Introduction

In 1595, in the Dutch town of Arnhem, a man by the name of Hans Poeck was imprisoned on suspicion of witchcraft. According to him, about three years earlier, after his leg had been injured by a horse and he was walking on the dyke, he had met a man. When asked for food, the man had said, I will give you plenty if you will do my will. Hans had hesitated but when the exchange was repeated several times (in the meantime two women had passed by) he finally consented to renounce God. At that moment he had felt something like hot or warm water on his face, the sign that his chrism was being removed. The devil, for Hans had encountered no other but him, had then given him a piece of cloth, saying: `As long as you have this, you will succeed in everything'. After this, Hans confessed that he had been `walking as a wolf' for three years. When turned into a wolf he was still capable of human judgement but could not speak.[1]

This statement is taken from a werewolf trial, one of about 300 held in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Compared to the tens of thousands of witch trials, of which the werewolf trials form a part, a few hundred is not a huge number. It is nevertheless large enough to allow for geographical and chronological classification. Werewolf trials, although often conducted against single suspects without evolving into mass trials, are not just isolated cases. They show regional characteristics and developments. This book, however, is not just about werewolf trials. It explores werewolves from the early modern period up to the present day, although not quite in that order.

Hans Poeck was just one werewolf. Can he be called a typical werewolf? Is there such thing as a typical werewolf? To start with, there is no single definition of a werewolf. It is therefore impossible to state succinctly at the outset what a werewolf is or was. Werewolves can be seen as men (*wer*, *were*, or *weer*) who changed into wolves. But that is too simple since this capacity was also ascribed to women. Furthermore, it was not always necessarily into a wolf that werewolves changed. Even the etymological derivation of man from *wer* is disputed.

In my opinion, a werewolf is what people say it is, regardless of etymology. I consider the werewolf to be an image, a story or a concept. These three terms indicate the distinct, yet overlapping attributes of the `werewolf': its characteristics, its actions and what people have in mind when they use the word `werewolf'. In this way my approach resembles the theme of a short story, written in 1984, in which a Nordic werewolf tells his comrade in arms: `I am what is believed (...). Snorri and Bjarni believed I was a werewolf. They believed they would be murdered, so that was what happened'.[2]

Today the werewolf is primarily known as a figure of the horror genre. In this genre the beast has an established position. `It is one of the classics'.[3] Although to date there is no agreement about the paradigmatic werewolf novel, as there is about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the case of androids or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* for vampires, the werewolf is nevertheless rooted in modern horror through movies. In western society horror is relevant in itself, both in what it reveals and how it is received, but the importance of the werewolf goes beyond the genre. As the cultural anthropologist Elizabeth Lawrence writes: `Pre-eminently, the werewolf phenomenon articulates humankind's overwhelming penchant for symbolizing

with animal images, making sense of life with metaphors from nature. The wolf is an extraordinarily rich vehicle of expression, carrying a complex web of embedded codes ...'[4] And according to the librarian Sarah Bakewell, stories about shapeshifters and anthropomorphical animals `address fundamental questions about human identity'.[5] Although for `humankind' I would substitute those humans who carry a werewolf in their cultural repertoire, I subscribe to the substance of these remarks. The werewolf presents a powerful image that touches on themes such as death, aggression, sexuality, and gender. In that sense it contributes to the identity of those who use the concept. In contrast to other figures of nineteenth-century horror and science-fiction, the werewolf has deep roots in western-European history. This makes it more intriguing than other movie monsters, the more so because the field is littered with speculations and much territory remains unexplored.

Werewolves have, strangely enough, attracted very little academic interest. Most of the work on them, documentaries included, can be classified as popularization. Since there was very little to popularize, the same cases were repeated over and over and mistakes were perpetuated. The lack of academic expertise means, among other things, that novelists and amateur historians can provide useful observations (but not the authors of most of the internet sites I have consulted), whereas academics may make mistakes. Werewolves are also fascinating because there is still a lot to discover, to rectify and to argue about them.

In this book we will encounter many other ways in which people have tried to understand werewolves than simply equating them with murderers. These perceptions may sometimes be flawed as to their historical references or logical coherence. But that does not mean that they can always be dismissed as absurdities. In the Netherlands, for instance, a number of people told folklorists that a werewolf brought bad weather, storm and rain.[6] Since the word *weer* (as in the Dutch *weerwolf*) also means `weather' the reason for the mistake seems obvious. Though it may be etymologically wrong, the `weather wolf' still presents a revealing option. Or take the poem by the early twentieth-century German writer Christian Morgenstern in which the word *Werwolf* is declined and the werewolf turned into a grammatical wolf. In this case, too, it is difficult to provide a translation preserving the double meaning; this has only been possible by replacing the werewolf with the hoopoe or `whopoe'.[7]

We can also consider another very different example of a `false' werewolf, a rare English one. In his novel *The Werewolves of London*, Brian Stableford refers to a traditional rhyme in which children are warned about the werewolves of London Town.

> Beware of the days of the year, little man,
> When the moon has a face of a silver crown;
> Cleave if thou may'st to the home of thy clan,
> And hide from the werewolves of London Town

He ostensibly quotes Sabine Baring-Gould's *The Book of Were-Wolves* of 1865 to reinforce the credibility of the verses. Only the first line of his quotation is reliable; the rest Stableford made up himself.[8] The only verse in which the London werewolves occur is a 1978 popsong.[9] Within a literary universe this mixing of genuine titles and fake contents is, of course,

acceptable, although it invites questions about the need for novelists' research.[10] Again, the discongruity can tell us something - in this case about the attraction of a creature without a local history. To dismiss these werewolves merely as products of misunderstanding, playfulness, or fantasy, however, would rob the werewolf of its rich variety and thus of some of its meanings.

Next to trial materials, folklore records provide us with an overview of the distribution of werewolf concepts among Europe's general populace. Available from the nineteenth century onwards, they exist in greater number than the texts of werewolf trials. Although there are similarities between confessions in trials and the later legends, the latter do not necessarily preserve earlier werewolf concepts. At least it should not be presupposed that oral traditions remained unaltered over the centuries. Events were not constantly retold and notions of what was a proper subject for discussion changed. Also the influence of broadsheets and chapbooks should not be ignored. The following legend, known among folklorists as `the Werewolf Husband' was recorded in Romania in the mid 1970s.

> A man went off to make hay with his wife. While they were haying, he went off to the woods. A wolf came out and attacked the woman. The wolf ripped her skirt, and then, after a time, ran off. In a little while, the man came out of the woods. The woman asked him where he was all that time, because she had shouted for him when the wolf attacked her. He laughed and she saw bits of clothing in his teeth.[11]

While the Dutch link between werewolf and weather can also be found in legend collections, that tradition differs from the Werewolf Husband in that it is mostly restricted to the Dutch language area. The Romanian text, on the other hand, is an example of a so-called `migratory legend' that can be found all over Europe - the Netherlands included.[12] The interpretation of local versions will thus have to rely on local details. This underlines the importance of a geographical approach to folklore material. Legends that crossed national boundaries were probably influenced by printed stories which were subsequently given some *couleur locale*. In their turn they reveal the meaning of local, less standarized expressions. Other legends are confined to particular regions or are primarily examples of local speech.

The geographical method, which can enlighten us about the distribution of werewolf trials and the occurrence of werewolf folklore, seems less appropriate for werewolf novels and films. The twentieth-century Hollywood version of the werewolf has been so influential that it has often replaced local European traditions. Nevertheless, it is still a useful means to identify national preoccupations. Stableford, by placing his werewolves in an esoteric and gothic context, fits them into an English literary tradition. The werewolf in Joanne Rowling's, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, to mention another example, conforms more to American cinematic norms. Professor Remus Lupin is an `Animagus' (shapeshifter) who was bitten by a werewolf when a small boy. He turns into `a fully fledged monster' each month when the moon is full. He has to wait for an antidote, `the Wolfsbane Potion' to control his changes. `As long as I take it in the week preceding the full moon, I keep my mind when I transform ... I am able to curl up in my office, a harmless wolf, and wait for the moon to wain again'.[13]

The main question throughout the present book is how we should understand these werewolves. Since they embodied concepts with which it was, as anthropologists have it, `good to think', what was it exactly that people had in mind when they talked or wrote about werewolves? Did they really believe in shapeshifters or were werewolves primarily a figure of speech? Was Hans Poeck suffering from a delusion? Was the Romanian peasant merely telling a frightening but entertaining story, as Rowling did twenty-five years later?

As it is, all texts have a particular relation to events. When told or performed, they become events in themselves: the confessions of werewolves in court, the story-telling during haymaking or the reading of Rowling's book. But stories are also about happenings, or at least are supposed to refer to what people had done, and they are acted out in their turn. People were put to death because they were deemed to have caused harm in wolf shape. Others went out dressed up as werewolves, as they were familiar with the legends or indeed with the newer twentieth-century werewolf lore. The differences and similarities between the various manifestations of the werewolf invite questions about continuity and change. Do we have to assume, for instance, that Hans Poeck had access to a wolfsbane antidote since he did not lose his mind? Or that Lupin had made a pact with the devil? But why was neither given away by the threads between his teeth? Or do questions about continuity only make sense within a restricted geographical area and within specific social groups?

The meaning of the word `werewolf' can only be local, linked to the events in which it is used. It is also subject to change. In addition, a werewolf may be taken to mean what people thought it was but did not dare to say openly because of all kinds of prevailing taboos. When some authors define werewolves as serial killers and cannibals, this does not have to be generally accepted as under the influence of etiological research the wolf - and by extension the wolf into which someone might turn - is now regarded as a basically peaceful animal. By the same token, however, the association with murderer and man eater cannot be entirely discarded since it shows some of the current and past meanings of the term werewolf. By linking werewolves to other historical or cultural phenomena, mistakes in interpretation can easily be made. Even so, it would be ill-advised not to heed the different perceptions by different people.

If we are to uncover the meanings that were given to werewolves, we will have to dig through layers of werewolf imagery and their intrepretations. In some cases meaning may only be skin deep, in others it lies more hidden. It does not have to be the same in each area and in each period. Since present-day werewolves are foremost defined by films, this book's first chapter starts with a discussion of the main werewolf films of the last twenty-five years. Film makers attempted to renew the werewolf, with more or less success. Measuring this can be done in different ways. In my opinion, a werewolf film becomes interesting when it balances recognizable werewolf motifs with innovations and when a story is told simultaneously on different levels. Lovers of slasher movies will find little of their taste in my analyses. The now classic cinematic werewolf image, however, was formed earlier, between 1941 and 1981, beginning with the archetypal Larry Talbot in *The Wolf Man* and culminating in *An American Werewolf in London*, with its many musical moons. In chapter two, `The Menstruating Man', it is argued that it is not so much the individual werewolf who offers the key to understanding here, but his relation to the main female character.

Writers of film scripts made some use of earlier novels and short stories, although selectively. When, in chapter three, we look further back in time beyond the films to English and American fiction, we hardly find the moon anymore. Instead, vague ideas about the werewolves in the late medieval nordic Volsunga Saga and about the supernatural wolf Fenrir (or occasionally Fenris) turn out to be important. And again the significance of gender relations is evident, but now in a completely different form. To authors seeking to explain werewolves, however, fiction and films are anathema. They do not see werewolves as language, or as as culture in general, but as particular phenomena that were misunderstood by their observers. Chapter four contains a discussion of the various pharmacological, psychological and medical approaches that found werewolves in rabies, feral children, porphyria or other strange occurrences. It appears that in these kind of publications arguments and evidence are incompatible with historical werewolves - which will become even more obvious further in this book. Materialist explanations merely have some relevance when related to werewolves on screen.

Even more than in the latest films, werewolves in earlier fiction are depicted as foreign to English and American culture. Histories about werewolves in the English language, to which we will turn to in chapter five, are also almost exclusively based on foreign material, or more accurately, on the assessment of non-English sources. To the English mind, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century criminal trials against werewolves were primarily French and the theoretical justification of them was authored by French lawyers. These were called demonologists because of the central place of the devil in their work. Later authors such as the folklorist Sabine Baring-Gould and writer about the occult Montague Summers, whose book *The Werewolf* appeared first in 1933, relied heavily on them. The way historical werewolf imagery was produced was distorted from the start and could, without major adjustment, only result in further misconceptions.

The other chapters of this book are devoted to a reconstruction of historical werewolves in countries were they were part of peoples' repertoires of words and stories. Werewolf trials and the concepts they mediated, I will argue, were relatively new. This allows us to discern core areas and peripheries of werewolf incidence. Here it foremost concerns a continuous area consisting of mid-Germany, the south-eastern Netherlands and the adjacent parts of present-day Belgium. In chapter six we will encounter Hans Poeck again, when he is placed in the context of his contemporaries. Other areas, such as France, Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries are briefly touched upon - they urgently need new and accessible research. Only in chapter seven, `A Journey to Hell', a Baltic `werewolf' is portrayed and his publicized appearance dissected, primarily to discover whether the claim that werewolves harboured shamanistic characteristics holds any ground.

German werewolves have to a large extend been ignored in English publications. Only Peter Stubbe, the late sixteenth-century werewolf from the neighbourhood of Cologne, is often cited; he had French and Catholic characteristics and in that sense stood apart from many of his later, seventeenth-century German colleagues. Legend texts allow us to explore links between early modern werewolf concepts and those current in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In chapter eight these texts are presented; in chapter nine an attempt is made to interprete them. Poeck and Stump (Stubbe) are then revealed to have been late

sixteenth-century predecessors of regionally current werewolf concepts, signalling what men actually did when they `walked as werewolves'.

In the course of this book, the present-day Anglo-American werewolf images and those current in parts of the historical European continent have inevitably drifted apart. In the concluding chapter, `Werewolves versus the Wolf Man', I have thematized this difference, asking whether we can discern traits of historical werewolves in their modern English and American counterparts. The answer should inspire new research into historical English `werewolves' and by extention into the animalistic vices so often ascribed to men. As for werewolves elsewhere: while this book is meant to sound the death bell over popularized werewolf faction, it may also be the cradle of new and serious werewolf scholarship.

Notes to Introduction

[1]. Molhuijsen, `Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der heksenprocessen in Gelderland', pp. 202-3.

[2]. Keizer, `What seen but the wolf', pp. 36-7.

[3]. As remarked by the librarian in Joss Whedon's television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, episode: `Phases' (season 2, 1998).

[4]. Lawrence, `Werewolves in psyche and cinema', p. 110.

[5]. Bakewell, `Images of bodily transformation', p. 503.

[6]. Heupers, *Volksverhalen*, no. 1331; Kooijman, *Volksverhalen*, nos. 1482, 1606. The connection also appears in answers given to the 1937 Folklore survey.

[7]. Morgenstern, *Das Mondschaf* / *The Moon Sheep*, pp. 10-3.

[8]. Stableford, *Werewolves of London*, pp. 49, 71. Cf. Baring-Gould, *Book of Were- Wolves*, p. 100.

[9]. On the Warren Zevon album, *Exitable Boy*.

[10]. About traces of Stablefort's research, see: Russell & Russell, `The social biology of werewolves' p. 154, 260-1; Stablefort, `The werewolf of Paris'.

[11]. Senn, *Were-wolf and Vampire in Romania* p. 83, no. 17.

[12]. Christiansen, *Migratory Legends*, pp. 58-60: ML 4005.

[13]. Rowling, *Azkaban*, p. 258.