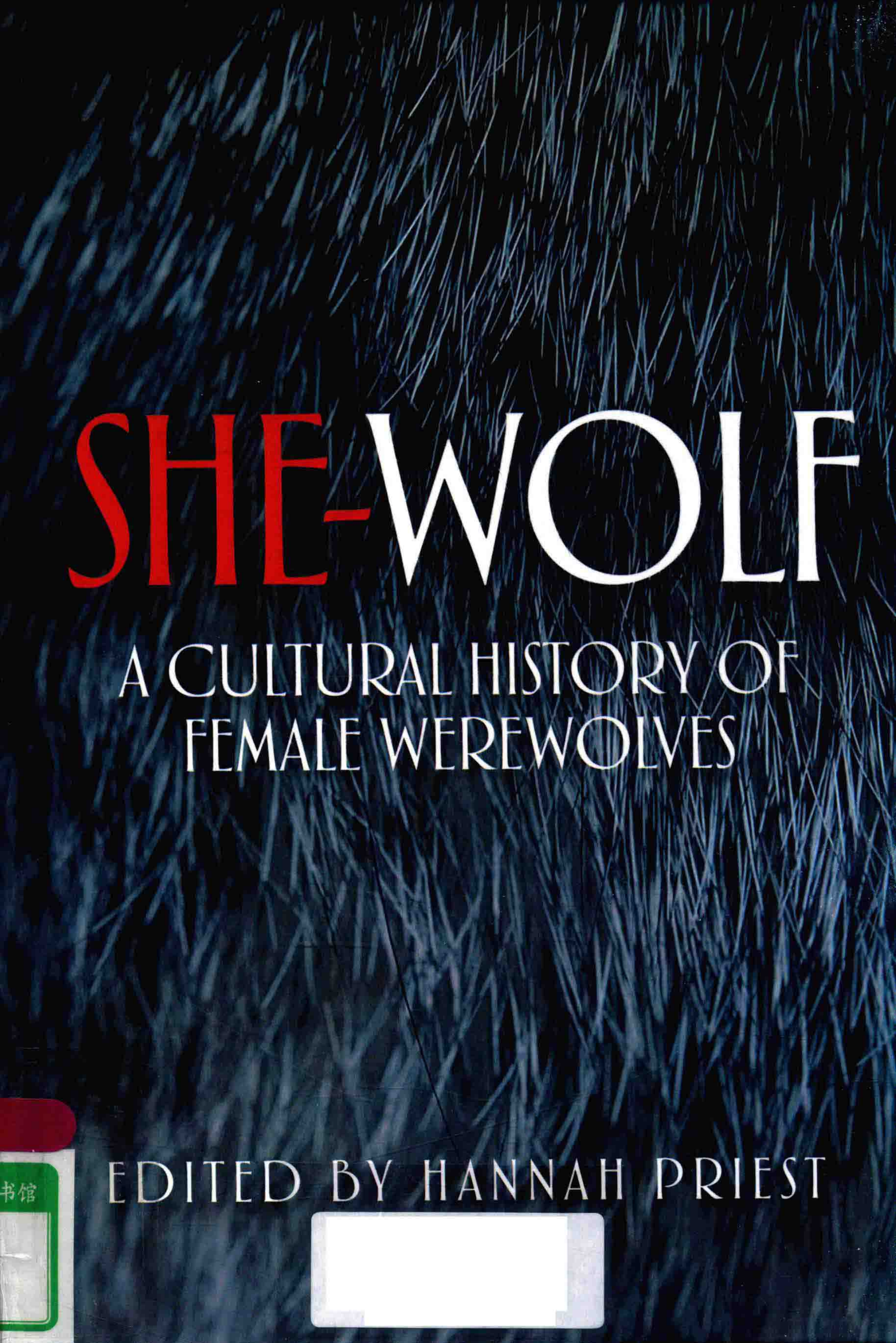

SHE-WOLF

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FEMALE WEREWOLVES

EDITED BY HANNAH PRIEST

书馆

She-wolf

A cultural history of female werewolves

edited by Hannah Priest

Manchester University Press

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Published by Manchester University Press
Altrincham Street, Manchester M1 7JA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 07190 8934 3 hardback

First published 2015

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Typeset
by Frances Hackeson Freelance Publishing Services, Brinscall, Lancs
Printed in Great Britain
by TJ International Ltd, Padstow

She-wolf

MANCHESTER
1824

Manchester University Press

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Contents

Notes on contributors *page* vii

1 Introduction: a history of female werewolves 1
Hannah Priest

2 Estonian werewolf legends collected from the island of Saaremaa 24
Merili Metsvahi

3 'She transformed into a werewolf, devouring and killing two children': trials of she-werewolves in early modern French Burgundy 41
Rolf Schulte

4 Participatory lycanthropy: female werewolves in *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* 59
Jay Cate

5 Fur girls and wolf women: fur, hair and subversive female lycanthropy 77
Jazmina Cininas

6 Female werewolf as monstrous other in Honoré Beaugrand's 'The Werewolves' 96
Shannon Scott

7 'The complex and antagonistic forces that constitute one soul': conflict between societal expectations and individual desires in Clemence Housman's *The Werewolf* and Rosamund Marriott Watson's 'A Ballad of the Were-wolf' 111
Carys Crossen

8 I was a teenage she-wolf: boobs, blood and sacrifice 129
Hannah Priest

9 The case of the cut-off hand: Angela Carter's werewolves in historical perspective 148
Willem de Blécourt

10 The she-wolves of horror cinema 166
Peter Hutchings

11 *Ginger Snaps*: the monstrous feminine as *femme animale* 180
Barbara Creed

12 *Dans Ma Peau*: shape-shifting and subjectivity 196
Laura Wilson

Select bibliography 211
Index 221

1

Introduction: a history of female werewolves

Hannah Priest

A cultural history of werewolves

The werewolf is an inherently contradictory creature.

There is a relatively common narrative explaining the prevalence of werewolves in European and Euro-American popular culture: once, long ago, our ancestors lived alongside wolves. The savage *canis lupus* was a constant threat to the cave-dwelling *homo sapiens*, who feared this ferocious predator more than any other. When early humans emerged, blinking, from their caves and began to hunt and gather, the wolf dogged their every step – a shadowy and ancient enemy. And yet, these humans held a grudging respect for the wolf; they began to glorify its speed and ruthlessness, to desire some appropriation of its power for themselves. Almost cultishly, they worshipped the wolf, but, for the most part, when the lupine enemy stalked, they cowered like lambs to the proverbial slaughter. Some of our ancestors were lucky: they met with wolves who were gentler, who approached proto-settlements and were amenable to companionship. These wolves were domesticated and became the ancestors of today's pet dogs. However, even companion animals hold traces of the savagery of their kin. People told stories of the wolf, created mythologies and folklore – and the shadows of these tales are still with us in contemporary narratives of the werewolf.

This opening paragraph is intentionally poetic and hyperbolic, as it reflects the sustained romanticisation of this persistent werewolf origin myth. In popular reference books, it is reproduced with frequency. In his book, *Werewolves*, for instance, Bob Curran writes:

> Arguably, the wolf is mankind's oldest foe, with an enmity that goes back almost into pre-human times. It was with the wolf that our distant ancestors competed for game and with whom they probably fought in the primal forests of an early world. And it may also be that the wolf won over the proto-men, for they were quick, strong and cunning, probably more able to chase and hunt down food than our heavy and lumbering forebears and even better at defending their territory than the early men. ... In every way, it seemed to be a fearsome and successful hunting and killing machine, better than anything our

> ancient ancestors could produce. Is it any wonder then, that early man both hated and feared the wolf?[1]

Similarly, in the introduction to Brian Frost's *The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature*, we find the claim that werewolf legends are 'immeasurably old and can be traced back to the earliest records of civilization'.[2] Even in more scholarly studies, we can see versions of this story. Leslie Sconduto, for example, begins her examination of werewolves in medieval and early modern literature with a poetic nod to the lycanthropy origin myth:

> Through the mists of time, we catch fleeting glimpses of the first werewolves, as if they were illuminated only momentarily by the light of a full moon partially obscured by clouds on a carefully constructed Hollywood sound stage.[3]

Walter Burkert's anthropological study of Ancient Greek ritual offers another, though more specified and localised, version of this. In outlining mythic sacrificial rites relating to werewolves and wolves, he writes that these must be taken as 'especially ancient', as they reflect 'the ideology of the predatory animal pack at its sacrificial meal, and this in spite of the fact that cooking in a kettle, a clearly cultural achievement, is an essential part of the rite'.[4]

Burkert's introduction to Greek wolf rituals is significant, as it offers the possibility of another narrative of the werewolf – and one which will be of central concern to this volume. The 'ideology of the predatory animal pack' notwithstanding, the rites that Burkert outlines require and involve important elements that are 'clearly a cultural achievement'. The werewolf, here, is revealed, not through mythologies of the pre- or proto-human, but through human culture, invention and ritualised social practice. Though the origins of the werewolf are romantically imagined as belonging to prehistory, the narrative of the werewolf is inextricably bound to historical circumstance, civilisation and literature. Even when, as Sconduto suggests, we feel we are getting a 'fleeting glimpse' through the 'mists of time', we are equally aware that we are actually looking at a 'carefully constructed' stage. Moreover, this stage is always a product of the culture that produced it – whether Ancient Greek myth or Hollywood cinema – and to understand the werewolf requires an engagement, not only with a sense of underlying 'ideology', but also with specific details of context. In her influential study of werewolf fiction, Chantal Bourgault du Coudray asserts that 'material relating to the werewolf in every period has been informed by prevailing cultural values and dominant ways of knowing or speaking about the world'.[5] The chapters in this volume reflect this way of approaching the figure of the werewolf, directly addressing the cultural values, tastes and ideologies that have informed various representations of the werewolf over the course of several centuries.

A note on terminology is needed here. This volume focuses on the figure of the werewolf, which is understood as a being that transforms between human and lupine forms, though this may occasionally be a symbolic rather than physical transformation, or (less frequently) a hybridised human/wolf.

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The history of the werewolf is also understood to be a product of European (and, later, colonial) culture, though 'European' here is used as a negotiable and historicised classification.[6] That is not to deny the long histories of shape-shifters in other cultures – including other mythologies of lupine transformation – nor to deny fruitful readings of the werewolf against other hybridised or transformative monsters. However, the werewolf is a particular category of shape-shifting, with a coherent history of representation and construction and a specific geography of cultural production. In fact, as several chapters in this volume suggest, the history of the werewolf can be read as a revealing reflection of the development of 'prevailing cultural values and dominant ways of knowing or speaking about the world' that shape our conceptualisation of European and colonial identities.

Nevertheless, despite this volume's focus on cultural history and territorial specificity, I do not advocate a wholesale dismissal of the romantic lycanthropy origin myth. This mythic and universalising narrative has some use in a discussion of female werewolves – particularly since the female of the species is often entirely excluded from such stories. The myth becomes significant, not in its 'truth' (or otherwise), but in its reception and development at various points in history. For the purposes of this volume, the use of this narrative in gendering werewolves is of vital importance.

The gendering of werewolves

In most presentations of the lycanthropy origin myth, the presence of the female is, if not erased entirely, then at least obscured. Curran's presentation of the myth uses the universal 'man' in place of 'human', as does Frost's suggestion of a 'common ancestry' shared by 'man and wolves'.[7] As Rolf Schulte outlines in Chapter 3 of this volume, the word 'werewolf' and its French equivalent 'loup garou' are likely derived from words for 'wolf' and 'man', thus offering etymological evidence of a traditional gendering of the monster.[8]

Ideologically, the focus on hunting, savagery and aggression in the origin myth aligns the werewolf with behaviours and ideals more commonly associated with masculine identity positions in European cultural history. When used in popular discourse as generalised terms for prehistoric humans, 'hunters' and 'gatherers' are gendered male and female respectively. The werewolf origin myth is a story of the 'hunters', rather than the 'gatherers', and this is reflected in not only the gendering of the werewolf, but also in the specific traits of 'masculine' and 'feminine' that are constructed and affirmed in werewolf texts.

This generalised gendering of the 'hunter' werewolf is certainly revealed in numerous texts – from the savage hunters of Marie de France's twelfth-century poem *Bisclavret*, in which all werewolves (bar the protagonist) stalk the forest looking for human prey, to the ferocious beast that haunts the Yorkshire Moors in John Landis's 1980 film *An American Werewolf in London* – all of which present lycanthropy as an exclusively male condition. It also accounts for the late medieval literary fascination with the 'sympathetic werewolf', as the 'hunter' wolf is recognised as an avatar for the noble courtly hunters of medieval romance. It should be remembered that Marie's Bisclavret, though trapped in lupine form by his perfidious wife, begins his reintegration with human society when he encounters a royal *hunting* party: the werewolf is rejected by the party's dogs, but accepted by the hunters themselves.[9] This identification is also reflected in the rhetoric surrounding the historical hunting of wolves in various parts of medieval Europe, with the bounties attached to dead wolves and the high status of 'specialist' wolf-hunters revealing a consistent characterisation of the wolf as the greatest adversary a *man* could face.[10]

This mythic ideation of wolves is undoubtedly reflected across the millennia of presenting sympathetic and non-sympathetic male werewolves. However, I would suggest that the cultural (and culturally specific) history of werewolves also has implications on the dominant gendering of the creature. In his study of human interactions with wolves, Garry Marvin argues that the 'problem of the wolf for humans' comes at a concrete, rather than mythologised, point in human history.[11] The wolf was transformed from 'a large carnivore' to a direct antagonist between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago, when human beings began to domesticate animals:

> With domestication a new class of animals emerged that was not the result of neutral processes of evolution but rather a combination of natural and cultural processes, shaped and maintained for specifically human purposes. Two of the complex relationships between humans and animals in the context of domestication are important here: mutual dependency and ownership. ... Their owners therefore made an investment in these animals, which entered into their economies and so into their social and cultural worlds.[12]

The wolf becomes, then, not a threat to individual humans or a competitor for prey, but rather a threat to domesticated animals. As agriculture and economies developed, this might be better characterised as a threat to property and investment.

The literary and folkloric history of werewolves, based on what survives today, has been produced almost entirely in societies that have posited property ownership and economic independence as predominantly male privileges in both the cultural imaginary and legal practice. The wolf is a threat, not just to the primal male hunter, but also to the monetised male landowner, seeking to protect his 'social and cultural worlds' and his 'investment' from a destructive, external force. Read in this light, the male werewolf is a double threat – an external force combined with an internal identification – which serves to undermine the stability of masculine economic privilege. It is symptomatic of an anxiety of property ownership and status: the wolf that is destroying a man's livelihood might well turn out to be the man himself.

This economic lycanthropic narrative of property ownership and threat appears to exclude the female werewolf in much the same way as the mythic narrative of the primal hunter. Indeed, this is potentially evidenced by counterpoints produced by cultures with different economic traditions. As Merili Metsvahi's Chapter 2 attests, the island of Saaremaa, an area of Estonia with matrilineal property inheritance and female land ownership throughout the late Middle Ages and into early modernity, produced more folktales about female werewolves than any other European territory.

The discourses introduced here – the etymological, the mythic and the economic – are all present in the dominant presentation of the werewolf as male monster. Different iterations of lycanthropy might privilege one or the other, but the traces of all three are visible throughout the cultural history of the male werewolf. It might seem, initially, that the female werewolf can only ever be read as a deliberate subversion or rejection of this. And, it must be admitted, this is occasionally the case in constructions of the female lycanthrope, where texts reveal the female werewolf simply as a 'surprise' that confounds expectations based on conventional gendering.[13]

However, just as cultural narratives of the human male reveal, despite (and through) their erasure of the female, a space for an 'other' narrative, so too do we find space for the female werewolf. The female narrative draws on many of the same cultural assumptions and values as that of the male, but it often represents and reflects on these with a different focus. Moreover, the narrative of the female werewolf combines aspects of the lycanthropy origin myth with mythic and cultural narratives of womanhood: if the werewolf is an inherently contradictory creature, so too is a woman. The specificities of these contradictions will be explored throughout this collection, with the chapters exploring particular moments of the female werewolf narrative to reveal a variety of cultural assumptions, narrative tropes and putative archetypes of femaleness and femininity.

The textual history of female werewolves

The female werewolf enters literature around 3,000 years later than her male counterpart.[14] Although the literature and myth of antiquity presented numerous female monsters that were human/animal hybrids or transformative female bodies, the concept of a woman who could transform into a wolf first appears in literary form in Gerald of Wales's twelfth-century *Topographia Hiberniae*, an account of the author's travels following the Norman invasion of Ireland. In the second part of his narrative, Gerald tells the story of a priest who spends the night on the borders of Meath. The priest encounters a wolf, who is miraculously able to speak. The wolf explains:

> We are natives of Ossory. From there every seven years, because of the imprecation of a certain saint, namely the abbot Natalis, two persons, a man and a woman, are compelled to go into exile not only from their territory but

> also from their bodily shape. They put off the form of man completely and put on the form of wolf. When the seven years are up, and if they have survived, two others take their place in the same way, and the first pair return to their former country and nature.
>
> My companion in this pilgrimage is not far from here and is seriously ill. Please give her in her last hour the solace of the priesthood in bringing to her the revelation of the divine mercy.[15]

The priest then visits the dying she-wolf, who also requests the last rites:

> To remove all doubt he [the male werewolf] pulled all the skin off the she-wolf from the head down to the navel, folding it back with his paw as if it were a hand. And immediately the shape of an old woman, clear to be seen, appeared. At that, the priest, more through terror than reason, communicated her as she had earnestly demanded, and she then devoutly received the sacrament. Afterwards, the skin which had been removed by the he-wolf resumed its former position.[16]

In the context of medieval werewolf narratives, Gerald's account of the werewolves of Ossory is unusual in a number of ways. The werewolves' speech, the revelation of human skin beneath the fur, and the careful situation of the transformation within the acceptable limits of Christian doctrine are all distinctive to Gerald's account. Moreover, as Sconduto points out, the tale 'is also unique for its Christian setting in which it presents a pair of werewolves whose metamorphosis has been inflicted on them as expiation for communal sin'.[17]

For this introduction, the significant characteristic of Gerald's tale is that it includes a female werewolf. Moreover, brief as Gerald's story may be, the werewolves of Ossory episode introduces some key features that resonate with post-medieval presentations of female werewolves. Firstly, the werewolves exist as a bonded pair – unlike other twelfth-century (male) werewolves, this female werewolf exists as part of a social unit. Secondly, there is a focus on bodily appearance and its mutability. Elsewhere in medieval literature, the corporeality of werewolf transformation is elided or denied; the transformation from human to werewolf (and, more importantly, from werewolf back to human) is associated more with the removal and recovery of clothes than with shifts in bodily form.[18] Gerald's text offers something different: for his female werewolf, the body *is* the clothing, and a graphic image of corporeal dissonance is offered.[19]

Finally, the woman who is revealed beneath the wolf is 'old'. Sconduto suggests that the age of the woman works as 'a metaphor for her humanity that has remained unchanged'.[20] However, the woman is depicted, not just as an image of unchanging humanity, but also as an example of ageing femininity. Again, there is a dissonance here. The male and female coupling initially implies a heterosexual pair bond, but the woman's age situates her as the non-sexual, non-fertile feminine. Similarly, though the Christianity of the woman is affirmed through her receiving the Eucharist from the priest, a shadow of monstrosity hangs over her and her companion's status as communal 'scapegoats'.

The she-wolf of Ossory is the only female werewolf found in medieval literature. Indeed, the female werewolf remains a 'surprising absentee' from literature until 1839 and the publication of Frederick Marryat's *The Phantom Ship*.[21] In the intervening years, however, the female werewolf was a recurrent presence in other cultural productions, particularly church tracts, Inquisition handbooks and folktales. The early modern period saw the development of a theological correlation between witchcraft and lycanthropy, both in theory and in legal practice, occasionally explicitly gendering both as female.[22] In addition to this, symbolic conceptualisations of the she-wolf became attached to various narratives of female leadership, national identity and modes of feminine aggression and assertiveness. In the Middle Ages, the symbolism of the she-wolf is a separate discourse to that of the werewolf, but the two intersect at various points. The she-wolf as contradictory and ambiguous symbol of female political power, with the potential for physical violence, questionable or promiscuous sexuality and an intrinsic connection to the formation of national identity, can be seen most clearly in the narratives surrounding the lupine totem of Rome.[23] It also informs discourses of medieval queenship, most notably concerning Isabella, consort of Edward II of England.[24]

Through such non-literary iterations, the narrative of the female werewolf developed, integrating narratives of the werewolf with (often negative) tropes of femininity, class and culture and blending the traditions of various European cultures with Classical narratives of the monstrous (and virtuous) female. By the time Marryat's Gothic white wolf Christina emerged in the nineteenth century as a seductive, homicidal and ultimately doomed female lycanthrope, the she-wolf had become a distillation of disparate and (often) contradictory cultural values. Moreover, although Gerald's Ossory werewolves are a fairly evenly matched pair, the female werewolf that enters supernatural fiction can be read as radically distinct from her male counterparts.

Just over eight hundred years after Gerald of Wales composed his *Topographia Hiberniae*, Atom Books published Lisi Harrison's novel *Monster High*. This book is, in a characteristically late-capitalist way, a novelisation of a range of toys. The Monster High dolls, produced by Mattel, are a collection of teenage anthropomorphic 'monsters', with posable limbs, dressable hair, and a range of accessories and possessions available for purchase and collection. While the dolls themselves are simply plastic models with 'profiles', outfits and accessories, Harrison's book offers a story and character development. The novel takes place in Salem, Oregon, where monsters (or RADs – 'Regular Attribute Dodgers' – as they call themselves) have taken refuge. The 'RAD' of interest here is Claudine (or Clawdeen) Wolf, the female werewolf of the toy range.[25]

Clawdeen Wolf is – according to marketing materials – ‘a wolf in chic clothing’. She hates gym (because she cannot wear her platform heels) and loves ‘shopping and flirting with boys’.[26] Her description continues:

> My hair is worthy of a shampoo commercial and that’s just what grows on my legs. Plucking and shaving is definitely a full time job but that’s a small price to pay for being scarily fabulous.[27]

Harrison’s novel takes this description as its foundation, but develops a more sustained characterisation.

Monster High follows the parallel experiences of two new girls at Merston High. The first is Melody Carver, a human (or ‘normie’ as the monsters call them) girl who has experienced bullying related to her physical appearance at her old school. Her father, a plastic surgeon, has ‘corrected’ her face. The second new girl is Frankie Stein, the newly created and green-skinned ‘daughter’ of Viktor and Viveka Stein. Both Frankie and Melody are desperate to make friends at their new school, but both encounter problems with ‘fitting in’.

The female werewolf is introduced as a student *before* any revelation of her monstrous nature, as Melody and a boy named Jackson enter the school cafeteria:

> Two attractive alternative girls, consumed by their own conversation, tried to squeeze past them. The Shakira-looking one, who had auburn curls and a tray stacked with Kobe beef sliders, made it by Jackson. … ‘Untrue!’ barked the girl with the sliders. … The barker wore purple leggings and a black bomber jacket lined in fur the same color as her hair.[28]

The second description offers further physical details:

> Claudine turned away from the window. ‘Hey,’ she said, tearing open a bag of organic turkey jerky. Her looks – yellowish-brown eyes, a mess of auburn curls, long manicured fingernails painted bronze – were just as striking as Cleo’s [a mummy] but in a more wild, feral way. Her style, however, seemed tamer: all-American with a touch of old-world Hollywood glamour.[29]

While readers familiar with the toy range will know what Clawdeen’s appearance signifies, the novel has not yet revealed that the girl is a werewolf. In fact, apart from Frankie, readers not told whether any of the characters at the school are ‘RADs’. Nevertheless, there are substantial clues as to Clawdeen’s nature. She is often seen eating meat, unlike the rest of the characters who are remarkably picky about food. Not only this, but Clawdeen eats large quantities of meat and eats impatiently; her tray is ‘stacked’ with beef sliders and she ‘tears’ into the bag of jerky. Perhaps a bigger clue is Clawdeen’s fur, which she is always seen wearing and which is the same colour as her hair – later on in the novel it is revealed that this is because it *is* her hair. This fur is accentuated by her ‘mess’ of curls and ‘wild, feral eyes’.

Another aspect of characterisation key to the presentation of Clawdeen is her ‘pack’. Apart from Frankie’s creators/parents, Clawdeen’s family

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