

Shape-shifting, Identity and Change
in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

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The proliferation of shape-shifters in all periods and genres of literature, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, testifies to our ongoing fascination with such figures and narratives. Yet, while countless shape-shifting narratives exist, as Caroline Bynum points out, recent examples and the critical works concerning them frequently engage the motif with a "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" (165). Bynum's treatment of modern narratives, however, is limited, as her study includes only works by Angela Carter and Saki (H. H. Munro). Instead of focusing on modern tales, and in what she describes as an effort to free her work from reductive dichotomies, Bynum turns to medieval and classical shape-shifting narratives such as the werewolf tales of Marie de France and Ovid, *Bisclavret* and "Lycaon," respectively. Here, she suggests, we find a "more labile and problematic understanding of identity" because these tales include what modern narratives lack: "images, metaphors, and stories that imagine a self possessing both individuality and identity position, a self that really changes while really remaining the same thing" (165-66).

Contrary to Bynum, I argue that it is not always necessary to return to medieval narratives for a "labile and problematic understanding of identity" (165-66). Complex representations of identity abound in children or youth's fantasy literature, particularly in texts

that employ the shape-shifting motif. In two of the most studied youth’s fantasy literature texts, *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Sword in the Stone*, Ursula K. Le Guin and T. H. White link shape-shifting to the identity and development of their protagonists. J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series also serves as an excellent case study, and her use of the motif, and its connected themes of identity and the development of the hero, places her within the tradition epitomized by White and Le Guin. The third installment of Rowling’s series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, foregrounds theriomorphic (that is, human to animal) shape-shifting through its focus on Animagi and the werewolf figure Remus Lupin. In concurrence with Giselle Liza Anatol, I consider Rowling’s texts a part of “this generation’s most formative narratives” not only because they represent identity in varied and contradictory terms, but also because they “reflect and/or comment upon the cultural assumptions and ideological tensions of contemporary society” (xv).

Identity is, at best, a polymorphous term, and therefore one that requires the establishment of parameters when used. Bynum outlines three basic modern concepts of identity, and although, as she confesses, the boundaries between these concepts sometime blur, they are useful tools for understanding the theme in both texts and society. First, Bynum lists “individuality or personality. . . . that which makes me particularly, distinctively, even uniquely me” (163). Often, this first category suggests choice or free will. As Dumbledore explains to Harry, “It is our choices, . . . that show what we truly are far more than our abilities” (CoS 245). This understanding of identity forms a large part of Andrea Schutz’s discussion, so I will proceed no further here.¹ The second category Bynum lists is “identity position. . . . 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” (163). Such factors appear

¹ Andrea Schutz and I shared a panel at ACCIO and subsequently coordinated our papers. Please refer to her essay for a detailed discussion of this area of identity.

within the wizarding world through the assignation of terms such as mudblood, pure blood, muggle, squib, werewolf, and so on. In the wizarding world, as in our own, these identity position categories exist within a hierarchical system established and perpetuated by an elite minority who have access to positions of power (people such as Dolores Umbridge), or who, because of their wealth, have influence over those with power (people such as the Malfoys). Finally, Bynum lists “spatiotemporal continuity. . . . the fact that I am the same person I was a moment ago” (163). This final or “third understanding of identity” is, perhaps, the most complex because it easily blurs with the first category, individuality or personality, through its association with the conscious or rational mind and the activities or choices of that mind. Spatiotemporal continuity suggests that beings retain their “oneness or integrity,” their conscious sense of self, “despite physical or spiritual transformation” (163; 28). In another, more Lockean sense, one could understand this as psychological continuity; the continuity over space and time of a particular mind despite any changes to the physical form that embodies that mind.² While all of these definitions appear in the *Harry Potter* series, I focus primarily on the concepts of spatiotemporal continuity and identity position because they are intrinsic to our understanding of Rowling’s werewolf figure.

I shall begin chronologically, with the Wart’s shape-shifting episodes in *The Sword in the Stone*. Throughout the tale, the wizard Merlyn transforms Wart into a fish, a merlin, a snake, an owl, and a badger. These episodes serve as Wart’s education, and contribute to his ability to draw the sword from the stone and, even if unwittingly, claim the kingship of Britain. Yet, while Wart moves back and forth between his human and animal forms, he remains, *essentially*, the same being. Although these shape-shifting episodes impact Wart’s personality or individuality because they teach him that just rule is achieved through the choices one makes, more

² I refer here to the concept put forth by John Locke in his treatise *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

importantly, they demonstrate that disruption of the physical body does not affect the rational mind or consciousness that houses individuality – Wart remains Wart and remains aware that he is Wart throughout his shape-shifting. Thus, White suggests that identity rests and persists in the conscious mind rather than in the physical body.

Le Guin’s treatment of shape-shifting in *A Wizard of Earthsea* complicates this understanding of identity. While Le Guin’s protagonist also studies transformation, there is, in *Earthsea*, a risk associated with this skill. Ogion the wizard warns Ged that each time he transforms into a falcon, he runs the risk “of losing [his] self,” and “the longer a man stays in a form not his own, the greater his peril” (*Wizard* 125). Over time, the qualities of the non-human physical form taken diminish the consciousness of the individual who chooses to transform. Indeed, Ged faces such peril when he flees the dark creatures of the Terrenon jewel on Osskil by turning into a falcon. As Ged flees, the anger and wildness of the hunted falcon overcome him. They are described as

like his own, and had become his own, and his will to fly had become the falcon’s will . . . he had known at last only what the falcon knows: hunger, the wind, the way he flies. (125-26)

Ged runs the risk of losing his conscious, human self through his prolonged period as a raptor. In fact, Ged’s period in raptor form is so prolonged that he is unable to transform back; his human mind or conscious self is so drastically reduced that he can no longer access the knowledge or power to return to his original state. It is Ogion who restores Ged to his human form.

At a first glance, Ged’s metamorphosis suggests that when physical transformation occurs, identity, particularly an understanding of human identity as the continuity of a rational mind or consciousness, deteriorates. An underlying principle of continuity, however, informs

Ged's shape-shifting. Ged's nickname Sparrowhawk not only reflects the ease with which, at a young age, he learns the magical words to summon birds of prey, but it also gestures to the raptor form he later acquires when shape-shifting. He becomes what he has already been named. When Ged flees Osskil, his falcon form returns instinctively to Ogion, confirming its shared awareness of where home, community, and safety lie. Ged's raptor identity is therefore synonymous with his human one. Le Guin further insists on a continued sense of identity despite transformation through the shadow that Ged unwittingly releases when he summons Elfarran from the dead. As Lord Gensher tells Ged, he and the shadow are connected: "It is the shadow of your arrogance, the shadow of your ignorance, the shadow you cast" (66). The shadow is the Jungian "dark side of [Ged's] soul, the unadmitted, the unadmissable" (Le Guin, "Child" 60), and in order for Ged to succeed as a wizard, as a human being, he must embrace this part of himself. Le Guin, then, while initially suggesting that one's identity cannot withstand the physical change, ultimately suggests that multiple, even co-existing forms, can share the signification of a single consciousness, and that identity is continuous throughout and despite transformation.

Rowling's Animagi likewise present continuity within change. Animagi may transfigure into an animal form, but they retain their consciousness or rational minds while doing so. Rowling establishes this fact very early in the series - in the opening of **PS** - when we meet Professor McGonagall. Vernon Dursley first notices McGonagall, disguised in her feline Animagus form, sitting on the street corner, first reading a map, then reading the street sign. McGonagall spends the entire day observing the Dursley family's behaviour and when Dumbledore arrives, questions their suitability as a foster-family for Harry. As we continue to read, we discover how unjust the Dursleys are in their treatment of Harry and have to concur with McGonagall. We trust McGonagall's judgment, and, consequently, assign to her feline form

the pragmatism and rationale of her human one. Other Animagi figures display behaviours that confirm the continuity of human consciousness despite transformation. In **GoF**, Rita Skeeter transfigures and blatantly disobeys her banishment from Hogwarts by Dumbledore. In her Animagus form, she consciously eavesdrops on a private conversation between Hagrid and Madame Maxime, and conducts an interview with Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. In both instances, the information she gathers gets twisted into sordid and malicious exaggerations for her articles in the *Daily Prophet*. Similarly, Sirius Black demonstrates the continuity of mind that characterizes the Animagi. While disguised in his Animagus form of the black dog, Sirius hides in the cave outside of Hogsmeade and scavenges not only for food but also for newspapers in order to stay informed of the events in the Tri-Wizard Contest and of the wizarding world in general. He explains to Harry, Ron, and Hermione that he has been living mostly off of rats because if he stole too much food from Hogsmeade, he would draw attention to himself. Yet, in the same breath, he tells them that he has been "stealing the paper every time someone throws one out" (**GoF** 452-53). It seems odd that Sirius would be concerned about drawing attention to himself by scavenging for food, more so than his scavenging for newspapers, for surely the former is more characteristic of a stray dog than the latter. The scavenged newspapers demonstrate the overtly 'human' aspect of his concern, and suggest that this over-rides his canine tendencies.

Rowling's Animagi also perpetuate the tradition seen in Le Guin's text of the synonymity between animal and human forms. Frequently, physical features carry over from one form to the next. Both Professor McGonagall and Rita Skeeter in their Animagus forms (the cat and the beetle, respectively), for instance, bear markings around their eyes in the same pattern as the glasses that they wear as humans. A more distinct example would be Peter Pettigrew, whose

Animagus and human forms correspond on several levels. When we first meet Peter as a human, forced out of his disguise by Sirius and Lupin, we are introduced to

a very short man, hardly taller than Harry and Hermione. His thin, colourless hair was unkempt and there was a large bald patch on top. He had the shrunken appearance of a plump man who had lost a lot of weight in a short time. His skin looked grubby, almost like Scabber's fur, and something of the rat lingered around his pointed nose, his very small, watery eyes. (PoA 269)

Peter Pettigrew's behaviour, like his physical appearance, is vermin like. His Animagus form evokes his literal role as the "rat" - as the secret breaker who brings about the deaths of Lily and James Potter, while his alliterative name calls to mind the Pied Piper of Hamelin and his association with rats.

To a degree, Remus Lupin follows the pattern established by Rowling's Animagi and Le Guin's Ged. As Pettigrew and Ged's names gesture towards their non-human forms, so, too, does Remus Lupin's name gesture towards his. "Remus" recalls the myth of the twin brothers Romulus and Remus who were suckled by a she-wolf, and subsequently gestures to the blurred boundaries between animal and human implicit in the myth. "Lupin" gestures both to the Latin word for wolf, "lupus," and to the lunar cycles or full moons associated with the werewolf's shape-shifting. Rowling's choice of names for her werewolf suggests that like his predecessor Ged, and like his Animagi counterparts, Lupin's human and non-human forms signify a single being or perduring identity – an identity that persists despite physical change. However, Rowling juxtaposes contradictory interpretations of identity through her werewolf figure. Unlike the Wart, Ged, or the Animagi, whose animal forms retain or share the consciousness of their human forms throughout physical transformation, Lupin's identity perdures only in its rhythmic division, that

is, its transformation at each full moon. Lupin’s mind or consciousness does not have the ability to persist in the same manner as his Animagi counterparts.

Lupin tells Harry that although his transformations turn him into “a fully fledged monster once a month,” with the help of magical intervention, the Wolfsbane potion, he can resist the loss of self that accompanies metamorphosis (**PoA** 258). He explains,

The potion that Professor Snape has been making for me is a very recent discovery. It makes me safe, you see. 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 wane again. (258, emphasis mine).

The Wolfsbane potion ensures the continuation of Lupin’s human consciousness throughout the metamorphic process. Before such magical intervention was available, however, this spatiotemporal continuity was interrupted on a monthly basis by physical transformation. Lupin tells Harry that when he was a student at Hogwarts, his monthly retreat to the Shrieking Shack reduced the risk he presented to others when transformed because it separated him “from humans to bite” (259). While in his transformed state, Lupin became less of a “monster,” less “wolfish,” only when accompanied by his friends, who were, themselves, in Animagus forms (260). Lupin also admits that their Animagus forms determine the amount of influence they have over him. “Sirius and James,” he says, “transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep a werewolf in check” (260). Had Sirius and James presented themselves to Lupin “the wolf” in their human rather than their animal forms, or, perhaps, in lesser forms than the stag and the black dog, their lives would have been in danger. Under normal circumstances, Lupin does not, indeed cannot, as he says, keep his mind; he cannot retain his human consciousness when he

transforms. He turns, repeatedly, from man to wolf and back again, existing as either one or the other, but remaining, outside of the metamorphic process itself, unable to exist as both simultaneously. Thus, Rowling sets Lupin apart from the Animagi, apart from the shape-shifters of her literary predecessors, by emphasizing his lack of continuous consciousness.

In the wizarding world, all Animagi must register with the Ministry of Magic (M. O. M.), which monitors the teaching of transfiguration. In **PoA**, Lupin explains to Harry, Ron, and Hermione that the Ministry "keeps a close watch" on those who attempt to transfigure because "Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong" (259). Victor Krum's partial success with his shark transformation during the Tri-Wizard Contest illustrates the difficulty of executing such magic even at the higher levels of wizarding education. Hogwarts, indeed the educational system of the wizarding world as a whole, thus teaches transfiguration in stages, regulating the knowledge of younger wizards as they study the skill until they eventually achieve its successful execution. The Ministry also requires all Animagi to register in order to prevent the abuse of the skill. For example, in **GoF**, Hermione discovers that Rita Skeeter is an *unregistered* Animagus who uses her skill inappropriately, transforming into her bug or beetle form to gather material for her newspaper articles. Hermione threatens to report the journalist's lawless behaviour to the Ministry unless she promises to cease writing for a period of one year (632). The regulatory systems of the Ministry are, essentially, systems of power and control that contribute to the wizarding world's construction and stratification of identity positions. Hermione's threat to Skeeter is effective precisely because the journalist fears punishment and exclusion from the regulated (and therefore accepted) social strata.

Through the juxtaposition of the Animagi and the werewolf, of contrary understandings of identity, Rowling forces the reader to question different concepts about what constitutes

identity as well as to criticize social hierarchies based upon limited definitions of identity. Lupin's inability to retain his conscious and rational self when transformed places him outside of the control of the systems that regulate society. Although werewolves, like Animagi, must register with the M. O. M., their transformations, unlike those of the Animagi, resist categorization and the regulatory systems designed to order society because they are not voluntarily or (fully) controllable. Because Lupin, under normal circumstances, does not retain his mind during transformation, there is no guarantee that he will remain aware of or adhere to the Ministry's regulations. The invention of Wolfsbane potion, however, allows the werewolf's human mind to perdure and overcome the otherwise ferocious behaviours associated with the lupine state. It is, in short, the Ministry's attempt to control the uncontrollable, to contain that which threatens categories and resists regulation.

Yet, the discovery of the Wolfsbane potion does not reverse the marginal position of the werewolf. When Lupin takes up his post at Hogwarts, he keeps his werewolf identity hidden. Further, after forgetting to take the potion, and subsequently placing the lives of those he loves in danger, he voluntarily resigns. He explains to Harry,

This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents – they will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you... that must never happen again. (**PoA** 309)

In order to minimize the threat implicit in his transformations, society ostracizes the werewolf. Forced to the margins, Lupin lives an impoverished life, as the description of him when first seen by Harry, Ron, and Hermione on the Hogwarts Express suggests: "The stranger [Lupin] was wearing an extremely shabby set of wizard's robes which had been darned in several places" (**PoA** 59). We learn in **HBP** that Lupin continues his impoverished existence, living

"underground" amongst other werewolves who are similarly ostracized. But even here Lupin has difficulty finding acceptance: he bears "the unmistakable signs of having tried to live among wizards" (313), and, subsequently, is doubly marginalized.

However, when Lupin resigns from his post at Hogwarts, Harry challenges his decision. "You're the best Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had!" he exclaims, and follows with a plea to Lupin, "Don't go!" (**PoA** 309). It is important to remember here that Harry witnesses Lupin's transformation, sees him at his worst, so to speak, and despite doing so, refuses to accept the identity position that Lupin resigns himself to, the marginalized position dictated by society. Rowling reinforces the unwarranted nature of Lupin's marginal identity position through his relationships with James, Sirius, and Peter. As I have explained elsewhere, "While students at Hogwarts," these three "train themselves in Transfiguration . . . outside of the strictures of the classroom and remain unregistered Animagi. They risk persecution to create a community within which the werewolf belongs, and through their transgression of the Ministry's regulations, themselves become outlaws" (Ward 10). James, Sirius, and Peter place their friendship with Lupin above social hierarchies and laws at a risk to themselves. The actions of James, Sirius, Peter, *and Harry*, then, suggest that identity based upon identity position, particularly a position based upon categories of difference determined by someone other than yourself, is a false identity, and that hierarchical systems determined by such categories are similarly false.

White and Le Guin differ drastically from Rowling in their use of identity position. Throughout *The Sword in the Stone* and *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the Wart and Ged hold marginal yet consistent identity positions, positions that facilitate their education and their future roles as king and wizard. Identity as identity position is never questioned in these texts as it is in

Rowling's. If anything, White and Le Guin present very limited interpretations of identity precisely because they are constant. While the Wart and Ged may develop as heroes, they retain their sense of self through spatiotemporal continuity and identity position, even when physically transformed.

Rowling calls into question fixed concepts of identity. She questions definitions of identity based upon the mind/body dichotomy or upon falsely constructed identity positions. Her juxtaposition of the Animagi to the werewolf, even of the werewolf to himself if we consider the influence of Wolfsbane potion on Lupin, suggests that while identity *can* be determined by spatiotemporal continuity, it does not necessarily *have* to be, nor is it specifically limited to this continuity. She also suggests that an understanding of identity as identity position, particularly an identity position determined by one's capacity for spatiotemporal continuity, is equally as limited. Rowling's work illustrates the difficulties we face when grappling with identity, and determines that it cannot, indeed should not, be contained by systems of regulation and defined by categories of difference, as any such attempts inevitably result in the breach or transgression of boundaries. Thus, in a period when the question of identity surfaces on a daily basis in all aspects of culture, when issues of ethnicity, gender, class, race, racial hybridity, and essentialism versus performativity permeate our world in literature, film and politics, Rowling's *Harry Potter* series provides a modern example of what Bynum seeks when she turns to medieval and classical texts: an understanding of identity that is both "labile and problematic," an understanding that allows continuity as well as change, and ultimately resists the notion that identity is or should be fixed.

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