MYTHOLOGIS

THE SHAPESHIFTERS BOOK

Werewolves, Skin-Changers, Selkies and the Gods Who Change Form

GUILLAUME HENRY

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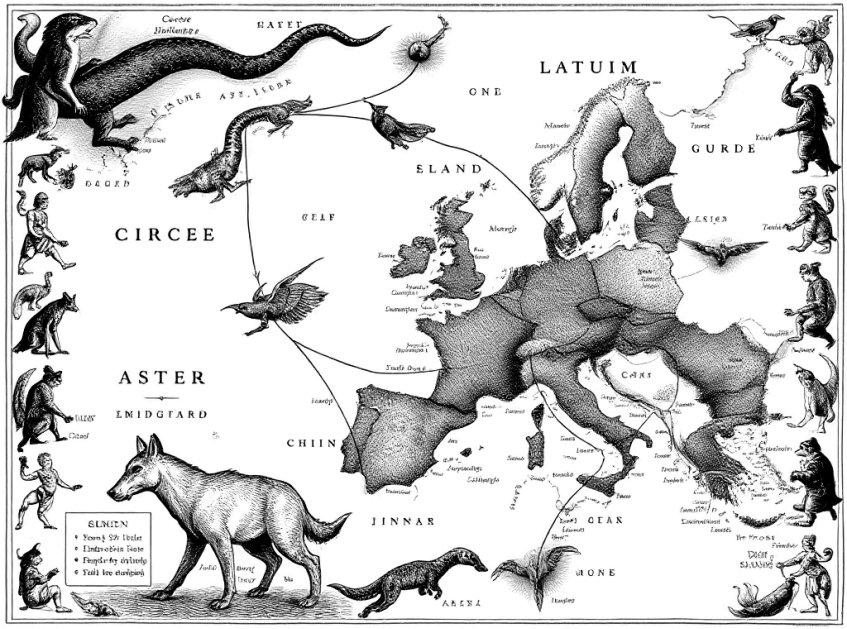
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For those who have ever wanted to slip their skin and run.

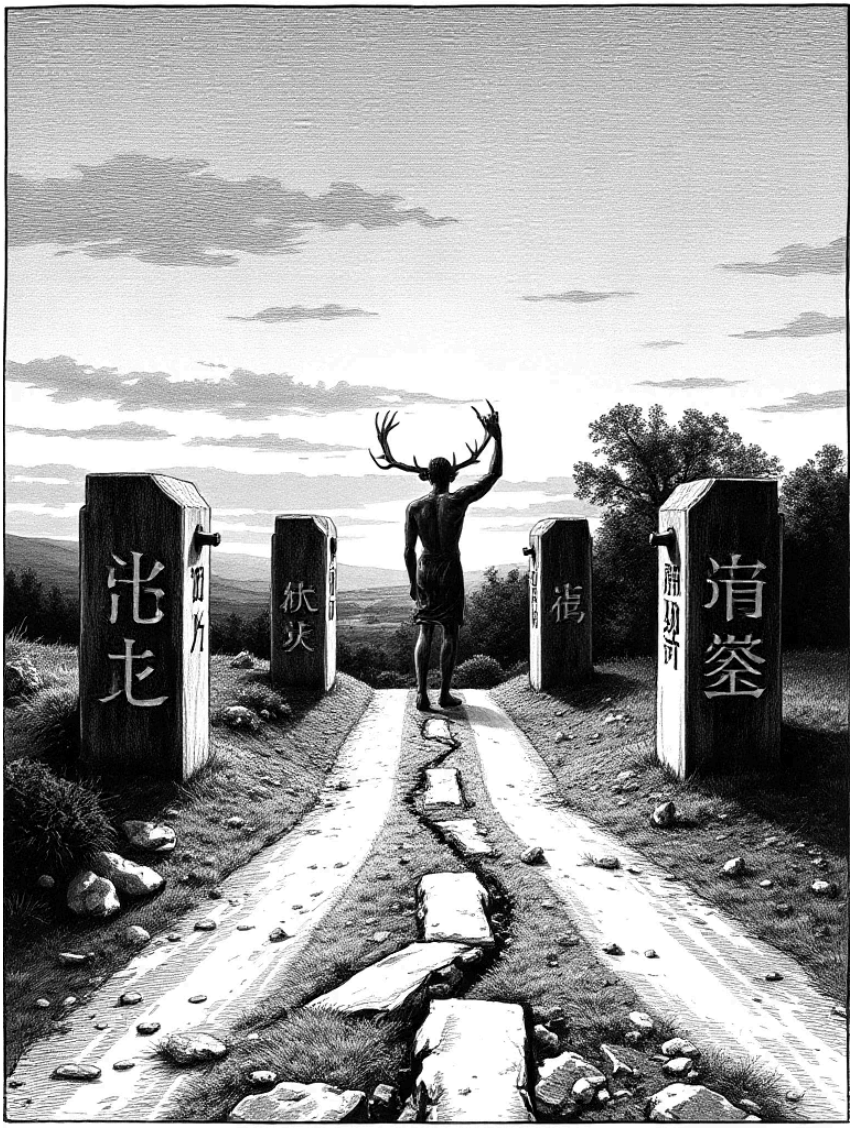
INTRODUCTION

I am standing in the British Library holding a fifteenth-century manuscript, and on the vellum before me a man is becoming a wolf. The illuminator has caught him mid-transformation, his face elongating, fur sprouting from his hands, and I can see in the careful brushwork the terror and fascination that this image must have held for its first viewers. The manuscript is a copy of Marie de France's Bisclavret, the story of the nobleman who becomes a wolf every week, and it is one of thousands of texts across the world that cannot look away from the body that changes shape. The ink has faded to rust-brown but the image has not lost its power. I have seen similar moments in Japanese scrolls depicting kitsune mid-transformation, in Ovid's verse where Actaeon sprouts antlers, in Norse carvings of bear-warriors caught between human and animal. Every culture that has told stories has told this one: the boundary between self and other is not fixed, and the body can betray you. This book is about those moments when the skin becomes a problem. Shapeshifting is older than writing. It appears in the earliest mythologies we possess and persists in folklore collected in the last century. Zeus becomes a swan to seduce Leda, a bull to abduct Europa, a shower of gold to reach Danaë. Odin walks the world as a wanderer and shifts into eagle form when needed. The gods of the Vedas change shape as easily as mortals change clothes. In these divine transformations, shapeshifting is a tool of power, the ultimate expression of will over matter. The god who can become anything is the god who is not bound by the limits that trap mortal flesh. But divine metamorphosis is only half the story. For every god who shifts form freely, there are dozens of mortals transformed against their will. Ovid's Metamorphoses is a catalogue of violated boundaries: Daphne fleeing Apollo becomes a laurel tree, Arachne

transformed into a spider for her pride, Actaeon turned into a stag and torn apart by his own hounds for seeing what he should not have seen. These are not stories of power but of punishment, of bodies reshaped as penalty. The shape you wear is not always yours to choose. And then there are the creatures who live between. The selkie who is seal in water and human on land, shedding one skin to wear another. The werewolf who transforms at the full moon, losing human reason as the wolf rises. The Japanese kitsune, the fox-spirit whose shape is always suspect, who may be woman or fox or something that is neither and both. These are not punishments or displays of divine power. They are ontological problems. What are you when your body has two forms? Which shape is the mask and which is the truth? I came to this material the way I came to most things: sideways, following a question I could not let go. My background is in cryptography, in finding patterns in noise, and mythology has always struck me as a kind of encrypted signal transmitted across time. The shapeshifter myths kept surfacing in every tradition I studied, and I wanted to know why. Why does every culture tell stories of bodies that change? What boundary is being tested here, and why does it matter so much? The answer, I think, is that the shapeshifter sits at the intersection of every fundamental question humans ask about identity. If your body changes, are you still you? If you can become an animal, were you ever fully human? If the boundary between self and other can dissolve, then what is a self? These are not abstract philosophical puzzles. They are the nightmares that wake you at three in the morning: the fear that the face in the mirror is not entirely yours, the suspicion that something inside you is not quite human. This book takes a comparative approach. I do not believe that every shapeshifter story derives from a single source, some Ur-myth of transformation that spread across the world. That would be tidy, but the evidence does not support it. What I do believe is that humans across cultures have independently arrived at similar stories because we face similar anxieties. The body is both self and other, both familiar and strange, and shapeshifting is the mythological expression of that tension. The primary sources for this study are texts I have returned to again and again: Homer's Odyssey, where Circe transforms men into pigs and Proteus shifts form to escape prophecy; Ovid's Metamorphoses, the foundational text of Western transformation myths; the Prose Edda and other Norse sources that give us berserkers. Skin-changers; the trial records of early modern Europe where men. Women confessed to becoming

wolves; the fox-spirit tales recorded in classical Chinese collections. Japanese folklore;. The Celtic selkie stories preserved in Scottish. Irish tradition. These are not the only sources, but they are the spine of the book. Where I reference ethnographic material or later collections, I say so plainly. The structure follows the logic of transformation itself. The book is organised by type of shapeshifter rather than by geography or culture. The first section examines divine metamorphosis, the gods who change form as an expression of power and will. The second treats cursed transformations, the mortal bodies reshaped by punishment or affliction, with particular attention to werewolves and the European lycanthropy trials. The third explores the liminal creatures, the beings whose existence is defined by their dual nature: selkies, swan-maidens, fox-spirits, and the skin-changers of the Norse sagas. Each section moves between cultures, finding echoes and divergences, but the goal is not to flatten difference. Greek werewolves are not the same as Norse berserkers, and the kitsune is not the same as the European fox. The comparative method is a tool for seeing patterns, not for erasing particularity. I have spent years with these stories, and one thing has become clear: the shapeshifter is never just a curiosity. It is never decoration. When a culture tells stories of bodies that change, it is working through something that matters. Sometimes the shapeshifter is an expression of divine power, the god reminding mortals that the rules do not apply equally. Sometimes it is a punishment for transgression, the body reshaped to match the crime. Sometimes it is a curse that must be endured or broken, a test of love or loyalty. And sometimes the shapeshifter simply exists, occupying a space between categories, refusing to resolve into one thing or another. The selkie fascinates me because the tragedy is built into the form. She is seal in water and woman on land, and to live in one shape she must abandon the other. The stories almost always end the same way: the human lover hides the seal-skin, thinking he can keep her, and when she finds it again she returns to the sea. The theft of the skin is the theft of choice, the attempt to fix what should remain fluid. The shapeshifter cannot be held without violence. The werewolf, by contrast, is about the loss of control. The moon rises and the transformation comes whether you will it or not. The European werewolf trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are full of confessions from men who claimed they became wolves and killed livestock, children, even their own families. Some of these confessions came under torture, and we can read them as evidence of judicial cruelty rather

than actual shapeshifting. But what interests me is the structure of the confession: the wolf-shape is described as something that overtakes the man, something he cannot resist. The werewolf is the nightmare of the body acting without the consent of the mind. The fox-spirits of East Asian tradition are different again. The kitsune can be benevolent or malicious, protector or trickster, and the shape it wears is always suspect. In some stories the fox becomes a beautiful woman to seduce a scholar; in others it serves the goddess Inari and brings good fortune. The shape is not the truth. The fox's power lies in the fact that you cannot be certain what you are looking at. I write this introduction in first person because this is the one place in the book where I need to speak directly to you. The chapters that follow will return to the third-person voice, the encyclopedic tone grounded in primary texts and comparative analysis. But here, at the threshold, I want you to know who is guiding you through this material and why I think it matters. I am not a professor in a wig. I am someone who has read obsessively across traditions and noticed that the same images keep surfacing, the same anxieties encoded in different forms. The shapeshifter is a code I have spent years trying to break, and this book is the clearest translation I can offer. One last thing before we begin. This is a book about bodies that change, but it is also a book about stories that change. The myths I examine here have been told and retold across centuries, and each retelling leaves its mark. Marie de France's Bisclavret is not the same story that oral tradition preserved before her, and the werewolf of early modern trial records is not the same creature that appears in Petronius. The shapeshifter adapts. It survives because it is never fixed, never final. The body that changes is also the story that changes, and both remain alive because they refuse to be pinned down. Turn the page. The wolf is waiting.



CHAPTER 1

THE WORLD OF THE SHAPESHIFTER

The word arrives in English from Greek: *metamorphosis*. Meta, meaning beyond or across. Morphē, meaning form or shape. The crossing beyond form. In the British Museum, tucked inside a glass case on the second floor, sits a red-figure krater from Athens, dated to 440 BCE. The painted scene shows a moment frozen in ceramic: a young man's body caught between human and stag, his hands splayed in terror, antlers already branching from his skull. The hounds have not yet reached him, but the painter has positioned them mid-leap, their bodies stretched in that instant before teeth meet flesh. This is Actaeon, hunter turned prey, and the image captures what every shapeshifting story must somehow convey: the precise second when one form bleeds into another, when the boundary that holds the self together dissolves. Walk through the museum's collection and you will find this moment painted, carved, and cast across a thousand years and a dozen civilizations. A Japanese scroll from the Edo period shows a fox mid-transformation, her face still vulpine but her body already wrapped in silk robes. A Norse wood carving depicts Loki with his mouth sewn shut, his eyes already carrying the gleam of something other. An Etruscan bronze mirror-back shows Teiresias at the moment of change, the serpents coiled at his feet, his body neither fully male nor fully female. The museum guards walk past these cases every day and perhaps no longer see them, but I stand here and cannot look away. What these images share is not style or medium

or even mythology. What they share is the same fundamental rupture: the human form breaking open to reveal something else underneath. The smell of the museum is old stone and preserved air, the kind of controlled climate that keeps vellum from crumbling and bronze from corroding further. The light is indirect, calculated not to fade pigment. Everything here is dead, in the sense that these objects no longer serve the functions for which they were made. The krater once held wine at a symposium. The scroll was unrolled by candlelight. The mirror reflected a living face. Now they are evidence, carefully labelled, their contexts reconstructed by scholars who will never drink from that cup or see their own reflection in that bronze. But the images still work. Stand close enough to the glass and Actaeon is still becoming a stag, the fox-woman is still stepping out of her fur, Teiresias is still crossing the line that was supposed to hold. The museum holds the objects. The stories they illustrate still move freely. Every language that has had to name this transformation has reached for its own vocabulary. The Greeks gave us *metamorphosis*, but they also had *alloiōsis*, meaning alteration, and *metaschēmatismos*, a re-forming or re-figuring. Latin offers *transformatio*, a carrying across of form, and *mutatio*, simple change. The Old Norse term *hamramr* translates literally as shape-strong, but the concept is slipperier: it describes someone who possesses *hamingja*, the ability to send forth another form of oneself or to change shape entirely. The word *hamr* itself means skin or shape, and to be *hamramr* is to be powerful in one's skin, capable of donning others. In medieval Icelandic sagas, the term sits adjacent to *vargúlfr*, wolf-outlaw, and *berserkr*, bear-shirt, all describing men who cross the boundary into animal form through fury, magic, or curse. Japanese offers *henge*, written with characters meaning change and strange, used for creatures who transform: the *kitsune* (fox), the *tanuki* (raccoon dog), the *bakeneko* (changed cat). Chinese distinguishes between *bian*, transformation as a general principle, and *hua*, transformation implying a kind of spiritual refinement or transcendence. The Nahuatl *nahualli* names both the transformed creature and the sorcerer who takes animal form, a double meaning that captures something essential about these narratives: the shapeshifter is both the thing transformed and the agent of transformation. Irish uses *fáth-fhiach*, meaning seer's trance, for the druidic shapeshifting described in early medieval texts, while Welsh *cylch-dro* (turning-around) appears in the Mabinogion when Math and Gwydion punish Gilfaethwy and Gwydion by transforming them annually into breeding pairs of animals.

These are not merely translation equivalents. Each term carries the semantic weight of the culture that coined it. The Greek *metamorphosis* emphasizes the crossing, the threshold moment. The Norse *hamramr* emphasizes strength and control, the capacity to master multiple forms. The Japanese *henge* emphasizes strangeness, the uncanny quality of the transformation. The Nahuatl *nahualli* collapses the distinction between magician and magic. When we use "shapeshifter" in English, a relatively recent coinage, we flatten these distinctions into a single category. The flattening is useful for analysis, but it erases texture. The geographical range of these narratives extends as far as recorded story. Homer's *Odyssey*, composed in the eighth century BCE, gives us Circe transforming Odysseus's crew into pigs in Book Ten, and later in Book Seventeen the disguised Odysseus himself is recognized by his old dog Argos, a recognition that depends on the possibility that this beggar might not be what he seems. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, completed in 8 CE, catalogs hundreds of transformations across fifteen books: Daphne into laurel, Arachne into spider, the daughters of Minyas into bats, Lycaon into wolf. The poem is structurally a meditation on change itself, beginning with the creation of the world from chaos and ending with Julius Caesar transformed into a star. Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, written around 180 CE, narrates the first-person experience of transformation, its protagonist Lucius accidentally turned into a donkey by a slave woman's botched magic and forced to experience human society from an animal perspective. The Norse corpus, written down in Iceland between the ninth and thirteenth centuries but preserving older oral traditions, is saturated with shapeshifting. Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, compiled around 1220, describes how Odin and other gods can change their shapes at will: "Odin could change his shape; his body then lay as if sleeping or dead, while he was a bird or a beast, a fish or a dragon, and went in an instant to far-off lands on his own errands or those of other men." The *Völsunga saga*, a thirteenth-century prose text based on much older poems, tells of Sigmund and Sinfjötli donning wolf-skins and becoming wolves for ten days, unable to remove the skins until the enchantment lifts. These are not metaphorical wolves. The saga specifies that they kill men, that they howl, that they cannot speak human language while in wolf form. East Asian traditions offer parallel density. Chinese tales of fox-spirit transformation date to at least the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), but the surviving narrative corpus explodes during the Six Dynasties period (220 to 589 CE), when

literati began recording strange tales of animals who assumed human form. By the Qing dynasty, Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (compiled 1740) includes dozens of such narratives, most featuring fox-women who seduce scholars, their transformations treated as simultaneously supernatural and utterly matter-of-fact. Japanese *henge* tales appear in the *Nihon Ryōiki* (compiled early ninth century) and proliferate through the Heian period and beyond, eventually codified into distinct types: the grateful animal who repays kindness by assuming human form, the vengeful spirit who transforms to punish wrongdoing, the trickster who shifts shape for amusement or profit. This is not a complete map. Celtic traditions preserve shapeshifting in texts like the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, where the goddess Mórrígan appears to Cú Chulainn as eel, wolf, and heifer. The *Mabinogion* includes Math and Gwydion's punishment transformations and Lleu Llaw Gyffes' metamorphosis into an eagle. Mesoamerican codices and colonial-era texts record *nahualli* sorcerers and gods who took jaguar, eagle, or serpent forms. The archive is vast and the patterns repeat: gods transform to seduce or deceive, humans are transformed as punishment or blessing, certain individuals possess the gift or curse of moving between forms, animals walk among us wearing human skin. Scholars have attempted taxonomy. Walter Burkert, in *Homo Necans* and later works, identified Greek animal metamorphosis as a ritual remnant, transformation narratives encoding actual cult practices involving masks and costume. Mircea Eliade, in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, linked shapeshifting to shamanic trance-states, the transformation narrative as a mythologized account of the shaman's spirit-journey in animal form. Claude Lévi-Strauss read transformation as structural mediation, the shapeshifter existing at the boundary between conceptual categories and therefore available to resolve narrative contradictions. All these readings possess truth, but none exhaust the phenomenon. A more pragmatic taxonomy begins with agency and voluntariness. At one pole sits voluntary divine metamorphosis: Zeus becoming swan, bull, or eagle to pursue mortal lovers; Odin taking bird or serpent form to travel; Proteus shifting shapes to escape capture. These transformations demonstrate power. The god who can alter form at will is a god who controls the fundamental category that defines mortal existence. The boundary between human and animal, which mortals experience as fixed, becomes for the god merely another threshold to cross. When Zeus becomes a bull to abduct Europa, the transformation is not a disguise in the

sense of hiding his true nature. It is a revelation of divine power, the capacity to be simultaneously god and beast, to inhabit animal form without ceasing to be divine. A second category encompasses involuntary transformation as curse or punishment. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* specializes in these: Actaeon, who sees Artemis bathing and is transformed into a stag, hunted down by his own hounds; Callisto, raped by Zeus and then transformed into a bear by Hera's jealousy; Lycaon, who serves Zeus human flesh and is transformed into a wolf. These transformations function as divine justice, the punishment fit precisely to the crime. Actaeon's voyeurism costs him his human gaze. Lycaon's violation of hospitality reduces him to the animal he has acted like. The transformation makes visible an inner truth: you are already a beast, the curse seems to say, now your body will match your soul. The third category includes creatures whose nature is dual: the selkie who swims as seal and walks on land as human, the swan-maiden who wears feathers in one realm and skin in another, the werewolf whose human and wolf forms alternate according to lunar cycle or other rhythmic compulsion. These are not transformations in the sense of one-time events. They are expressions of an ontological doubleness, beings who exist simultaneously in two categories. The narrative question for such creatures is not whether they will transform, but which form they will choose or be forced into, and what that choice will cost. The final category consists of skin-changers: humans who don animal pelts or skins to become animals, and whose transformation depends on the physical presence of that skin. The Norse wolf-shirts and bear-shirts belong here, as do the selkies in their seal-skins, the fox-spirits who sometimes leave their fox-skins behind, the witches in various European traditions who rub themselves with ointments and become hares or cats. These transformations are technological in a sense: they require a tool, a medium through which the change occurs. The skin or pelt becomes a kind of threshold object, neither fully animal nor fully human, the material trace of the boundary being crossed. Each category carries different narrative possibilities and different cultural work. Divine voluntary transformation encodes ideas about power and divinity, the relationship between mortal and immortal realms. Punishment transformation enforces social and moral boundaries, warning against hubris, violation of taboo, or failure to recognize the gods. Dual-natured creatures negotiate categorical ambiguity, allowing narratives to explore what it means to live simultaneously in two worlds. Skin-changing traditions locate trans-

formation in physical objects, making the supernatural tangible and theftable, available to narrative complications involving lost skins, hidden pelts, stolen identities. A Norse warrior stands at the edge of a forest clearing. The year is 973, the place is Iceland, the season is autumn. These specifics are invented, but the type is historical: the sagas and *Landnámabók* record such men, and their transformations. This warrior has hung a wolf-pelt over his shoulders. It is not decorative. The pelt still carries teeth and claws, still smells of the animal it was. He has sung the words, the specific formula that his father taught him and his father's mother taught before that. The words are not written in any surviving source, but their existence is attested. Egil's Saga mentions them. The Volsunga saga implies them. What happens next is the transformation, but the saga texts are curiously reticent about mechanism. They give us result, not process. The warrior becomes wolf. Some texts specify that the man's body lies as if sleeping while his wolf-form moves abroad. Others imply a more complete metamorphosis: the man's body changes, fur sprouts, the mouth lengthens, the hands become paws. The difference is theological. If the wolf-form is a kind of *hugr* or sending, a projection of the man's spirit in animal shape, then body and form remain separate. If the wolf-form is a true transformation, body and form unite. The sagas do not resolve this. Perhaps their original audiences did not need resolution. The result is what matters: a man who was standing in the clearing is now a wolf, and that wolf will hunt, and what it hunts is not always deer. The autumn light is failing. The wolf-warrior can smell the settlement downhill, can smell the smoke of cooking fires and the sweat of frightened sheep. The transformation has brought hunger, a hunger that is not entirely metaphorical. The sagas are clear on this point: the berserkers and wolfskins are dangerous. They kill. The question the sagas ask is not whether such men should exist, but how to control them. King Harald Fairhair outlawed berserkers around 900 CE, according to Snorri. The Icelandic legal codes include provisions against them. These are not laws against mythical creatures. They are laws against men who put on animal skins and became, in some literal or functional sense, animals. The warrior in the clearing feels the wolf-skin tighten. The word used in the sagas is *hamrammr*, shape-strong, and the strength is real. Men in wolf-skins fought in the front ranks of Viking shield-walls, and their reputation for fury and imperviousness to pain was strategic as much as supernatural. But the transformation exacts a price. The sagas record that berserkers after battle often fell into weakness

and depression, the shape-strength leaving them. The wolf-warrior in the clearing knows this. He knows the hunger will fade, the pelt will loosen, he will wake (if wake is the right word) back in human form. He also knows that each transformation costs something. The sagas are vague about what. Perhaps it is simply that the boundary, once crossed, becomes easier to cross again, until one day the wolf-form does not relinquish its hold. The wolf moves into the trees. The human part of consciousness has not vanished, but it has narrowed. The wolf hunts. That is what wolves do. The cultural functions of shapeshifting narratives operate on multiple registers simultaneously. At the most pragmatic level, they explain divine power and divine behavior. When Zeus transforms into a swan to couple with Leda, the transformation solves a narrative problem: how can a god mate with a mortal woman without destroying her? The swan-form provides an answer. The transformation makes the encounter possible, renders the divine approachable. At the same time, it maintains divine otherness. Zeus may wear a swan's body, but he remains Zeus. The transformation is revelation and concealment both. The mortal woman experiences divine power through the mediation of animal form, an encounter that would be unendurable without that mediation. At a deeper level, shapeshifting narratives enforce social boundaries by literalizing transgression. When Ovid transforms Lycaon into a wolf after Lycaon serves Zeus human flesh, the metamorphosis makes visible what was already morally true: the man who violates the most fundamental rule of hospitality, who treats human flesh as animal meat, has already placed himself outside human society. The wolf-form is the external sign of an internal reality. This is transformation as diagnosis. The bestial act produces the bestial body. The narrative logic is relentlessly symmetrical: Arachne, who claimed to weave better than Athena, becomes a spider, condemned to weave forever. Callisto, transformed into a bear, becomes the hunted animal she once hunted. The punishment fits because the punishment reveals. But shapeshifting narratives also create spaces for desires and identities that cannot otherwise be spoken. The swan-maiden who can remove her feathers and become human, or the selkie who can shed her seal-skin and walk on land, occupies a threshold space where longing and impossibility meet. These are creatures who belong to two worlds and fully to neither, and their narratives often turn on marriage to humans: the man who steals the swan-maiden's feathers or the selkie's skin, forcing her to remain on land, binding her to human domesticity. The theft is both meta-

phorical and literal. The skin or feathers represent the creature's autonomy, her ability to return to her original form and realm. The human husband who hides the skin is committing a kind of metaphysical violence, trapping her between forms. These narratives allow cultures to think about marriage across boundaries: class, culture, the human and more-than-human worlds. They also think about gender and desire in ways that more conventional narratives cannot. The god who becomes animal to seduce a mortal explores not just divine power but the erotics of the non-human. The witch who becomes a cat moves through the night world unavailable to women in their ordinary bodies. The berserker who dons the wolf-skin accesses a fury and violence otherwise coded as shameful or illegal. Transformation provides license. The changed body can do what the original body cannot. Shapeshifting narratives also manage the human-animal boundary itself, that permeable and anxiously-policed line between categories. Every hunting culture must reconcile the fact that the animal one hunts is simultaneously other and kin, meat and subject, thing and being. Transformation narratives make this doubleness explicit. The hunter who becomes hunted, like Actaeon, experiences the collapse of the boundary from both sides. The wolf-warrior who hunts in animal form knows animal consciousness from the inside. The fox-spirit who lives among humans in human guise reveals that the boundary was always more porous than the village walls suggested. These narratives do not resolve the tension. They enact it, over and over, in story after story. Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* offers the most sustained first-person account of transformation in the classical corpus. The novel's narrator, Lucius, comes to Thessaly pursuing magical knowledge and convinces a slave-woman named Photis to let him watch her mistress transform into a bird. Lucius wants to transform himself, persuades Photis to steal the ointment, but she brings the wrong jar. Lucius rubs himself with the contents and transforms not into a bird but into an ass, a donkey. The novel's remaining ten books narrate his attempts to regain human form, a quest that takes him through slavery, beatings, the threat of castration, forced participation in a bestial sex-show, and finally a religious vision of Isis who restores his humanity. What makes the narrative remarkable is Apuleius's attention to the experience of living in an animal body. Lucius in ass-form retains human consciousness and language comprehension but cannot speak. He understands the conversations happening around him but cannot participate. He is beaten for behavior that makes perfect sense to him but

appears to humans as animal stubbornness. He is sold, resold, used. The narrative is comic in places and horrifying in others, and what it explores is what it means to be trapped in a body that the world reads as animal while the consciousness inside remains human. This is not voluntary transformation. It is not divine punishment for specific transgression. It is accident, the wrong ointment applied, and the horror is precisely in the arbitrariness. The novel's resolution comes through religious initiation. Lucius prays to Isis, is visited by her in a dream, follows her instructions, eats a crown of roses from the hand of her priest during a festival procession, and in that moment transforms back into human form. He subsequently becomes an initiate in Isis's mysteries, then in Osiris's mysteries, and the novel ends with Lucius living in Rome as a religious devotee. The transformation and restoration thus function as an initiation narrative, the animal body as a kind of ritual death and rebirth. Lucius in human form is not the same person who first transformed. He has experienced vulnerability, abjection, and the collapse of human privilege. The ass-body was his teacher. Comparative mythology has often read transformation narratives through the lens of shamanism and trance-states. Mircea Eliade's work on Siberian and Central Asian shamanism documented practices in which shamans wear animal costumes, dance animal movements, and describe their trance experiences as spirit-journeys in animal form. The shaman becomes eagle, or wolf, or reindeer, travels to the underworld or the sky-realm, returns with knowledge or healing. These are not metaphors in the traditions themselves. The shaman in trance has become the animal, can see through the animal's eyes, experiences the animal's powers. Similar practices are documented across the Americas, in Australian Aboriginal traditions, in African contexts. The scholarly debate centers on whether the transformation is phenomenologically real for the practitioner or whether it is symbolic, a religious language for altered states. This is probably the wrong question. The shaman in trance experiences the transformation as real. The community witnesses the transformation as real. The symbolic and the experiential are not separate categories. Norse shapeshifting may preserve a European version of these shamanic practices. The *hamramr* warriors and the berserkers operate at the edges of Old Norse society in ways that recall shamanic specialists elsewhere: valued for their power, feared for their otherness, dangerous if uncontrolled. The *Ynglinga saga* describes Odin as skilled in the magic called *seiðr*, a practice Snorri associates with shapeshifting and spirit-journeys.

Seiðr was coded as female magic in the Norse sources, and men who practiced it, including Odin, faced accusations of *ergi*, unmanliness. The *hamramr* warrior's transformation might represent a male-coded alternative to *seiðr*, a way of accessing shapeshifting power through martial fury rather than ritual trance. But the distinction may be modern. Both practices involve crossing boundaries: between human and animal, between body and spirit, between self and other. A woman kneels by a river in Heian-period Japan. The place is unspecified in the story, one of Pu Songling's collected tales translated and adapted. The woman's reflection in the water shows human features: dark hair, pale face, the layers of silk robes appropriate to her station. But if the observer looks carefully, looks past the surface of the water to the woman herself, something in the angle of her eyes, the set of her mouth, the way she holds her body, reads as other. This is a kitsune, a fox-spirit, and she has been wearing human form for three years. The scholar she married does not know. The children she has borne him do not know. The neighbors do not suspect. She has been careful. The fox-spirits in Chinese and Japanese tales are not quite shapeshifters in the Western mold. They do not transform and un-transform within a single narrative. They wear human form for years, decades, sometimes entire lifetimes. The transformation is not an event but a sustained performance, a constant act of will and magic. The danger for the fox-woman is not transformation itself but discovery, the moment when the disguise fails, when someone sees through the form to the fox beneath. Discovery comes through various means: the fox-woman's reflection in a mirror shows vulpine features; she sleeps with her tail exposed; a Taoist priest recognizes her nature; she becomes drunk and her fox-form emerges. The moment of discovery is always narrative crisis. What these tales explore is not transformation per se but identity and its fragility. The fox-woman has built a life in human form: marriage, children, social position. When her true nature is revealed, all of this becomes retroactively false. The marriage was not a marriage, the children not fully human, the social position a lie. Or was it? The fox-woman loved her husband, bore and raised her children, performed every wifely duty. If the performance was perfect, in what sense was it false? This is the question the tales ask but do not definitively answer. Some tales end with the fox-woman fleeing, the marriage annulled, the children abandoned. Others end with the husband accepting his wife's dual nature, the marriage continuing, the doubleness accommodated rather than resolved. The river reflects the

woman's face, and the face is human, and the magic that holds that face in place is as real as the face itself. She has shaped herself into human form the way a sculptor shapes clay, and the form is not mask or costume. It is her body, chosen and maintained. The fox beneath is no more her true self than the woman on the surface. She is both. The river does not care. Transformation narratives persist across media and centuries because they address something fundamental about embodiment and selfhood. We experience our bodies as ourselves, the unquestionable ground of identity, and simultaneously as other, as the meat that betrays us through aging, illness, desire, mortality. The shapeshifter literalizes this doubleness. The body that changes shape is a body that might be otherwise, and that possibility is both liberation and horror. Liberation: you are not bound to this form, this gender, this species-identity. Horror: the self you thought was fixed is permeable, vulnerable, capable of dissolving into other forms entirely. The shapeshifter stands at every boundary that human cultures police: human and animal, male and female, mortal and divine, domestic. Wild, self. Other. The narratives do not erase these boundaries. They make them visible, tangible, crossable. And in making them crossable, they reveal that the boundaries were always more negotiable than the daylight world pretends. The wolf-warrior knows this. The fox-woman knows this. The god in swan-form knows this. The changed body is the proof. The British Museum's krater is closed in darkness now, the building locked, the security lights casting their flat glow across the galleries. The painted figures continue their transformations in the dark. Actaeon's antlers branch upward, his hounds leap, his human face elongates into the muzzle that will seal his fate. The image has held this moment for two and a half millennia and will hold it for centuries more, the terror frozen in ceramic, the transformation permanent and eternally incomplete. The museum's climate control hums, the temperature and humidity regulated to preserve the object. Outside, in the London night, actual animals move through the city: foxes in the parks, deer in the suburban margins, wolves only in the zoo. The boundary between human and animal space is policed now with roads and walls and the assumption that wildness happens elsewhere, that the shapeshifter belongs to the museum and not to the street. But the stories still move freely. The woman reading Ovid on the Tube home could recite the transformation of Daphne without opening the book. The child who watches the wolf transformation in the film carries that image into nightmares and daydreams

both. The tattoo on the barista's forearm shows a half-formed creature, human and animal at once, the lines of the design tracing the boundary that will not hold. We have preserved the shapeshifter in every medium our technologies allow: ink on vellum, paint on ceramic, pixels on screens. The form changes. The crossing remains.

