lost her virginity” (Lopez 219). It’s absolutely astonishing to think that two nations half-way across the continent can have platitudes so similar, relating to a single animal¹⁰. I say

¹⁰ There are other sayings referencing wolves as well:

Peasants were in revolt against their feudal lords, and the hated nobles were represented by wolves in the proletarian literature. Medieval peasants called famine “the wolf.” Avaricious landlords were “wolves.” Anything that threatened a peasant’s precarious existence was “the wolf.” (Lopez 206) In French to be known by everyone is to be as well-known as the white wolf, *il est connu comme le loup blanc*. To sneak along is to walk with the step of a wolf, *marcher á pas le loup*. Speak of the wolf and he appears, *quand on parle du loup, on en voit la queue* (literally, one speaks of the wolf and one sees his tail.) (Lopez 220)

animal here, because a beast is something that isn't understood. In the twelfth and thirteenth century, the wolf was a beast and could become a monster. In the modern perspective, the wolf has been studied extensively and civilization only seems to fear it in extreme circumstances as seen through cinema (Liam Neeson in *The Grey*). Yet we still fear the werewolf, because we have yet to conquer the unknown, the untamable, and the Other within ourselves.

In the Medieval texts examined in this thesis, monsters have worn the hybrid form of wolf and man. The werewolves of the *Völsunga Saga* are unique in their association with legally-branded outlaws, cast out or forced out of society in some form.

The Icelandic sagas...are *not* about chivalric exploits or quests for any variety of Holy Grail, but are more concerned with domestic and agricultural issues such as marital disputes or disagreements over livestock, field boundaries, and property ownership. The violence has much to do with territoriality in its starkest, most unforgiving aspect—the seizure, settlement, and retention of land (whether by force or by marriage), the desire for ownership and domination. (Overing 52)

In Iceland, the value of land was held at a premium. It was tied to more than just a home or a community, but a sense of identity and heritage. Land was so vital that the idea of being landless was horrifying. It makes sense for those without land to be turned into a monster. The exterior of the island, such as Reykjavik (Smoky Bay), was the settled parts with various communities constructed, but the interior was a harsh and wild place. This was where the outlaws, or outsiders, lived. “The Icelanders’ relation to the land is even now very much one of exterior to interior: the socialized margin interacts with and is conditioned by the spatial centrality of wilderness” (Overing 52). For the Nordic

people of the ninth century to the thirteenth, wilderness was something they lived with daily. It was right ‘Outside the fence’ (*útangarþs*), or “beyond the periphery of the central farmhouse” (Overing 68). So close was the *Óbyggth* (uninhabited space of the island) that the Grágás, or “law code of the Icelandic Free State” (Sigurðsson 5), took into consideration distances from civilization for crimes. A violent action taken within the confines of the community might be considered a crime, but the same action taken in the *Óbyggth* might not be. This is the culture that gave birth to the werewolf of the *Völsunga Saga*. To be cut out of Icelandic society would be devastating. An individual could either remain in the central interior of the island, constantly reminded of the social exterior and fearing for one’s life (An outlaw could be killed by anyone without fear of legal recrimination) or leave Iceland and try to regain honor elsewhere. In addition, to be an outlaw meant being banned from the Althing (general assembly of the Iceland chieftains), a place where “chieftains and householders could find spouses for their children” (Sigurðsson 30). Becoming an outlaw would be seen as a failure beyond self, but a failure of family as well. Also at Þingvellir, where the Althing took place, information was shared about what was happening within the country and abroad. A werewolf was cut off from knowing what was happening within their country and beyond its coasts. Yet to survive that time without land and to regain honor was also something to be respected. It meant they were strong in a way that few men could understand (or even desired to understand). Violence could make a person into a werewolf, but either violence or time could allow them to regain their human form. This was the ostracized werewolf, one that was not allowed to return to society while in that bestial shape.

In contrast to the ostracized werewolf, the sanctioned werewolf is outcast for a period, but in his redemption, he is allowed back into the interior without losing his metaphoric state. In *Bisclavret*, the initial transformation takes place from expectation to reality. When the *lai* begins, it lays the groundwork for the savage beast, or *garwaf*. Once *Bisclavret*, the man himself, is introduced there is an immediate discrepancy. This disconnect between the introduction and the character allows the author to create an expectation of the monstrous and provide the readers with a visual of the monster instead. Through this derailment of the concept of the werewolf, there is a sudden restructuring in the audience's¹¹ understanding. This creates a void, as the expectations that were placed on the character are suddenly destroyed. As the narrative continues, we can fill in that vacuum with new details of who *Bisclavret* really is, transforming him from the monstrous into the monster. With the betrayal of the noble by his wife, his form becomes permanent, and the loss of his connections to society is instant. While he loses his position and his voice as the wolf, he retains his inner values of nobility. It is this internal character, the most civilized part, that the king is able to recognize *Bisclavret*.

It is only through the king that *Bisclavret* shape-shifts once more, but this time his external shape remains the same. His submission to his ruler allows for his violence to be channeled in a knightly manner, akin to a joust against an opponent. This kind of violence was socially accepted in France as long as it was controlled (with the approval

¹¹ A 'triple audience': When dealing with the literature of another time or culture, however, an additional complication of the audience role must be considered. There is, if one may extend Rabinowitz's metaphor, a triple audience: the authorial audience aware of reading a text, the narrative audience participating in the fiction, and the culturally removed audience that is aware of its own alterity. For the medieval storyteller's ideal audience, for example, alterity would not be an issue and the story would be "natural" in ways it cannot be to us. We might call that ideal audience the original audience (as opposed to us, the alien audience), siting it in the storyteller's own world. (Overing 91)

of the nation). It was still a violent and brutal contest, but it gave an outlet for aggression that might build up in the knights, which Bisclavret is associated with. It is finally through the confrontation of Bisclavret's wife that the monster can become the man, deforming her so she, too, can bear the visible mark of the outsider. "The missing nose of Bisclavret's wife functions as an altogether different kind of sign...According to several critics, cutting off someone's nose was a common punishment for adultery" (Sconduto 54). She becomes another kind of monster for society to fear, her internal actions of betrayal leave her monstrous. In the whole tale, Bisclavret enacts only visible violence in a justified manner, within the rules of a man of his position and with the approval of the nation. Non-physical violence, socially unacceptable in a religious nation, casts him out and shifts the internal form of the wife from loving to brutal. Bisclavret's actions allow the beast to be embraced by society, so it may exist inside it as long as its violence remains within the culturally acceptable. "The moral transformation of the werewolf from villain to noble hero is a stunning development..." (Sconduto 55).

It is undeniable that the werewolf has a permeance on the imagination. As a monster mythology, it has endured and thrived into the modern time period. The fear it elicits is easily understood in any age. The idea that anyone in a community could be a werewolf creates a sense of terror that questions everyone's identity. The individual is human most of or at least some of the time, meaning that friends or neighbors could shape-shift at any given moment into the monster. In a single instant, someone could give in to their inner beast and become inhuman in their actions, committing violence outside of culture's boundaries. This is the root fear of the werewolf: they are the reflection of the unknown, the unknowable, the untamable, and the other that could

appear in anyone. At the same time, there is a draw to the werewolf. Aside from the wolf itself, the werewolf has come to represent power, a purity of purpose, and knowing one's place in the world without having to reshape it. This is just as true today as it was in both of the studied texts. The werewolf acts as a metaphorical bridge between civilization and nature. It was not a bridge that was burned when someone walked over for a period of time. In a similar manner, the monster inside humanity still lurks, chained by *Gleipnir*, intangible things. Eventually the monster will break free if it is cast out and not brought to the interior where its violence can be channeled towards acceptable means. The werewolf isn't meant to remain the slobbering horror monster of cinema that must be put down with a silver bullet. This is what we have missed with the reading of the werewolf monster in the past. They can be monstrous or they can be monsters, but they're not necessarily both and to assume so is to diminish the rich cultures that produced them. Those same cultures knew that an individual could appear as a monster, but he or she could still be redeemed.

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APPENDIX

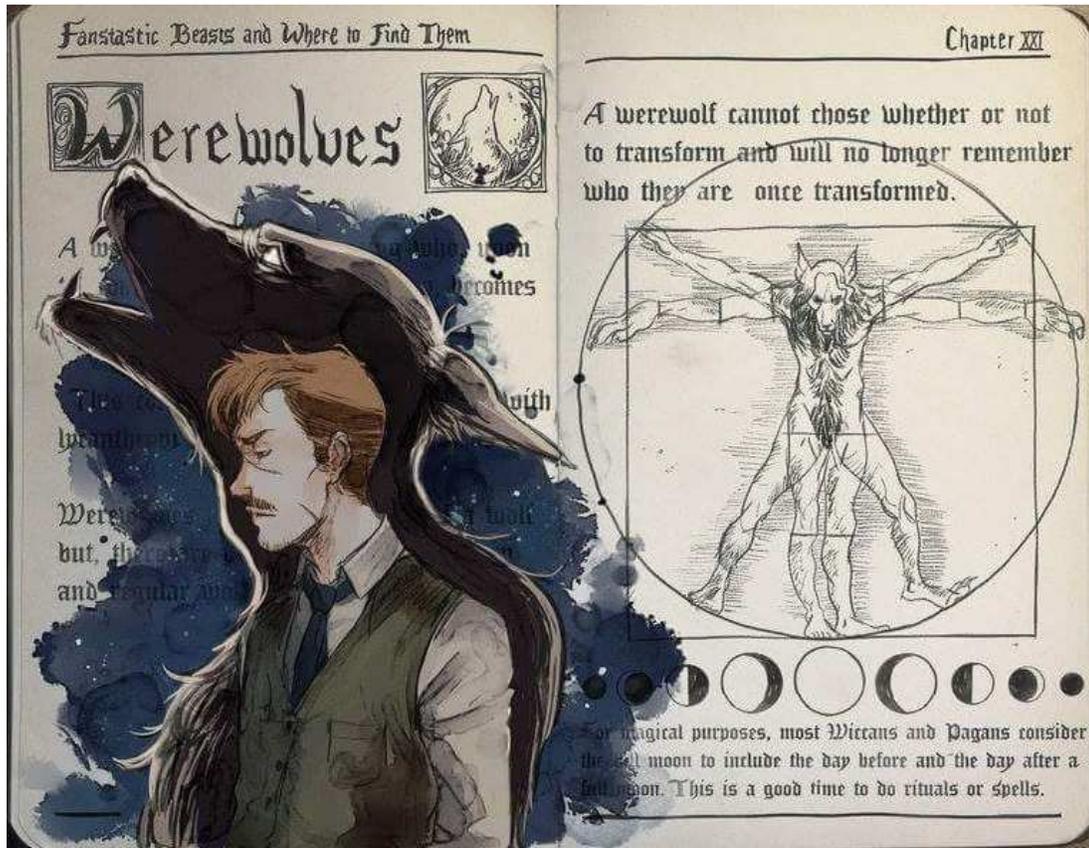


Figure 1: 'Fantastic Beasts' and Where to Find Them

The beast in the wolf.



Figure II: *The Beast in the Wolf.*



Figure III: *Odin battles Fenrir*

Illustration by Arthur Packham

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