THE EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH ATLANTIC

Edited by Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo

Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature

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Press

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The Early Medieval North Atlantic

This series provides a publishing platform for research on the history, cultures, and societies that laced the North Sea from the Migration Period at the twilight of the Roman Empire to the eleventh century.
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Introduction

Medieval Thought and Shapeshifting

Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo

> Sed et quidam adserunt *Strigas* ex hominibus fieri. Ad multa enim latrocinia figurae sceleratorum mutantur, et sive magicis cantibus, sive herbarum veneficio totis corporibus in feras transeunt. Siquidem et per naturam pleraque mutationem recipiunt, et corrupta in diversas species transformantur...[1]
>
> [Some people claim that *witches* were transformed from humans. With regard to many types of crimes, the appearance of the miscreants is changed, and they wholly metamorphose into wild animals, by means of either magic charms or poisonous herbs. Indeed, many creatures naturally undergo mutation and, when they decay, are transformed into different species...]

This passage, from the section *De Transformatis* in the eleventh book of Isidore's *Etymologies*, reveals three ways in which medieval learning explained shapeshifting: it could derive from moral causes (miscreants transformed due to crimes), from magic (the reference to charms) or it could be caused by natural action (as with poisonous herbs and decay). These three causes are paralleled in other thinkers, such as Arnulf of Orléans, who thought that metamorphoses were caused by natural, artificial, magical, or spiritual reasons.[2]

Arnulf and Isidore are characteristic of a frequent medieval worldview which could be described as conceiving the different aspects of the universal order as closely interconnected with each other (and as stemming from

1 San Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*, XI.iv.2–3, emphasis added. We follow the translation in Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*.

2 Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 99.

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God). This view logically considered the natural aspects of order as more fluid than a modern, post-Linnean view, and was dominant in the whole medieval period, or at least until the intellectual transformations brought about through neo-Aristotelian thought from the central Middle Ages onwards.[3] In such a medieval mode of thought the change expressed through metamorphosis was an integral part of the created world, even if frequently circumscribed to remote geographical corners, or the effect of the work of specific agents, be they divine or demonic.

It is not difficult to imagine why the medieval multidimensional ideas about causation, nature, and transformation of beings were often also concerned with shapeshifters: these appear almost as embodiments of this fluid, interconnected image of reality. While our focus in this book is in its literary manifestations in Northern European contexts, the multitude of werewolves, swan-maidens, bear- and boar-men that appear in medieval narratives should not be thought as remnants of 'primitive' or 'folk' mentalities: shapeshifters were a core element of medieval cultures and were a concern even for the clerical, learned elite.[4] Fascination with shapeshifting and metamorphoses in general, with the possibilities they opened for treating a wide range of topics (such as taboos; fear of the 'other', whether monsters, foreigners, or marginal peoples; and socially disruptive attitudes) reveal the kinds of ideas that medieval societies had about, among other things, nature, causality, change, morality, and divine and human agency.

In fact, alongside such a 'naturalistic' perspective there coexisted a very pervasive theological view from Saint Augustine that condemned metamorphosis as *ludificatio daemonum*, 'trick of demons'.[5] Harf-Lancner considers that, for the theologians, the belief in stories about metamorphosis

3 The Argentinian historian of science Miguel de Asúa synthesized the main trends in medieval natural thought. Ultimately rooted in a dual beginning in Classical Antiquity, there was a precise, analytical trend (represented by Aristotle) and a comprehensive yet diffuse view of natural phenomena (expressed by Pliny the Elder). In the following centuries, the Aristotelian tradition was mostly retaken by Arab thinkers such as Avicenna, while Christian Europe followed the Plinian view, chiefly through its use in Isidore's *Etymologiae*. A (later) third trend, represented by the bestiaries (the *Physiologus* being the main model) represents a moralising trend, which was often conflated with the Plinean-Isidorian stance, especially in the encyclopedic treatises of the twelfth and thirteenth century, such as those by Alexander Neckam and Vincent of Beauvais. These typically depict living beings as moral-allegorical types; it was only with Albert the Great (and his *De Animalibus*) the Aristotelian mode of thought reappeared in Western animal knowledge (Asúa, 'Alberto Magno', pp. 407–411.)

4 This interest of learned men, of course, did not exclude a broader interest in the topic and an aesthetic pleasure in otherness, which 'has exercised a huge power of attraction' historically (Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 20) and was 'highly popular' (*ibid.*, p. 27).

5 *La Ciudad de Dios*, xviii, 18.1.

expressed a regrettable survival of pagan superstitions that cast doubts on God's power as Creator.[6] In Latin and Greco-Latin mythologies, the transformation of the individual concretised an already-present link between man and animal, vegetable, or mineral, highlighting the dual nature of being: men or women turned into something that revealed or showed a trait or skill that was part of them before. The passing from one realm to another thus manifested the proximity of men to nature and the continuity of the hierarchy that goes from animal to the divine, and this posed a serious theological problem: if man were created in the image and likeness of God, how can Christians conceive the passing of humans into animals? How can that be part of God's creation?

As Harf-Lancner argued, Saint Augustine's answer was that metamorphosis interpreted as a change in nature is inadmissible and therefore explained it as diabolical illusion: 'La métamorphose est donc liée à quatre registres dont les frontières s'entrepénètrent sans cesse dans l'imaginaire médiéval: celui du diabolique; celui de la magie; celui de l'illusion; celui du rêve.' ('Metamorphosis is thus related to four registers, whose borders constantly entwine in the medieval imaginary: that of the diabolic, that of magic, that of illusion and that of dreams').[7] Hence shapeshifting was seen as unreal; it was associated with mental illness, a deviation of the senses, and a product of the imagination or dreams generated by the agency of demons, who play with men because they have no power to create or alter God's creation. The demonising of transformation takes the medieval theory about metamorphosis to the heart of a general discussion of witchcraft and sorcery, which was to have a profound impact on narrative literature.

However, the contexts of production of the texts in the contributions to this volume are somewhat paradoxical: while undoubtedly integrated in Latin Christendom, some of these Northern lands were peripheral to the core of Latin civilisation. For example, the rich culture revealed by the vernacular literature of Iceland reveals both a recurrent concern for the place of Icelanders within Christianity and a complex yet recurrent re-appropriation of themes which hail back to pre-Christian times.[8] Undoubtedly, these and other local specificities are also relevant for the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon societies (and their literatures) that are studied here, and the interplay between the ecclesiastical, learned, and Latin views and local

6 'Introduction', 'La métamorphose'.

7 'La métamorphose', p. 212.

8 Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin*. See also the excellent collection of articles in *Gripla*, 20.

elements undoubtedly enriched the variety of literary responses to the issue of shapeshifting.

In fact, this can be readily seen with regard to the variety of traditions about shapeshifting that circulated since Antiquity, in particular the very influential (and paramount) model represented by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Throughout the Middle Ages this work received historical, moral, allegorical, and philological readings that informed the work of many authors.[9] Of course, in the Middle Ages moral or allegorical interpretations predominated to ease the acceptability of Ovid's text within Christian societies. Ovid celebrated fluidity, mutability as power and possibility, 'the principle of organic vitality';[10] and nature was viewed as perpetual transformation and return.[11]

The twelfth century saw a twofold change with respect to Ovid. On the one hand, *Metamorphoses* became the subject of a series of *accessi* and commentaries as part of the schools' curricula, such as that of Arnulf of Orléans, John of Garland, and the 'Vulgate' commentator (produced in the Loire Valley *c.* 1250), to take the French masters as examples, which revealed the multifaceted approaches to the poem: philological and utilitarian, or as a moral, historical or euhemeristic allegory.[12] These commentaries 'prefigure the fuller Christianising treatment the poem will undergo in the fourteenth century in the *Ovidius moralizatus* of Pierre Bersuire and the French vernacular *Ovide moralisé*'.[13] On the other hand, Ovid's stories influenced an explosion of narratives that treated of metamorphosis, especially of one kind, known as the 'werewolf renaissance'.[14] This renewed interest in metamorphosis in the twelfth century was, according to several authors, also due to the reception of Celtic and Nordic literatures.[15] However, the precise impact on continental literature of texts such as those discussed in this book is rather difficult to assess. Inversely, the influence of Ovidian ideas or those of his Latin commentators in Norse and Celtic traditions is also hard to pinpoint, although they were likely present as part of Latin-influenced learning.[16]

9 Keith and Rupp, 'After Ovid', pp. 16–26.
10 Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 2.
11 Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 178.
12 Coulson, 'Ovid's Transformations'.
13 *ibid.*, p. 54.
14 Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 94.
15 See Noacco, 'Repères historiques'.
16 For example, for Wales, Sims-Williams has demonstrated the presence of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* in the early *Fontes Cambrensis* ('Uses of Writing'). See also Russell, '"Go and Look in the Latin

Shapeshifters, metamorphoses, and monsters

Shapeshifters as a group have not been subject to much specific attention by medievalists, even while they have been considered in studies about broader topics concerning the boundaries of the human and the natural world. The hallmark studies are the widely read Caroline Walker Bynum's *Metamorphosis and Identity*, which we have already mentioned, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory*, and Marina Warner's *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds. Ways of Telling the Self*. These volumes provide a useful framework for defining shapeshifting and are stepping stones for more nuanced and specific analyses of particular corpora.[17]

The third ('The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis') and fourth ('The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference') of Cohen's seven theses on monsters provide good starting points. They both insist on difference and ambiguity: the third thesis highlights the impossibility of the monster to fit inside an Aristotelian or modern taxonomy, while the fourth holds that it 'is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us."[18] The way Cohen considers the monster is also very fruitful when considering shapeshifters, who are indeed taxonomy-breaking beings who embody difference, but they do so (unlike most other monsters) through *time*. A man who turns into a wolf is not a taxonomy-breaking entity in either shape *per se*, but is so when he moves through both of them in an unexpected way (even if this effect could be as subtle as keeping human traits, such as the ability to speak, in a fully animal form). Its difference lies, essentially, not in (synchronic) hybridity, but in (diachronic) transformation: this transformation speaks less of a stable difference or hybridity than of an unstable existence.[19] It thus can be said, paraphrasing Cohen, that the shapeshifter is ambivalence made flesh.

However, what is said above does not preclude hybrid intermediate stages in some cases, but these are not crucial elements in medieval shapeshifter narratives. The hybridity of a modern movie or video-game werewolf

Books'"; we have not been able to see his last volume (*Reading Ovid in Medieval Wales*), which will surely cast more light on this issue.

17 Albrecht Classen criticised Cohen's approach as too generic ('The monster outside and within', p. 523). While certainly this conceptual generality is helpful as a broad frame of reference it almost necessarily limits the depth of its explicative power. A possible solution for specific contexts is to use native categories and analyse them conceptually (for example, Ármann Jakobsson's study of Icelandic troll notions, *The Troll Inside You*).

18 Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 7.

19 Shapeshifters, as a specific class of metamorphosis, are typically human beings that turn into animals (or animals that acquire human traits). Frequently, they can reverse into human form after some time.

(who appears often as a wolf-headed, furry humanoid) is not prominent (and frequently not even present) in its medieval equivalent. For example, medieval Icelandic sources mention several werewolves, but these do not appear to have intermediate 'wolf-man' stages. Interestingly, what the transformation often implies is a cruel or aggressive turn in their behaviour.[20] These hints of shapeshifting are less horrifying because of the breaking of 'natural' taxonomies (be they Aristotelian, Plinian, or Linnean) than they are morally condemnable.

That leads us back to Isidore and the moral causes of shapeshifting, which are potentially also their consequences, given the reversible nature of the process. Following on the previous example, cruelty is linked with the Norse werewolf in the same way that greed is linked with the man who turns into a dragon in the same tradition. However, moral (or sociological) causes are not the only literary reasons for shapeshifters to exist: in some cases, the metamorphosis appears as a plot device (for example, in the many shapeshifting events of the trickster god Loki) for the purpose of narrative advance, a function perhaps not surprising giving that shapeshifting is intrinsically entwined with time and change.

Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literatures

Studies about medieval shapeshifting can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, with the comprehensive investigations of Sabine Baring-Gould and Kirby Smith.[21] These endeavours have often been inspired by scholarly traditions close to folklore, which tended to mix sources from an extremely wide temporal and spatial arc. At the same time, they set a trend which has been fruitful for the study of the two main figures of shapeshifting in the Middle Ages: the werewolf and the berserker. While the first is attested in a broad range of medieval cultures, the second appears as a characteristically Norse phenomenon, even if it shows similarities with figures of ecstatic warriors in other traditions. These two topics have been particularly productive, and several works have analysed them. Furthermore, studies of shapeshifting in Celtic sources have been almost entirely focused on Medieval Irish sources and on Gerald of Wales' account of Irish werewolves. For the Welsh sources, comments about metamorphosis have been rather sparse.

20 Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf'.

21 *The Book of Werewolves* and 'An Historical Study of the Werewolf in Literature', respectively.

The essays compiled in this book address questions of shapeshifting in connection with supernatural agency, voluntary metamorphoses, social meaning, literary representations and motifs in different languages and cultural environments. Each essay will cover different spatial and literary spheres of the North Atlantic contexts, including Icelandic, Welsh, Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Hiberno-Latin sources. This book aims to inscribe itself within a tradition of studies focused on the socio-cultural aspects of specific medieval literatures, rather than on broad comparative studies of a figure, theme or motif.

In the first chapter, Rafał Borysławski discusses how shapeshifting in Old-English riddles is treated both as subject and as creative procedure. Grounded in theoretical analysis of shapeshifting from folklore studies and psychology and linking it with monstrosity and with trickster figures, the author proposes that riddles mirror the essential trait of shapeshifting: its inherent ambiguity and gnomic significance both disappear as entities when their mystery is disclosed. A solved riddle ceases to be a riddle and a monster stops being a monster once it is understood and assimilated. Focusing on the artistry and poetics of riddles, Borysławski reveals the remarkable meta-shapeshifting character of this type of composition: narrative content about metamorphosis interplays with linguistic and visual transformations.

Ármann Jakobsson moves the focus of attention to one of the *Íslendingasögur,* a corpus of medieval Icelandic prose texts about the early settlers of the North Atlantic country. He analyses an example of a villain in *Vatnsdœla saga,* Þórólfr, who is aided by a herd of demonic cats. The saga avoids discussing how the cats turned demonic, but the vocabulary indicates that the shift is due to the magical skills possessed by Þórólfr. Ármann notices that this uncertainty about the backstory of the cats is inherent to the medieval Icelandic discussions of paranormal motifs and events: shapeshifting is liminal and is the essence of a *troll*. Physical marks are not evident, which leads Ármann to remark that conceiving monstrosity in terms of races and species is an effect of nineteenth-century scholarly paradigms rather than of medieval attitudes to transformations, a fact well illustrated by the use of the same trollish categories for beasts and men, and even for heroes. In a similar vein, Santiago Barreiro explores medieval conceptions of dragons found in a variety of Icelandic texts in his discussion of Fáfnir, the shapeshifted worm that is the main antagonist of the Vǫlsung hero Sigurðr during his youth. The author argues that the shapeshifting of the villain from man to dragon should be seen as an effect of his will to keep the treasure, narrated through the motif of an active cursed hoard. Barreiro compares this form of conceiving dragons (expressed in a range of Norse texts and with notable

parallels in Old English literature) with the more naturalistic conceptions expressed in translated Latin learning and allegorical and moral reading in hagiographical literature. In Fáfnir's case the transformation is physical and tied with socially disruptive behaviour: his tale can easily be read as a normative rejection of greedy, hoarding behaviour.

In the next chapter, Rebecca Merkelbach returns to the *Íslendingasögur* to examine the tie between shapeshifting and the *berserkir*. She argues that the shift is not physical, but rather behavioural and psychological. Moreover, the change of shape seems to express an inheritable nature within the *berserkr*. Merkelbach shows that while *berserkir* are indeed monstrous and display animality, it is not because they are not of human shape, but because their actions show them as antisocial. As with other monstrous beings in these sagas, such as revenants, disruption of the social order (expressed in economic harm, but primarily in sexual misconduct) is of prime importance, while the physical manifestations of it are secondary. Their literary otherness, plainly seen in the fact that most *berserkir* are not Icelanders, but foreigners, may thus be understood as a way for society to distance itself from such antisocial characters, but also to allow society to explore issues of sexual violence.

Camilla With Pedersen's contribution moves the discussion to a comparative analysis of involuntary metamorphoses in Old Norse and early medieval Irish texts, with a focus on transformations performed through curses. By analysing the story of Bran and Sceolang, and Étaín, on the one hand, and Fáfnir and Hrólfr, on the other, the author reveals similarities in the use of Christian imagery and philosophical ideas about metamorphosis. Furthermore, in her discussion of the undead in Old Norse texts, Pedersen proposes an element of voluntary transformation that strongly links inner self and appearance, hence marking a contrast to the Irish ghostly figures. In this way, the link she proposes between Fáfnir and the undead as protectors of treasure (in the case of the latter, represented by land) contributes to the discussions in Barreiro and Merkelbach's chapters.

Santiago Disalvo's contribution, '*Unde sunt aues istae?*: Notes on Bird-Shapeshifting, Bird Messengers, and Early Medieval Hagiography' looks at shapeshifting and the use of birds in early Celtic hagiography. Disalvo examines the narrative role of shapeshifting birds in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, extending the analysis to other medieval Irish texts, especially *immrama* or voyage tales, and posing parallels with Middle Welsh compositions, Anglo-Saxon poems, and the Galician-Portuguese *cantigas*. The author recognises four main functions of metamorphosed birds: as messengers and helpers, or destroyers; as rational beings, keeping

human abilities; as liminal animals that traverse and blur the boundaries to the otherworld; and as wonderful singers, bearers of a marvellous voice. By bringing to the fore marked similarities in bird imagery and behaviour, as well as on the importance of musical experience, in both secular and religious texts, Disalvo's findings anticipate an aspect discussed in the last contribution.

Finally, Luciana Cordo Russo, on her chapter entitled 'Sin, Punishment, and Magic: Changing Form in Medieval Welsh Literature', explores all the instances of shapeshifting in a corpus of medieval prose literature in Middle Welsh and Latin. Punitive metamorphoses are the most numerous examples, and the author finds striking similarities with miraculous transformations inflicted by Welsh saints in hagiographic discourse. This study reveals the intrinsic fluidity between the animal and human spheres, and the remarkably unthreatening character of shapeshifters, set within the natural world of *mirabilia*. In this way, she argues for continuities between 'original' and 'shapeshifted' forms, linking medieval Welsh secular and religious literature to common thinking on shapeshifting.

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About the Authors

Santiago Barreiro holds a PhD in History at the University of Buenos Aires, and works as a researcher at the IMHICIHU-CONICET in Buenos Aires. His works focuses on social and economical issues in Medieval Icelandic literature. He has recently published the first Spanish translation of *Hœnsa-Þóris saga* and two shorter texts as *Tres Relatos Medievales Nórdicos*, and co-edited (with Renan Birro) an introductory handbook on the medieval north, *El mundo nórdico medieval: una introducción*, plus numerous articles and book chapters.

Luciana Cordo Russo completed her PhD in Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. She is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the IMHICIHU-CONICET in Buenos Aires. She also teaches Literary Theory and Criticism and Medieval Literature at the University of San Martín. Her current research focuses on the dissemination and translation of the legend of Charlemagne in Wales. An important contribution on this topic will appear in *Charlemagne in the Norse and Celtic Worlds*, edited by Sif Rikhardsdottir and Helen Fulton. She translated for the first time into Spanish the eleven Middle Welsh prose tales commonly known as *Mabinogion*, for which she won the Wales Literature Exchange Translation Award. She has published several articles and book chapters, as well as co-edited two books on medieval literature.