

Shape and Story:
Some Thoughts About Werewolves

Caroline Bynum

For the past ten years, I have been fascinated by the question of personal identity in all three senses in which the word is used by present-day philosophers, sociologists and literary theorists. Identity can mean individuality or personality; in this sense identity is that which makes me particularly, distinctively, even uniquely "me." But identity is also used in current debates to mean something almost the opposite; it can mean identity-position. In this sense my identity is that which signals group affiliation—often race or biological sex but sometimes also statuses generally understood as more socially shaped, such as class, language-group, or religion. Finally, identity can mean spatio-temporal continuity. In this sense identity refers to the fact that "I" am the same person I was a moment ago. This third understanding of identity carries the connotation of oneness or integrity. The same set of crumbs are not the identical piece of cake if it is divided into two portions.

All three senses of identity can seem to slip away from one's intellectual grasp when examined closely. Moreover they slip into each other. If we consider identity as individuality, what are its elements and limits? Does the emergence of depression or schizophrenia, for example, remove identity, however much it may alter personality? Identity as identity-position raises questions about who owns or bestows the identifying label (such as "black" or "queer") and whether such identities are biologically determined or culturally constructed. Is there something basic to particular races or sexes either encoded in genes and carried by physiology or found so universally in world cultures as to be ineradicable even if elaborated by society from mere biological hints in musculature, pigment or hormones? Identity as spatio-temporal continuity raises doubts about whether there can be a guarantee that anything perdures—my "self," my cat, my briefcase if I take my eye off it for even a moment. If I have amnesia, does my body guarantee that I am me over time? What if it then undergoes a sex-change operation and complete cosmetic surgery? Is there any sense in saying that such an altered entity is "the same individual," whereas a donor mouse and its clone are two separate individuals?

Discussion of identity issues in all three senses of identity is everywhere today: in campus politics and debates over whose literary "canon" should be taught; in the pop culture of movies, television and tabloids where consciousness is split or transplanted, bodies "beamed up;" in ethicists' agonized ruminations over cloning, organ donation, or recovered memory. It has tended to fall into dichotomous terminology: mind (or consciousness or memory) versus brain or body; biology versus social or cultural construction; self versus other; freedom or agency versus essence. I find that, however much such terminology and debate have helped me recognize the complexity of problems I face in either my own life or in my efforts to understand the medieval past, they offer little in the way of solution.

I am a historian who began her scholarly career in a time (fortunately now over) when discrimination against my identity group was permitted by law; I am also the adoptive mother of a child whose race is not my own and the daughter of a beloved father who suffered devastating Alzheimer's disease for more than twenty years. As a medievalist, I ponder the practices of men and women who revered bits of bone and ashes (called relics) as if they were the deceased saint; I study abstruse treatises by theologians who worried about what self would return at the end of time; I consider debates over how one person could "represent," or stand for, another in the earliest historical cases of parliamentary government. Current theoretical deliberation has left me with little technical language and very few powerful images with which to understand such things—in part because the discussion seems to force either/or conclusions. Hence, when I read a medieval treatise about what constitutes the resurrection of the same body at the Last Judgment or talk with a daughter who must navigate in a world where her skin color, her accent, and her affect may give others contradictory signals about who she is, I wonder about identity. Are we genes, bodies, brains, minds, experiences, memories, or souls? How many of these can or must change before we lose our identity and become someone or something else? On what identity do we insist, if we claim rights for our identity-position? What allows or entitles someone else to represent or empathize with that identity? The answers to these questions are not at all clear. But if we are so confused about what constitutes identity, how can we talk about individuals—past or present—without reducing both ourselves and others to a mere fraction of the complexity we think we are? Surely we need a more labile and problematic understanding of identity, one that will not force us to choose between mind and body, socialization and biology, genes and desire, one not figured primarily in images of transplants, splits and dichotomies.

Having now grounded the question in our current perplexities and, I hope, thereby thoroughly perplexed you, I want to remove myself a great way off and tell you three stories or sets of stories—stories that (I shall later contend) give us a new way of thinking about identity. They are stories about werewolves—one from the first century of the common era, one from the late twelfth century, and a group from our own period. I hasten to underline that they are stories—not trial records, or medical accounts, or reportage. Although the Middle Ages is often associated in the popular press with the benighted, the monstrous and the marvelous, the centuries between 500 and 1400 were not in fact the period of western history most characterized by hunger for and terror of the bizarre. Indeed the early Middle Ages prohibited and punished werewolf belief (although mildly—with a penance of bread and water); philosophical and theological experts of the high Middle Ages employed technical distinctions at least as complex as those of modern identity theorists to explain that, whatever people claimed they saw, human-animal metamorphosis did not occur. It was the Renaissance of the sixteenth century, not the Middle Ages, that saw the flourishing of astrology, alchemy, and magic, the burning of witches and werewolves. Such things are not, however, my topic. My topic is stories. Marvelous stories. Stories of metamorphosis and species transformation.

One more word of warning. These stories are not allegories, although literary critics in the first and the twelfth centuries were perfectly capable of understanding werewolf stories as "about" the eruption of the beast within us; indeed they developed the techniques for allegorical reading of such stories still sometimes used to interpret

texts as different as Greek myths and the Bible. The stories I speak of are, however, carefully constructed tales belonging to the literary genre Tzvetan Todorov has called “the marvelous” (that is, stories in which the characters accept the supernatural) as opposed to “the uncanny” (tales in which the supernatural is rationalized) or “the fantastic” (in which characters and readers vacillate between natural explanation and acceptance of the supernatural). Realistic in their assessment of character and motivation, they hover in a world whose rules about boundary crossing—about identity—are internally consistent but different from ours; hence, in part, their power.

And so, with this as introduction, I tell you three tales. (I shall come to a fourth set of literary transformations at the end of the lecture, when I consider Dante.) The first is from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, one of the great poems in the western tradition, source of many of the stories familiar to us from legend, opera, and art. Ovid sings of a universe of change—“*in nova ... mutatas ... formas ... corpora*,” of bodies changed into new forms. One of the earliest stories he tells, in fifteen books of *metamorphoses*, is the story of Lycaon, whose savagery led Jove to destroy all but two members of the human race with a mighty flood. Explaining his anger to the other gods, Jove speaks:

An infamous report of the age had reached my ears. Eager to prove this false, I descended from high Olympus, and as a god disguised in human form travelled up and down the land. ...I approached the seat and inhospitable abode of the Arcadian king [Lycaon], just as the late evening shades were ushering in the night. I gave a sign that a god had come, and the common folk began to worship me. Lycaon at first mocked at their pious prayers; and then he said: ‘I will soon find out, and that by a plain test, whether this fellow be god or mortal....’ He planned that night while I was heavy with sleep to kill me.... And not content with that, he took a hostage who had been sent by the Molossian race, cut his throat, and some parts of him still warm with life, he boiled, and others he roasted over the fire. But no sooner had he placed these before me on the table than I, with my avenging bolt, brought the house down upon its household gods, gods worthy of such a master. The king himself flies in terror [*note how the tense changes, rushing the drama forward!*] and, gaining the silent fields, howls aloud, attempting in vain to speak. His mouth of itself gathers foam, and with his accustomed greed for blood he turns against the sheep, delighting still in slaughter. His garments change to shaggy hair, his arms to legs. He turns into a wolf, and yet retains some traces of his former shape [*veteris servat vestigia formae*]. There is the same grey hair, the same fierce face, the same gleaming eyes, the same picture of beastly savagery. One house has fallen but [it is] not one house alone [that] has deserved to perish.

Ovid’s great poem contains many kinds of metamorphosis—change of body for punishment, escape or apotheosis, for seduction or betrayal, for discovery or revelation. About this particular metamorphosis I make here only three points. First, Lycaon (who is associated in a complex earlier image with disloyalty to the Augustus for whom Ovid writes) is not only an impious tyrant, turning his people against Jove, ruler of the gods; he is also a cannibal, committer of that ultimate metamorphosis (human eating human—that is, human turning another person not just into food but into himself). And the two vices

are both boundary crossings, mirroring each other and mirrored in the tyrant's subsequent transformation. Lycaon violates both the division between human and god, by preparing to kill Jove, and the boundary between human and human, by killing a hostage for cannibalism; hence his own species boundaries are violated by the metamorphosis into wolf.

Second, Lycaon really changes; as the poetry pulses forward, he becomes a wolf (*fit lupus*); his speech twists into howls, echoing against silent fields. Clothes, the mark of civilization, become hair; arms, signs of the creature who walks erect, become merely two more legs.

And yet—my third point—Lycaon is what he was before: “with his accustomed greed [*solitaeque cupidine*] for blood he turns against the sheep, delighting still [*nunc quoque*] in slaughter.” The greed he carries into wolfhood was his already by custom and practice; the delight in slaughter is “now also” present, almost as if, though certainly there before, it might have fallen away with the change. The poem not only states explicitly that *vestigia* [traces] remain but also hammers away “same, same, same.” “...the same grey hair, the same fierce face [the word is *vultus*, not muzzle or snout], the same gleaming eyes, the same image [*imago*] of beastly savagery.”

The medieval werewolf story I have chosen to tell is very different—indeed almost opposite—from Ovid's. Equally artful and, like Ovid's, in many ways typical of other stories of its day, the *lai* of *Bisclavret* by Marie de France is a tale of the re-gaining (not the loss) of civilization and nobility, a tale in which the metamorphosis, unlike Lycaon's, is reversed. Marie's poem begins:

In the old days, people used to say—
and it often actually happened—
that some men turned into werewolves
and lived in the woods.
A werewolf (*garvalf*) is a savage beast (*beste salvage*);
while his fury is on him
he eats men, does much harm,
goes deep in the forest to live.
But that's enough of this for now:
I want to tell you about the *Bisclavret* [*the Breton word for werewolf*].

These few lines (clearly set off by “that's enough of this”) are all we hear about savagery and anthropophagy (i.e., eating humans). Marie, with characteristic self-confidence, suggests her divergence from folk tradition and establishes her authorial voice; she also distinguishes her *bisclavret* from the savage *garvalf* of tradition. The story then unfolds. A fine and noble knight with an estimable wife has a habit of disappearing for three days a week. Nagged by his wife to reveal where he goes, he finally answers: “My dear, I become a werewolf.” And when she inquires whether he keeps his clothes on, he replies “Wife, I go stark naked” and reveals that he hides the garments carefully because he cannot return to his human shape without them. The wife, now understandably afraid and “never wanting to sleep with him again,” contrives with the help of a lover to steal his clothes.

A year passes. Then the king, hunting in the forest, finds the werewolf, who runs

and kisses his foot in its stirrup, begging for mercy. "My lords," calls the king to his courtiers, "Look at this marvel—this beast is humbling itself to me. It has the mind of a man (*sen d'hume*)..." So the king returns home with the werewolf who "was so noble and well behaved that he never wished to do anything wrong." After some time the wife of the bisclavret came with rich presents for the king, and the werewolf, flying at her in rage, tore the nose off her face. The king, convinced there was a reason for the beast's hatred, tortured the woman until she confessed and restored the stolen clothes. Bisclavret was then allowed to retire into the king's chamber with the clothes, and when the king returned there, he found the knight asleep in the royal bed. The wife was banished with her lover and "had several children who were widely known for their appearance: several women of the family were actually born without noses."

Marie's story raises complex questions about civilization, trust, and gender that I cannot explore thoroughly here. But I call your attention to four points relevant to our theme of identity. First, Marie's story, unlike Ovid's, is about transformation and return. Bisclavret is not left to howl forever in silent meadows. Having performed like a well-behaved dog at court, he becomes a well-beloved knight to a just and wise king.

Second, Bisclavret, unlike Lycaon, is presented throughout as still human. Marie insists several times (in the king's words): "This beast... has understanding and judgment (*Ceste beste ad entente e sen*)."

Not only is Marie's werewolf an innocent victim, both of the pattern of periodic bestiality with which he begins and of the wifely trick that freezes him in his wolf shape (yes, this tale by a woman has misogynistic elements); he is also throughout rational—loyal to his king, vengeful only to those who betrayed him first, civilized enough to request privacy for the shocking act of metamorphosis and the nakedness that precedes it. Indeed the wife's real crime (a natural enough reaction) is to confuse her bisclavret with the *garvalf* tradition, thus denying him the possibility of escaping from it. Although the bisclavret is wolf-shaped and deprived of speech, we are dealing with a sharper soul-body or person-skin dualism than we met in Ovid's story. Whereas Ovid's wolf carries traces of a former self *on* his skin, there is in Marie a suggestion of over and under, inner and outer, of a person under the shaggy wolf. But the suggestion never becomes a claim that the skin is only covering or disguise; Bisclavret, although rational, is also a wolf. As Marie says, it is "a beast (*ceste beste*)" that "has understanding and judgment (*entente e sen*)."

Third, Marie's werewolf seems, at least morally, to change *more* than Ovid's. Lycaon becomes a beast, but a beast he has always been. Bisclavret learns discretion and trust, and teaches those around him. He is more reliable and courteous, wiser in judgment, as a werewolf than he was as a husband, wisest (and richest) of all as a re-transformed knight. It is the wife, who does not undergo metamorphosis, who also does not learn.

Finally, vestiges or traces are important in Marie's tale as in Ovid's, but the traces important here are not on Bisclavret but on the wife. The werewolf's physical transformation both to wolf and to man goes undescribed. But his revenge marks the wife's body, and she passes this physical mark down to subsequent generations. It is her body finally that (however unfair we may feel it is) carries the story.

The modern werewolf stories I have chosen to consider are from a collection by the British writer Angela Carter, who died in 1992. Metamorphosis was for Carter, as for Ovid, a complex theme, and there is no one meaning she gave to change, no single tone

in which she sings of it, although Salman Rushdie seems correct when he says "It is Carter's genius...to make the [beast] fable a metaphor for all the myriad yearnings and dangers of sexual relations." Carter's stories weave fairytale themes we all know—especially "Little Red Riding Hood," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Bluebeard"—into standard European werewolf motifs, such as the notion that spilling a werewolf's blood will release him into his human form or that destroying his clothes will condemn him to lycanthropy forever, or the idea (sometimes called "repercussion" by folklorists) that any wound suffered on the werewolf's body will be found on the restored human form as well. It is Carter's trademark to disrupt profoundly both our expectations of what should follow what in such tales and our customary moral and aesthetic response to them, whether the disrupted template is from classical myth or the Brothers Grimm.

For example, in the brief tale (it is only two pages in the collected stories) called "The Werewolf," the "good child," who sets out for grandmother's house, manages to defend herself against the wolf in the forest by slashing off its right forepaw, only to find her grandmother with "a bloody stump where her right hand should have been." The longer story, "The Company of Wolves," gives Red Ridinghood a more feminist reading. Although the wolf eats grandma completely, the "wise child" does not flinch when she reaches grandmother's house. Rather she strips for the wolf. "The firelight shone through the edges of her skin," writes Carter; "now she was clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh." And when the wolf roars "All the better to eat you with"

The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat.
...She ripped off his shirt for him.

And so the reader waits for the denouement, which is surprisingly gentle, for what has threatened to be a tale of rape and carnage.

...All silent, all silent.
Midnight; and the clock strikes. It is Christmas day, the werewolf's birthday....
See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.

In a parallel tale "The Tiger's Bride," Beauty approaches her beast in terror (and he is a real beast, carnivorous and stinking with piss), only to hear him purring. Then, in one of the most beautiful descriptions I know of sexual arousal—and, yes, of love—the tiger licks his bride into his own species and the story ends.

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shiny hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.

Carter's werewolves and metamorphoses are clearly heirs both to Ovid's and to Marie's. Like Marie's, Carter's stories deal with sexual fulfillment and betrayal, although hers are more overtly erotic. Like Ovid's, her werewolves eat people, although

anthropophagy in her tales is usually also the identity-violation of rape whereas Lycaon's cannibalism is also impiety—the ontological violation of the boundary between human and god. (Is there a hint of this in Carter's suggestion that Christmas—the day of Christian metamorphosis of god to human—is the werewolf's birthday?) Some of Carter's metamorphoses are unidirectional, like Lycaon's; others involve reversals, some of them salvific, like Bisclavret's. Most important for my purposes is Carter's clear sense—paralleling Marie's and Ovid's—that skin both overclothes and is. The “wise child” wears her own virgin skin, through which the firelight shines. Using the Latinate word “integument,” which possessed in Marie de France's day the technical definition of “a story which covers and conveys meaning,” Carter writes: “now she was clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh.” The “wise child” flaunts the nakedness of which the bisclavret was ashamed, but that naked skin is as well as covers self. Has she realised or lost a skin-self, been devoured, raped, or sexually fulfilled? What lies there when “she” (but it is, Carter insists, “she”) sleeps in the arms of a wolf?

“The Tiger's Bride” makes identity fluid in similar ways. Like Lycaon, the bride becomes a beast. But vestiges, marks, remain. What is in one line a patina of hairs (still a human term) is in the next fur (an animal term); but an “I” still speaks, and even as the earrings drip away, the beauty of “my” skin-hair-fur perdures. Like the grandmother with her bloody stump, the bride carries something through species change. Enchanted, aroused and decidedly uncomfortable, we readers wonder: who, or what, is the tiger's bride?

And so we have three tales of metamorphosis, Ovid's, Marie's and Carter's. But how, you may ask, do they help us think about identity? These stories seem to be about exactly the opposite—about not identity but loss. Moreover, they seem, on the surface at least, preposterous, even offensive—the taste of other eras, which enjoyed the surely politically-incorrect spectacle of women turned into trees or raped by wolves, or carrying into future generations a facial deformity we would be inclined to blame on an unforgiving, even bestial husband. Even if Carter's Beauty is sometimes saved from the beast by her mother or Red Ridinghood stands up to the wolf, we may feel that these are hardly myths for our time.

I suggest that we think again. For these stories are not as preposterous as they first seem. We are surrounded, as even medieval commentators on Ovid knew, by metamorphosis. We do see change of species; we grapple with change of self. Caterpillars turn into butterflies; dead sticks flower in springtime; beloved children change into killers when schizophrenia erupts; healthy cells become cancer; people die. Change is a staggering fact—one ancient philosophers struggled to explain. It is possible to argue that the great intellectual breakthrough of the centuries before Ovid was Aristotle's, whose fundamental contribution to western culture was to speak of what he called generation and corruption—coming-to-be and passing away—as not mere fluctuations of appearance, the adding and subtracting of qualities or “skins,” but the replacement of one existing substance by another. Real change. Without it there is no story; nothing happens. Aristotle the biologist knew that the chicken really replaces the egg; Aristotle the aesthetician knew that, in tragedy, the fortunes of the hero really reverse. If change is not real, Lycaon's howls do not move us, nor is the bisclavret really trapped, speechless, in wolfhood by his wife's betrayal.

And yet there is no story if there is only change. If something does not continue

we have only discrete vignettes, a point the modern writer H.H. Munro ("Saki") plays with in his story "The She-Wolf," where a group of bored society people are tricked into accepting metamorphosis by the rather crude substitution of a wolf for a woman in a conservatory. The story falls completely flat—which is perhaps, given the frisson of horror he evokes in other werewolf stories, exactly Saki's point. If we see a tyrant in one frame, a shaggy wolf in the next, a running woman at one moment and at the next a laurel tree, we are (unless we are environmentalists) unmoved and uninterested; there is no story. No matter how majestic or beautiful, a tree is only a tree. The horror and pain come because the wolf was (is?) Lycaon, the tree was (is?) Daphne. And I say "was (is?)" because there is no "was" for wolf or tree unless there is an "is." Unless the story is carried in some way in the present body or shape, we do not know what it was. Hence the body carries the story—Lycaon's hair is still the same shaggy grey, the tiger's bride has her beautiful fur, even the bisclavret, although his appearance is completely undescribed, carries in his dog-like comportment the knight's devotion to sovereign, as his wife carries in her face to future generations the story of betrayal.

As students of folklore and comparative religion tell us, there are profound differences between cultures in stories of metamorphosis or shape-shifting; nor are all such stories in the western tradition the same. Even Marie and Angela Carter, drawing on European werewolf traditions that go back in part to Ovid or Ovid's sources, do not tell the same story or take the same stance toward metamorphosis. Indeed we may feel that, if we use the two poles I just discussed—change and continuity—, Marie at least in an ontological sense stresses continuity (a human seems to remain under the skin), whereas Angela Carter and Ovid push toward change. Moreover the contrast appears even starker if we embed the stories in their historical contexts. Some theorists in Marie's day resisted metamorphosis so profoundly, even as an image, that they felt reading such stories was heretical. The special effects departments of Hollywood have no such qualms. Orthodox Christian theologians in the Middle Ages firmly rejected the metempsychosis (or transmigration of souls from one body to another at death—certainly a form of shape-shifting) that Ovid used in book 15 of the Metamorphoses to argue "nothing perishes in the whole universe; it does but vary and renew its form" (Metam. 15. 254-55).

Nonetheless medieval thinkers struggled to explain, not erase, the metamorphoses of marvel, magic and miracle: the change of chrysalis to butterfly in the world around them, of Lot's wife to salt in the stories of their Holy Scripture, of wine to blood in the central ritual of the Christian tradition. And neither Angela Carter nor Ovid sees finally only change. The point made by Ovid's Pythagoras in book 15 of the Metamorphoses is not only that the energy of the universe perdures but also that it is a self that is reincarnated in many shapes. We must not forget that the historical Pythagoras is supposed to have remembered his former lives—surely a radical claim to continuity through metempsychosis. And Angela Carter's heroes and heroines often painfully resist change. In the last of her werewolf stories, "Peter and the Wolf," an intellectually gifted peasant boy who has grown up with wolf stories and has known a feral child, turns his back resolutely against metamorphosis, as he (the words are Carter's) "tramps onwards into a different story." His last words upon leaving his peasant world forever behind are: "If I look back again... I shall turn into a pillar of salt." Metamorphosis here is trap.

What then do we see in these stories of metamorphosis—stories that recur and recur in the western tradition? Not a single meaning or message, not even a single

definition of person or self. Stories don't give definitions. That is not how they work. But I suggest we do find here a profound and powerful way of thinking about what we call identity in all its senses. I suggest that identity is what we find in these tales from Ovid, from Marie, from Angela Carter: the shape (or visible body) that carries story.

Of course, both shape and story are complex notions— notions for which contemporary theory employs other, more freighted terms, in particular “body” and “narrative.” It is in order to avoid the implications of structures, essences, ontologies often carried by these terms that I choose the simpler words “shape” and “story.” But what I mean is not simple.

By story I mean, as I said above, real change. In an Aristotelian sense, story involves metabole, the replacement of something by something else. Story spreads out through time the behaviors or bodies—the shapes—a self has been or will be, each replacing the one before. Hence story has before and after, gain and loss. It goes somewhere. Even if it is the story of repetition, or of salvation or destruction by a return whence it began, story has sequence.

Moreover, shape or body is crucial, not incidental, to story. It carries story; it makes story visible; in a sense it is story. Shape (or visible body) is in-space what story is in time. I thus prefer the ordinary word “shape,” suggested by the theme of metamorphosis, rather than the now popular concept “body” (whose ordinary associations seem to tie it too closely to the physiological and genetic) or the technical term “form” (whose medieval meaning makes it almost the opposite of body or matter). The shape I speak of (Lycaon's wolf body, for example, or the bisclavret's doglike comportment) encapsulates graphically and simultaneously the sequence, the before and after, of a self. But it can do this only paradoxically and partially, only in traces or vestiges, not fully. For what shape carries is story, and story is change; “before” must be (mostly) lost in order for there to be an “after.”

It should now be clear that the identity dealt with so complexly in the werewolf stories I have discussed is not an essence, an identity position, or even a personality. Indeed the shape of which Ovid, Marie, Saki and Angela Carter speak is not either allegorical or mimetic. Although some later commentators read Ovid this way, he is not saying that Lycaon's essence is imitated or uncovered or revealed in his skin. None of these stories is, in modern jargon, essentialist. None says we look like what we are. (Bisclavret, which comes the closest to speaking of under and over, inner and outer, does not speak of “looks like” at all.) None reduces us to an essence manifested (or hidden) in pigment or limbs, or allegorizes our bodies as signs of a characteristic or a character located within. Lycaon is not human greed symbolized by an animal; Carter's wild child is not a virgin soul or a virgin self or a virgin identity-position manifested in translucent skin. As the literary critic Leonard Barkan says, shape matters; it matters too much to be allegory or symbol. Without it, there is no story, and hence no self. For my self is my story, known only in my shape, in the marks and visible behaviors I manifest—whether generic or personal. I am my skin and scars, my gender and pigment, my height and bearing, all forever changing—not just a performance, as some contemporary theory would have it, but a story.

Hence identity is labile, problematic, threatening and threatened. But metamorphosis is as much its guarantee as its loss. Like Carter's peasant boy, we resist it, afraid we shall become a pillar of salt, that our story will end in arbitrary change. But

without change, we have no story. All we can hope for is that the traces of our story endure in the body we are becoming. It is when shape no longer carries story, when the traces or vestiges are completely erased, that identity is lost. Narcissus is still in some sense Narcissus as long as the flower bends to contemplate its own image in the pond.

Perhaps we can understand this better if we look for a moment at Dante's challenge to Ovid in cantos 24 and 25 of the Inferno, the first part of the great Divine Comedy. In circle eight of hell, Dante the voyager meets five noble thieves of Florence, some of whom first appear as reptiles, others in human form. While Dante watches in horror, the human forms merge with snakes and lizards, who have themselves before been human. In the first of these metamorphoses (24. 100-108), the damned man, one Vanni Fucci, bitten at the neck by a great serpent, falls into a heap of ashes, which immediately resumes its former shape. Dante audaciously compares this shape-shifting to the phoenix (traditional Christian symbol of bodily resurrection), which dies and is born again every 500 years. Two more thieves then merge with reptiles, who are themselves understood by most commentators as metamorphosed thieves. The descriptions grow longer and more sexual, borrowing language from Ovid's story of the nymph Salmacis and the boy Hermaphroditus who fuse into a single bisexual being (Metam. 4. 356-88).

If now, reader, you are slow to believe what I say, that will be no marvel,
for I, who saw it, hardly allow it.

As I was raising my brows toward them, a serpent with six feet threw
itself on one of them and embraced him closely.

Its middle feet it wrapped around his waist, with its forefeet it seized his
arms; then it pierced both his cheeks with its fangs;

its hind feet it spread along his thighs, and put its tail between them,
extending it up along his loins:

ivy never took root on a tree so tightly as the horrible beast grew vinelike
around the other's limbs.

After they had adhered to each other like hot wax and had mixed their
colors, neither seemed what it had been

.....
Already the two heads had become one, so that two sets of features
seemed mingled in one face, where two heads were lost.

Then Dante, in a well-established literary topos, flings down his challenge:

About Cadmus and Arethusa let Ovid be silent, for if in his poetry he
converts him into a serpent and her into a fountain, I do not envy him,

for never two natures face to face did he transmute so that both forms were
ready to exchange their matter.

What does Dante mean?

In one sense of course he is simply claiming to have described a more radical metamorphosis than Ovid—a change of one individual into another so total that the form-matter combination Dante understands as person is shattered in a way Ovid could not

have imagined. But I think we can see here something else, without getting into the complexity (which is nonetheless surely relevant) of Dante's metaphysical categories. For the metamorphosis of Dante's thieves, whether or not a literary advance on Ovid, is, in the terms I have been using, a complete loss of identity; shape does not carry story. It is story more than form that is erased. And story is erased not only because there are no traces left but also because the metamorphosis goes nowhere except to confusion, as Dante says to "change and change again" (*mutare e trasmutare*) (25. 143). In a (to Dante) obscene parody of resurrection (hence the phoenix simile), the change from reptile to human goes on forever, but neither carries traces of the other. It is significant that later commentators must argue without decisive evidence (that is, without any identifying marks on the bodies) that the reptile in canto 25 line 50 is the Cianfa who disappears in line 43.

Hence Dante's challenge to Ovid in *Inferno* 24-25 is (as many critics have noted) parallel to cantos 24-25 of the *Purgatorio*, in which Dante the pilgrim questions why his physical fingers grasp only air when he tries to embrace the figures he meets. In answer, the poet Statius explains that souls generate aerial bodies in the afterlife as embryos grow in the womb. Just as the account of the thieves in *Inferno* 25 shows that loss of story, of sequence, is loss of self, so *Purgatorio* 25 makes it clear that selfhood requires story-expressing shapes even in that period after death and before resurrection when bodies are not necessitated by theological doctrine.

But Dante's ultimate challenge to Ovid is (as fewer critics have understood) cantos 22 and 30 of the *Paradiso*, where Dante asks to see souls as they truly are "with faces uncovered." Then the flowers (souls) he has seen in heaven are made manifest in their bodies, not in the eternal return from ashes through body to reptile to ashes Vanni Fucci underwent in *Inferno* 24 but in a real story, a story whose end bears the traces of all that has unfolded before. In a stunning metamorphosis from flower to human, the souls of *Paradiso* 30 appear as the glorified and, of course, identifiable bodies of the resurrection. For Dante, living among the Florentine altarpieces we can still see in European museums and churches, imagined the heaven of the Last Judgment as painters did—filled with saints who carried on their bodies the physical traces of their martyrdom, reigned over by a Christ whose resurrected and triumphant body still bore the scars of the crucifixion although they now scintillated with golden light.

The balance of metamorphosis and continuity may differ in Dante's *Comedia* and Ovid's book 15, where there is also an apotheosis (that of Caesar to star). The differences are important. But I would argue that Dante understood and used Ovid's metamorphosis. The change with which he challenges Ovid in the *Inferno* is not Ovidian, for he changes the thieves so completely that they lose their stories and hence their identities. But in the true metamorphosis of the *Paradiso*, shape does carry story. Thus the identities of Dante's *Comedia*, although understood in scholastic terms of form and matter foreign to Ovid, are not so far from Ovid's, just as Angela Carter—for all her difference from Marie—is not so far from Marie's sense of skin and self as woven too closely together to be merely cover and core, disguise and essence.

It is now time to return where I began—with our modern woes and queries. And we are of course no closer than we were to answering the either/or questions of modern politics, or modern philosophy, or even of modern television. I cannot tell you whether your race or gender is biologically given or culturally constructed, how far your sexual

preference lies in your genes and hormones or in your education and your hopes. I cannot tell you whether you should erase some of your experience with cosmetic surgery or, like Bisclavret's wife, bear it no matter how unfair it may seem. Nor can I tell you whether you can or should be cloned and, if you are, whether your clone is you. But I can draw two conclusions.

First, these dichotomies of nature versus nurture, biology versus social construction, mind versus body, agency versus essence, do not seem to me to give us the help we need to deal compassionately with ourselves or with others. In the complex decisions we must make as we gain and lose children, parents, lovers, friends, even the selves we thought we were, we need a sense of identity—identity as individuality, identity as group affiliation, identity as continuity—more labile and nuanced than these stark contrasts suggest. Who I am, who you are, is (as we all know at heart) seldom a matter of either/or.

Second, the stories of the past, of the western canon—great stories like those of Dante and Carter, Ovid and Marie de France—are worth studying, not least because they explore and comment on, elaborate and explode themselves. We cannot understand Dante and Marie unless we know Ovid, Ovid unless we understand Pythagoras; we will not grasp fully the intricate ways Carter or Saki disrupt our expectations at every twist of line and plot unless we know the entire European werewolf tradition and the Brothers Grimm. We read, however, not in order to understand the tradition (an academic enterprise) but in order to understand—through the tradition and its artful refigurings—ourselves. Behind these fantastic stories lie probing, parody and evocation of that glorious, inexplicable, and (to postmodern eyes) totally improbable thing: identity.

For if my reading of these werewolf stories is persuasive—if identity is shape carrying story—we need not decide between mind and body, inner and outer, biology and society, agency and essence. Rather we are living beings, shapes with stories, always changing but also always carrying traces of what we were before. We are not Dante's thieves—a series of random shapes with no story. We are not the garvalf anticipated by Bisclavret's wife—a stereotypical pattern predicted by a generalized shape and tradition. But we are also not floating bundles of motives and memories without shape, separated souls without the aerial bodies Statius explains in the Purgatorio. Terrifying though it may be (but I hope I have shown that it is liberating as well), we are Bisclavret or the tiger's bride, really changing but bearing our story through the change and bearing it out there in our bodies, visible to others as well as to ourselves.

Over the past decade of my life—whether sitting by my father's feeding chair to watch a shape that carries its story with it, although the dull eyes no longer see a daughter, or struggling in the classroom to teach the abstruse and forbidding texts of ancient and medieval philosophers—I have found more help in metamorphosis stories than in current political or philosophical debates over identity-position or survival. Without contemporary politics and academic debate, I would not have my questions in quite the form they thrust themselves upon me. And I am grateful for the incentive to question. But without the confidence of Ovid, Angela Carter and Marie de France that identity is finally shape carrying story, I would have no answers at all.