WEREWOLVES ARE NON-BINARY

BUT NOT IN THE WAY YOU MIGHT THINK

The animal-human boundary in medieval werewolf transformation narratives

BISCLAVRET · ARTHUR & GORLAGON · TOPOGRAPHIA HIBERNICA

In his book *Animal Rationality*, Anselm Oelze writes that, following in the tradition of Aristotle, it was the view of theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Gregory of Rimini that: "only human beings have rational souls or, more precisely, only humans possess immaterial intellectual faculties [the ability to extrapolate to universal concepts from material sense input]." According to Oelze, "[a]lthough various authors questioned the denial of rational faculties to nonhuman animals, none of them ultimately rejected it."

This distinction is borne out in the three medieval werewolf narratives mentioned above. In spite of the werewolf's visual transformation, there is no inward change, no loss of "human sense." These stories end up as a way of asserting the essential wholeness of human nature and the immutability of the difference between animal and human, a theme particularly prevalent in *Arthur and Gorlagon* – which is simultaneously interested in reinforcing the essential differences in nature between men and women. In this scenario, there is very little boundary crossing: animals do not present human kinds of intelligence unless they were previously human themselves, so animal rationality presents no challenge to the status of the human.

However, in *Bisclavret*, the prolonged transformation into a wolf happens because Bisclavret cannot reclaim his clothes, and in *Arthur and Gorlagon*, the man is transformed into a wolf by being tapped with a stick. In small ways, these texts challenge the assumption that humanity is inviolate – if it is as easy to change form as not wearing clothes or being tapped with a stick, identity is much more unstable, and something which has to be continually recognised or asserted. These narratives do that asserting, by creating a world in which humanity is inviolate and can always be recognised.

Human status, which we might assume to be absolute and unquestionable, was figured as dangerously fragile.

IF DRESS CAN UPSET SPECIES STABILITY, IT DOESN'T SAY A GREAT DEAL ABOUT THE STRENGTH OF THAT STABILITY.

- Erica Fudge, Animal

Coincidentally, a medieval werewolf poem, known variously as *William of Palerne* and *William and the Werewolf*, is cited by the Oxford English Dictionary as the earliest known usage of 'they' as a singular pronoun.

Being queer and non-binary has informed my interests in liminality, failures of definition and the spaces between rigidly defined categories. I find it fascinating under what circumstances the boundaries between socially constructed binary categories can flex or shift. This poster is adapted from an undergraduate essay and reflects an exploration of these ideas in relation to medieval werewolf narratives.