

***"The Lessons of Merlyn: Shapeshifters and Shapeshifting in
Fantasy"***

Amongst those fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm is one called "The Foundling." In this story, there are two children: Foundling and Lena, a boy and a girl, respectively. They are not related by blood, but are quite inseparable, if they have anything to say about it. The cook employed by Lena's father, of course, decided to scheme to cook and eat Foundling, and when Lena caught wind of this plot she and Foundling made for the woods. They were pursued, but were able to outwit the villainous cook's henchmen by becoming first a rosebush with a rose, then a church with a chandelier. The cook saw through this deception and decided that, as the old saying goes, if she wanted something done right, she would have to do it herself. When she set out after the children, she met her appointed bad end, as all fairy tale villains should, drowned by Lena (in the form of a duck) in Foundling (in the form of a pond).

Instances of shapeshifting can be found across fantasy literature. It is accomplished through myriad means and employed to countless different ends. Whether a character is cursed to become a werewolf with each full moon or a wizard is using powerful magic to give himself the upper hand against some evil (or, perhaps, teach someone an important lesson), shapeshifting is a prevalent component of the fantasy genre. In all of its forms, shapeshifting is a significant – perhaps irreplaceable – tool of fantasy storytelling.

Shapeshifting is not restricted, however, to the genre of the fairy tale and fantasy story; instances of shapeshifting and shapeshifters abound throughout mythology and folklore. The Olympian gods of Greek mythology demonstrate their abilities to change

their shape and the shape of others on numerous occasions. Several Norse figures, including Loki, are also known to alter their shape. In Japanese lore, the shapeshifting fox, or *kitsune*, appears “in virtually every genre of Japanese discourse for more than a millennium” [Bathgate 27].

Contemporary fantasy has inarguably followed suit. The importance of the shapeshifting motifs within fantasy is best analyzed based upon the circumstances of its use; shapeshifting is, as stated, often used in different fashions and for different reasons, and thus can be led to mean something different, as well. Shapeshifting can be willing or unwilling, beneficial or detrimental, natural or divine. Some shapeshifting is punishment or curse, as in several myths, fairy tales, and folklore involving creatures like werewolves. Other instances of shapeshifting confer, positively, the abilities and insights of the new form, or, at least, provide a handy disguise.

The shapeshifting in “The Foundling” is, of course, of the disguise variety. The cook’s henchmen, expecting to find children, paid no attention to a rosebush or a church. The third instance of shapeshifting could also be classified as one to attain the abilities of the new form, namely to give the children something in which to drown the cook. Regardless, it is worth noting that each case paired the children into two particularly complementary forms: when Foundling was a rosebush, Lena was a rose; when Foundling became a church, Lena was a chandelier within the church; and when Foundling took the form of a pond, Lena became a duck on the pond. These forms accentuated the acute connection between the children, who loved each other dearly. The use of shapeshifting here suggests that Lena and Foundling were two parts of a coherent whole, and lacked completeness when they were not together. This is a case-specific way

in which shapeshifting is used to augment a motif within a story. After all, what is a rosebush without a rose?

Other fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm dealing with shapeshifting tend to have a more negative spin to it. The well-known tale of “The Frog Prince” is one easy example, wherein a royal man is cursed by a witch into the form of a frog, and can only be returned to his human shape with a maiden’s kiss. Two other stories, “Brother and Sister” and “The Seven Ravens,” use shapeshifting as punishment. In the former, the eponymous brother is turned into a faun when he drinks from an enchanted pool, despite his sister’s warnings. The latter is the tale of seven brothers who, after botching the simple task of retrieving baptismal water for their younger sister, are turned into ravens with a careless word from their father. In both stories, the victims of the shapeshifting are eventually returned to their human forms, after a specific task is performed.

There are numerous similar tales in Greek mythology. To name just one example, the story of Arachne tells of how a boastful weaver is transformed by Athena into a spider for challenging the goddess to a weaving contest [Forbes Irving 308]. This story, which may be intended as an explanatory tale to shed light on the spider’s skill at spinning its silk into a web, is also an obviously cautionary tale, warning against the dangers of being too egotistical. Homer’s *The Odyssey* tells, too, of an unfortunate incident in which Odysseus’s crew is drugged and enchanted by Circe, so that “They had the heads of swine and the voice and the hair/And the body, but the mind was steady as before” [Homer, X: lines 239-240].

In these cases, shapeshifting is a threat. It is, literally, a loss of physical humanity, and thus suggests the loss of humanity altogether. None of the shapeshifted

gained any special boon from their animal form, though the characters in the fairy tale examples did find ways to adapt and exist happily, though they were still elated to be human again. This theme firmly situates the animal as something less than human, something undesirable, even when the human mind is in control of the bestial body. For the fairy tales collected in *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, to which the brothers “added numerous Christian expressions and references” [Zipes xxviii], it may be further significant to note that taking the shape of an animal is “the epitome of horror, given that the image of God is denatured” [Lecouteux 106].

The loss of humanity, the beast winning over human reason, is a danger of shapeshifting in some fantasy fiction. In Ursula Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*, “a wizard’s power of Changing...can shake the balance of the world” [48]. Le Guin’s protagonist, the young wizard Ged, is warned of the dangers of shapeshifting, or Changing, by multiple elder mages. One later passage of the novel, after Ged nearly loses himself as a falcon, explains:

“The longer a man stays in a form not his own, the greater this peril.

Every prentice-sorcerer learns the tale of the wizard Bordger of Way, who delighted in taking bear’s shape, and did so more and more often until the bear grew in him and the man died away, and he became a bear, and killed his own little son in the forests, and was hunted down and slain” [135-136].

While *A Wizard of Earthsea* does not view Changing as a strictly negative thing, it is certainly not without its dangers. Le Guin draws a clear line between merely taking the form of an animal or object and truly becoming that thing. This dichotomy admits two

important things about Changing in Le Guin's world: one, that it is a useful tool, and that humans are not superior in all ways to the creatures with which they share the world; and two, that the danger to a wizard is not losing his natural race or species, but instead losing himself, losing who he is. A bear is not necessarily less than human, but a human is not meant to live as a bear.

Nowhere is the loss of humanity and victory of the beast more prevalent in shapeshifter fiction than with the werewolf. The origin of the werewolf is difficult to pin down; it could originate in early belief that men and wolves had a common ancestry, or perhaps because of late evolutionary survivors of "primitive" man. The "most credible theory yet advanced," however, is that werewolves are based upon ancient warriors who went into battle garbed in wolf's fur [Frost 4]. Medical theories also link lycanthropy – that is, the condition of being a werewolf – to a congenital disorder called porphyria, which causes light sensitivity, clay-colored teeth, the deformation of the ears, nose, and fingers, and a variety of mental disorders [Edwards xxi].

The wolf is a creature that is particularly associated with evil and ferocity. In the Greek myth of Lycaon, the eponymous figure dares to serve Zeus a feast of human flesh. When the god discovers this vile treachery, Lycaon is turned into a wolf for the crime [Forbes Irving 216]. The werewolf, by association, is rarely a benevolent beast. Shapeshifting in general, and lycanthropy in particular, was, in the Middle Ages, inseparably linked to witchcraft, and through witchcraft to the Devil [Frost 10]. Transformation into a werewolf was a demonic thing; if done intentionally, then the lycanthrope most likely has evil intent. Otherwise, the lycanthrope is a victim of some

curse or contamination, forced to transform into a vicious, untamed beast against his or her will [Frost 7-8].

The werewolf in fiction, then, serves a purpose that connects the lycanthrope, and by association humans, less with the wolf as an animal, but rather with the wolf as a symbol. The werewolf itself is evil incarnate; the deliberate werewolf is truly a twisted human being, prone to rend and kill. The unintentional werewolf is a victim of the breakdown of human ability to reason, having succumbed to that darkness that exists in human nature. In the Christian approximation, this would undoubtedly mean sin; if the werewolf is a tool of the Devil, who tempts mortal man to commit sin, then werewolves must be amongst the most sinful of beings. The fact that the werewolf could be someone who is innocent of the crimes of their lupine alter ego makes this beast even more powerful; it forces the hero, in some stories, to defeat the werewolf's evil at the expense of the innocent trapped within the werewolf. The werewolf is a duality between good and evil, man and beast, which epitomizes the inseparability of such abstracts.

Werewolves offer a segue into the topic of the willful shapeshifters, those that change their form for their own benefit and, sometimes, that of others. Mythology is full of such shapeshifters, usually deities, who can take whatever form they wish, and do when it suits them. Zeus beguiled more than one maiden while disguised as something less than a god, though he was not necessarily always human (or even male). The story of Proteus, the old man of the sea, is amongst the earliest shapeshifter tales in mythology [Forbes Irving 174]. Menelaus recounts the tale of his encounter with Proteus to Telemachus in Book IV of *The Odyssey*:

“The old man did not forget his wily skill.

First of all he became a lion with a mighty beard,
 And then a serpent, and a panther, and a great boar.
 Then he became watery water, and a lofty-leaved tree.

But we held on firmly with an enduring heart..." [IV: lines 455-459]

Norse myth, too, contains shapeshifting figures. One such is Bodvar Bjarki, a "Norwegian...who ever and anon took on the likeness of a bear" [Munch 218]. Bjarki was one of the champions of King Rolf of Leire, and laid waste to enemy troops in the form of an immense bear [Munch 218-220].

Willful shapeshifting is often done to gain some advantage from the new form. Disguise is one such use, as in the earlier example from "The Foundling"; shapeshifting-as-disguise is used to villainous ends in the fairy tale "Brother and Sister," when a witch disguises her ugly daughter as the eponymous maiden so that she may take the sister's place [Grimm 45]. Witches were also known to take animal form as a disguise, to conceal their villainous doings, as they can "change form at will" [Lecouteux 104]. Often, says Bathgate of Japanese shapeshifter tales, "the deceptive powers of the shapeshifter are pitted against protagonists who strive (not always successfully) to unmask them" [13].

Another usage of shapeshifting is as a pedagogical method. Some lessons in fantasy are best taught, when possible, through the eyes of something other than human. Perhaps the best known case of this comes from *The Once and Future King*, T.H. White's Arthurian novel. Several times throughout the first book, *The Sword in the Stone*, the wizard Merlyn turns Arthur, then called the Wart, into a variety of different creatures as part of his education. The first time sees the Wart become a fish so that Merlyn may

introduce him to “what it is to be a king” [White 51]. The Wart’s subsequent educational adventures in the animal world see him become a kind of hawk called a merlin [76], an ant [122], an owl [161], a goose [164-165], and a badger [184].

Merlyn uses these forays into the cultures of animals to teach the Wart important lessons that he will need to learn to be a good king. These animal societies often resemble caricatures of human ones in some way; for instance, in the moat, the King of the Moat is a Machiavellian pike who firmly believes that might makes right. The moat, then, is a microcosm of human society, but seems as great from the point of view of a fish. Likewise, the system employed by the ants reminds of the hyperefficient, controlling, and homogenous dystopias of science fiction. The birds of prey in Hob’s mew form a military paradigm, as noted by Merlyn before sending the Wart in for the night. White satirizes human society with animal society. Merlyn’s magic enables him to do so safely within the context of Arthurian legend.

Perhaps most commonly, shapeshifting is used to gain the abilities of the new form. To return to Le Guin, Ged uses his ability to Change to great effect when battling the offspring of Yevaud, the Dragon of Pendor. After defeating three of the younger dragons with his magic, Ged takes the form of a dragon himself to engage a second trio of the beasts. He quickly dispatches the two smaller ones before engaging the largest of the three, who is larger than Ged’s dragon form, as well, in combat using his talons. He manages to best even this dragon, but quickly returns to his own form because “it was most perilous to keep that dragon-shape longer than need demanded” [Le Guin 96]. Ged also takes the form of a bird of prey on more than one occasion during the novel to allow him to fly.

There is a notable, if mostly stylistic, distinction between the shapeshifting in *The Once and Future King* and *Changing* in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Both are accomplished magically, by skilled wizards; however, whereas Ged seems to take quite naturally to his new form when he Changes, the Wart has greater difficulty and must learn to utilize his animal body: “The Wart found it difficult to be a new kind of creature. It was no good trying to swim like a human being, for it made him go corkscrew and much too slowly. He did not know how to swim like a fish” [White 46]. The significance of this may largely lie in the use of shapeshifting in each work; while White’s novel utilizes it as an educational tool for the young King Arthur, Le Guin’s merely offers it as a tool for Ged to use as he needs. Merlyn sees an obvious value in the society of animals, but Le Guin offers no such reasoning. While dragons have their own significance in Le Guin’s novels, the fact that Ged is capable of besting a natural dragon, and a larger one at that, when he takes dragon form somewhat undermines the importance of the dragon being a different kind of creature than Ged, at least in body.

Obviously, shapeshifting features transformations into animal forms more often than other objects. However, as with “The Foundling,” shapeshifting does occasionally involve a creature changing into an object. Likewise, shapeshifting from one gender to another, though perhaps remaining the same species, is also relatively uncommon. There are several notable examples from Greek mythology; Zeus took the form of a woman to seduce Callisto [Forbes Irving 151], and the story of Teiresias’s metamorphosis into a woman and back is possibly the best known story of sex change in the shapeshifting sense. The tale may gain its notoriety because of the rarity of its topic in other sources.

Though it may seem quite a different thing for a human to become an animal than for a man to become a woman, they are, perhaps, more closely related than is obvious. Of sex changes, Forbes Irving says: “Movement between the sexes is perhaps the most obvious and striking example of a confusion or transcendence of categories and therefore a symbol of very varied potential” [151]. To call shapeshifting in general a “transcendence of categories” would certainly not be inaccurate, and there is validity to Forbes Irving’s statement, as well. Human and animal are separated by numerous things, the most obvious of which being physical form. In much fiction, and indeed in conventional thought, the difference extends further; animals have a different nature than humans; it is fallacious to attempt to describe the animal in strictly human terms. Indeed, the danger of remaining Changed for too long in *A Wizard of Earthsea* springs from the fact that animals have a certain nature that is not shared by humans; it is not wrong, merely different.

Similarly, male and female are two very different categories, even for the same species. This is especially true if, added to the biological and psychological differences between the sexes, traditional gender roles are considered. If a character were to find himself or herself in the form of the opposite sex, they would, likely, have to adapt to playing the opposite role from what is normal for them, despite the fact that such roles are societal constructs rather than facts of the shape. Another aspect that makes such a prospect a significant subcategory of shapeshifting is that, unlike with animal transformations, sex transformations are such that, at least within humanity, both forms can be known by humans from experience, though obviously not by the same person.

With animal shapeshifting, the author must take liberties; he cannot ask his dog what it's like to be a dog and expect to get a helpful response.

This does raise a question about shapeshifters in general: does gender even apply to such creatures which can shapeshift over a wide range of forms? Gender roles being, as mentioned, constructs tied to, though not caused by, physical form, would they hold if physical form no longer mattered? Probably not. If the male and female sexes were as interchangeable as clothing, there would be little opportunity for sexism. Speculatively, though, were that the case on a large scale, the related society would have to be different from most societies, real and imagined. Too much of modern thought rides on distinctions like gender.

The shapeshifters discussed to this point have been predominantly humans, or at least gods who tend to resemble humans in their "normal" form. Shapeshifters that are not human in any event do exist in fantasy fiction, and serve a variety of roles. One of the most notable is the *daemon* from Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. In Pullman's alternate world, all humans have a daemon, which are an animal companion of sorts tied inseparably to them. Until the human half of the pair reaches puberty, the daemon is capable of changing shape at will into, seemingly, almost any sort of animal, real or fictional, though Pullman alludes to the existence of size limitations. At puberty, however, the daemon settles into a certain form which is supposedly a reflection of the human's true self.

Here, shapeshifting is closely tied to the human personality because of the connection of the human to the daemon. While children sometimes use their daemon's shapeshifting ability for a specific task, the daemons often seem to be left to their own

devices to be whatever they want to be at the time. This may suggest the malleability of the child's mind and personality; just as they are impressionable in a nonphysical way, so the daemon is quite literally changeable with the child's moods. Daemons do seem to develop favorite forms, as well, which may suggest the maturation of the child's personality; the child is closer to their adult form mentally, their "self," and so the daemon is closing in on its own proper form. In this way, the child is its own breed of shapeshifter, but one which does its metamorphosing in the mind rather than the body.

It would be erroneous to discuss shapeshifting without touching upon the degree to which it can capture the imagination of the reader. Fiction which contains shapeshifters often makes more or less overt reference to this fact. Many characters – and, indeed, many people – do spend time wishing they were capable of something that an animal is capable of, but that a human is not. The Wart of *The Once and Future King* expressed such a desire, one of the more common ones, to be able to fly. Just as magic thrills because it allows the impossible to be easily possible, shapeshifting caters to the same desire for the rules of reality to be let go in favor of the rules of fantasy.

Because human beings are limited to a meager five senses, our world is defined according to what those senses allow us to perceive. Our most acute sense, the one we most rely on, is sight; we identify most things – objects, animals, and people – first by how they look. Our methods of Othering are also largely based on something that can be discerned visually: the color of one's skin, the shape of one's body, and so on. Our ability to identify things visually is vital to our way of life. That is why shapeshifting can be so disarming: it disables our ability to trust what we see, to be able to judge a book by its cover, in spite of the old cliché.

Shapeshifting is utilized in nearly as varied ways as the shapes which shapeshifters take. On the surface, that much is apparent. Shapeshifting is good and evil, threat and boon, passive and aggressive, and so on. However, consider some of the dichotomies it inherently presents: human and animal, living and nonliving, controlled and uncontrolled, male and female. Shapeshifting blurs the lines between these things and brings them closer together. Shapeshifting, then, is the breakdown of the structure of the Other. It allows us to become the Other, and allows the Other to become us. Other still exists – if Ged takes the form of a dragon, the fact remains that he is still Ged, if only for a time – but it is a weaker, less tangible distinction. Shapeshifting also impresses the fact that there is, as perhaps Merlyn was trying to teach us, value in the Other. However, like Proteus, shapeshifting finds shapes to take and roles to play that refuse to be easily grouped with the others. Like a true shapeshifter, no one form quite fits.

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