

Transforming, Transgressing and Terrorizing

Some Werewolves and their Antagonists in Swedish Ballads

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ABSTRACT: The article discusses some werewolf motifs in Swedish ballads, which tell of shapeshifters of ambiguous character that change between a human and a non-human body, dwell in spaces on the fringe of the human world, and have potential to intrude into the world of humans. Some of them represent a harsh untamed wilderness, others dangers, threats, or misbehaviour inside the human community. All religious imaginaries have fantastic things to tell: myths from before time, truths about the present, and hopes for the future. But no worldview can move beyond a recognizable everyday world, and the problems presented must be relevant. Did people believe in the content of the supernatural ballads? We should rather ask whether people were able to mirror their lives and nightmares in them.

SAMMANDRAG: Artikeln diskuterar framställningen av varulvar de framträder i några svenska ballader. Dessa förmedlar bilder av varelser med tvetydig karaktär och som kan skifta mellan mänsklig och icke-mänsklig kropp, uppehålla sig på gränsen mellan det djuriska och mänskliga och med potential att tränga långt in i människornas värld. Några av dem representerar det otämjt vilda, andra faror, hot och missgärningar i den mänskliga gemenskapen. Alla religiösa bildvärldar har fantastiska saker att förmedla: myter från före tidens gryning, sanningar om det nuvarande och hopp om framtiden. Men ingen världsbild kan röra sig bortom det vardagligt gripbara och problemen som formuleras måste vara relevanta. Trodde människor verkligen på de övernaturliga tematikerna i balladerna? Vi kanske hellre ska fråga om de kunde spegla sina liv och mardrömmar i dem.

KEYWORDS: *Swedish Ballads; werewolves; destiny; reality; belief*

“The essence of songs is neither vocal nor cerebral but organic. We follow them in order to be enclosed” (Berger 2016, 105).

Long historical lines have been decisive for the history of religions since its inauguration as an academic discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹ These long-term perspectives quite soon became equivalent to arguing in favour of continuities, and hence promoted an academic legacy that gave little space for other aspects of processes over time in historical religions. Making comparisons by finding similarities became the discipline’s defining method. Furthermore, an enduring attempt to distinguish between religion and popular religion seems to have lingered in the discipline well into this century. Fortunately, more recent works on Nordic folk beliefs have emphasized parallel worldviews, simultaneous religious imaginaries, competing and conflicting interests, irony and jokes, as well as zones of cultural and religious hybridity. In order to do so, such studies have pointed to difference in terms of region, social status, gender and age (Stark 1998, 2006; Asplund Ingemark 2004; Kværndrup 2006, 73–118; Skott 2008, 2013; Häll 2013; Frog 2016, 2017). The study of religions in the Nordic countries has provided many fine examples of analyses of folk-belief and rituals. With its long tradition of providing academic encounters between the history of religions, folklore studies and ethnology, the multi-disciplinary field of folk-belief studies has an obvious potential to commence discussions about how to re-formulate methodological strategies after the linguistic and material turns. I am happy to note that the study of historical religions, where an interest in large-scale changes can be paired with analyses of local customs, continues to prosper among younger scholars today.

In the Scandinavian medieval ballads, a world opens up to the modern reader that balances between imagery of everyday life and the fantastic. With their poetical qualities, rhythmical repetitions, metaphors, and dramatic language, the ballads are nonetheless very concrete in their expressions. Given their apparent oral background, a performance must have ranged over a spectrum from realism to irony and it must have been possible for a skilled singer to move the stress from the didactic to the jocular, from the realistic to the grotesque. In the ballads people sow and harvest, they brew and bake, family relations and social hierarchies are explicated. Medieval and early modern living conditions hereby come to life, but so too does a world behind the everyday activities. All ballads have a story to tell and many of them are narratives about humans encountering representatives of the supernatural. Content-wise, they often communicate moralities where the compact narrative form strengthens the message that acts and choices always have consequences – not least when it comes to contact with supernatural beings and cunning people. Foolish, manipulative, and evil behaviour is always punished in the end.

This article will discuss beings in the borderland between the world of humans and a cosmology that knows of other boundaries in time and space than everyday experience. The literary depiction of interaction with this kind of figure can take place by choice or involuntarily, but is centred on conflicts in the world of humans. Hence it

¹ A Swedish version of this article is forthcoming in *Saga och sed* 2022. See also Raudvere 2019.

could be argued that the ballads, read as sources to the history of religions, could be employed in examination of a moral universe in long-term perspectives, that in turn provides hints of what made these beings relevant to people who spoke of and sang about them.

Humans and Encounters with a World Beyond Everyday Life

One possible continuity from the pre-Christian religion(s) of the Nordic region to the popular belief of later centuries has for long been a contested area – as much as the question of how to identify worldview changes in a long-term perspective. The focus of such discussions has mainly been on motifs and narrative patterns, less so on religious content in a more qualified sense. Undeniably, when trying to argue in any of these directions the century-long gaps in the material must be considered, as must the distance from the much later folklore records. One of the few genres that in some sense connect the medieval period with the early modern is the ballad tradition. Irrespective of whether one wants to argue in favour of continuity or change in the imaginaries documented from pre-industrial society, there are not only substantial lacunae when it comes to text collections; the ways of telling of religious and moral issues are also very heterogeneous in terms of both genre and shifts over time.

This article takes its outset in a discussion about the supernatural in Swedish ballads, but it will neither argue in favour of an unbroken genealogy over centuries nor in favour of retrospective methods. Moreover, it will not search for names of gods or beings lingering over the centuries. Rather, it will point to how conceptualizations of destiny, honour, and good vs. evil as expressed in the ballads can constitute valuable means to approach a worldview and ethical stances that existed over a long time in relation – not in parallel – to Catholicism as well as Lutheranism and with links to pre-Christian elements in Old Norse literature. In this context, Søren Kværndrup's seminal study of the East-Nordic ballads, in which he discusses long-term motifs and argues in favour of continuous lines is of special interest (2006, 435–458). Beside the links to motifs in Old-Norse literature, he strongly emphasizes the continuity in references to concepts like "luck" and "honour" that referred not only to religious matters, but to a large extent to a way of living and definitions of the human nature.

The first volume of the critical edition of the Swedish ballad tradition, *Sveriges medeltida ballader* (Sweden's Medieval Ballads; 1983), is devoted to texts dealing with the supernatural in a broad understanding of the term. This volume was named "Ballads of the Supernatural" by its editor Bengt Jonsson in his English summary; in Swedish, though, this volume is entitled "Naturmytiska visor" (Mythic Songs of Nature).² As Bengt Jonsson was also one of the editors of *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad* (1978, hereafter TSB), a project formulated in 1960, the basic categories and the labelling of the songs were long since established. In TSB, the heading "ballads of the

² The concept of *naturmytiske visor* (nature-mythical ballads) was originally coined by Svend Grundtvig for the second volume of his edition of *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* (1854–56). See also Jansson 1999, 143–166.

supernatural" (A1-75) is divided into two sub-categories: ballads of witchcraft and magic, and ballads of supernatural beings. It is from the first section the following analysis will take its examples.

As the ballads were collected in broader social strata, and not primarily because of the folk beliefs embedded in the songs, "the supernatural" has a different character in ballads than that in the type of folklore labelled "legends". It also means that supernatural motifs are written down with more variation in the individual ballad texts, whereas many records of legends only give a rather condensed version of the fabula. The supernatural ballads constitute a rich – albeit complicated from a source-critical perspective – corpus of texts that has far too rarely attracted attention in the academic study of religion. In these texts, we get to know about supernatural beings such as the elves and the nix, intentional shape-shifters who transform themselves in order to perform evil deeds against their fellow human beings, returning dead, and various kinds of spirits – and a large scope of human interaction with them. But in addition to motifs that can be recognized in texts from other periods, the ballads are also characterized by the moral messages they transmit by means of visualizing emotions of fear of the unknown, pointing to (in)appropriate behaviour and (dis)trust in the local community. In other words, the ballads depict the excitement of testing cultural boundaries and the consequences of transgressing them. Although most of the "types" of ballads are given titles (some of them dating back to categorizations made when the folklore and song archives were established in the nineteenth century) where the acting supernatural characters dominate (The Maiden in Deer Shape, The Enchanted Woman Giving Birth, The Nix Abducts the Maiden, Sir Magnus and the Lady of the Sea, or King Erik and the Woman Telling Fortunes, etc.), human agents and agency, as we shall see, play a significant role when it comes to taking the storyline forward.

In TSB, the supernatural ballads are defined as "based upon an apparent belief in supernatural beings or supernatural powers" and with the supplementary comment that "elements of belief in the supernatural" can be found in many types of ballads (1978, 16). Such a definition places emphasis firstly on belief (which the editors claim to be apparent) and secondly on the supernatural being rather than on the human counterparts who are equally important to the moral of the ballads' narratives. The 838 types of ballads identified by Bengt Jonsson and his colleagues bear witness to a vast thematic spread and several of these motifs are very directly related to concepts that cannot be considered part of a Christian worldview. The way in which the ballads are indexed in the archives and outlined in the TSB catalogue emphasizes the analytical consequences of the taxonomy, and has influenced the study of the ballads.

Nordic ballads are, perhaps more than other forms of telling discussed in the present volume, part of European literary and musical traditions, especially when viewed alongside their English and Scottish counterparts. Story-songs are found all over the world and in many forms. For this short discussion about possible sources of Nordic folk-beliefs from before the systematic folklore collections, ballads are understood as a corpus of anonymous and orally transmitted narrative songs. Their metric character-

istics still give rhythm and pulse to the contemporary reading from a text-critical edition and must have done so emphatically when performed. Unfortunately, there is not space here to discuss the performative aspects of the ballads, such as song and dance, that were absolutely critical to the living ballad tradition. The focus here is merely on content.

The ballad format is compact and crisp. The storyline in the individual stanzas brings the narrative forward and the refrain reminds us of the story's fundamental problem and hints at the end with its moral conclusion. Ballads are comparatively short and focused on one particular event (with a problem or conflict identified in the first stanza(s)) and the consequences for humans who try to solve the situation. They are narratives, often including dialogue and monologue, where representatives of the supernatural take an active part. A substantial part of the Scandinavian ballad corpus tells of human action when meeting with the supernatural and/or encountering the wilderness (Feldt 2012).³ Characters in ballads are not so much described as shown by their acts and to some extent told of by means of their symbolically loaded attributes (Piø 1983; 1991; Swang 1983).

The ballads had a complicated transmission processes and were collected over a long period of time. This corpus covers early modern songs documented in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as the most recent to be written down, together with other folklore and folk belief materials in the late nineteenth century. The long-term documentation and the continuity of motifs and formulas challenge the epithet "medieval" that is often assigned to the ballads. The editors of TBS pragmatically state that they have "employed the epithet medieval to refer to a typological age" (Jonsson 1978, 14).

"She was met by a wolf so grey"

The motif of shape-shifters tells of transformed humans, "beings" of ambiguous character. They shift between a human and a non-human body, their dwellings and spaces are placed at the fringe of the human world, but with a potential to threaten and intrude into the world of humans. Some of them represent an explicit wilderness, others dangers, threats, or misbehaviour inside the human community. As the editors of TSB note, shape-shifters played an important part in the broader concept of witchcraft where human agency was thought to be the motor of development in narrative events (TSB 1978, 16).

³ In the volume *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion*, edited by Laura Feldt, a wide range of studies analyse the fluid relation between humans and the wilderness, which certainly is a source of danger (2012). The interaction with the wild seems to be a necessary entanglement for humans and it turns out to be a useful element when representing human vulnerability in religious texts – from the Hebrew Bible to New Age. This is very much the case in the Scandinavian ballads too. The wilderness indeed constitutes a threat, but it has to be depicted in order to present a trustworthy imagery of the world as it is: a dangerous place full of unexpected encounters.

Belief is not the only aspect of the shape-shifters in the ballads. Stories about changeable bodies were part of a poetic programme where the use of the fantastic was one tool among many to entertain as well as to (re)present significant questions by means of narration, but not necessarily to give the answers. Shape-shifters appear in imaginaries where people travel to encounter the dead, the dead reappear, humans are transformed – and are sometimes later saved from forcing spells. Before that, however, innocent people are attacked and assaulted, pure love is thwarted, and illicit lust and malicious harm take bodily form. The werewolf in Scandinavian folk beliefs belongs to a group of beings that oscillates between human existence and the diffuse darkness that constitute “the other world” (Odstedt 1943). Shape-shifters are found in Old Norse literature as well as in folk-belief records collected well into the twentieth century (Klintberg 1972, 246–251; 2010, 306–314; Raudvere 2002, 198–225; 2003, 25–87; 2020, 215–250; Aðalheidur Guðmundsdóttir 2007; Blécourt 2007; 2015). When the indexing of the latter was done in the folklore archives, it was with cultural continuity as its paradigm. The titles of the records and the motif groups are constructions from the last century. In most cases, the titles connect well to the motifs, but it is interesting to note that Jonsson’s structuring of the “supernatural ballads” is based on beings as agents also appearing in the legends collected much later. This is of course not an unreasonable way to outline the corpus, but it overshadows other religious, existential and moral elements in the ballads.

The following version of a werewolf ballad from *Sveriges medeltida ballader* serves as an example of how several layers of interwoven motifs unfold through the 13 stanzas (Jansson 1999, 144–149).

Jungfrun hon skulle sig åt vakerstugan gå
 – Linden darrar uti lunden –
 Så tog hon den vägen åt skogen den blå
 – Ty hon var i vildskoga vända

Och när som hon kommer till skogen den blå
 Där mötte henne en ulf så grå

Och kära Du Ulfver du bit inte mig
 Dig vill jag gifva min silkessyddde särk

Din silkessyddde särk passar jag inte på
 Ditt unga lif och blod det måste nu gå

Och kära Du Ulfver du bit inte mig
 Dig vill jag gifva mina silfverspenda sko

Dina silfverspen-da skor passar jag inte på
 Ditt unga lif och blod det måste nu gå

Och kära Du Ulfver du bit inte mig
 Dig vill jag gifva min röda Guldkrone

Din röda gul-dkrone passar jag inte på
 Ditt unga lif och blod det måste nu gå

Och jungfrun hon steg sig så högt upp i ek

Och Ulfven Han gick på backen och skrek

Och Ulfven han grafde den eken till rot
Och jungfrun gaf till ett hiskelit rop

Och ungersven sadlar sin gångare grå
Han red litet for-tare än fogeln han flög

Och när som han kom till platsen fram
Så var det inte mer än en blodiger arm

Gud trösta Gud bättra mig ungersven
– Linden darrar uti lunden –
Min jungfru är borta min häst är för ränd
– Ty hon var i vildskoga vända. (SMB 1983, 39; TSB A 20)

The maiden set off to the wake-house to go
– The lime tree trembles in the grove
So she took the road to the forest dark
– For she was in the troublesome wild wood

And when she came to the forest dark
She was met by a wolf so grey

O dear wolf do not bite me
I will give you my silken shift

I am not out for your silken shift
Your young life and blood is what must go

O dear wolf do not bite me
I will give you my silver-buckled shoes

I am not out for your silver-buckled shoes
Your young life and blood is what must go

O dear wolf do not bite me
I will give you my crown of red gold

I am not out for your crown of red gold
Your young life and blood is what must go

And the maiden climbed up so high in an oak
And the wolf he walked on the ground and howled

And the wolf dug down to the root of the oak
And the maiden gave out a terrible cry

And the young swain saddles his steed so grey
He rode a little faster than the bird could fly

And when he to that place arrived
All that was left was a bloody arm

God comfort, God improve me, a young swain
– The lime tree trembles in the grove –
My maiden is gone, my horse has run away

– For she was in the troublesome wild wood. (Trans. Crozier⁴)

The opening stanza presents a maiden on her way to a wake, which was not only a solemn event at the side of the coffin the night before the funeral; it was – as the local clergy complained – an occasion for dance and play for the young. The very first line not only introduces the theme of death, it is rather explicit about the young woman's desire for pleasure and deliberate choice to walk through the wood. Already the first two stanzas and the ominous refrain lead us to realize that the narrative 'The Werewolf' brings about can only end in a tragic way. In the refrain, the linden tree trembles and the maiden is already lost on her way through the dark woods: "Ty hon var i vildskoga vända" (for she was in the troublesome wild wood).

In the moral universe of the ballads, a maiden who leaves home and walks along the road towards "skogen den blå" (the forest dark) puts herself into danger, and consequently she encounters "en ulf så grå" (a wolf so grey) – the dark colour scheme is contrasted in later stanzas by vibrant colours. Variants of 'The Werewolf' explicitly say that the maiden asks for her mother's permission to go and meet her lover, and that she leaves despite warnings. As in many ballads with folk-belief motifs, the fundamental problem is identified in all variants in the very first stanzas. In this version, the choice made by the maiden transgresses the boundaries of safe space for an honourable woman. Here, the listener (like the modern reader) already knows that this will end with bad (disobedience) becoming worse (a direct conflict).

The encounter with the wolf is the first central scene in the ballad and his aggressiveness is clear from the beginning, but we are left without a clue about his background. In the ballad he is called the wolf, but the title given in the ballad edition is 'The Werewolf'. The shape-shifting narrative is embedded in the storyline and the logic of the ballad requires that we know it, listeners and readers alike.

The wood is certainly not a place where a young maiden should linger, as the refrain has repeatedly reminded us since the very first stanza. The question of her motivation in crossing the wood is whether stress should be placed on her contravention of proper behaviour (violation of norms and custom), or whether her actions should be read as an expression of a strong longing for the lover (emotional motifs) which makes her try to cross the wood. Irrespective, coming across the wolf becomes a confrontation of a kind we know from both ballad texts and later legends when they tell of human fatal interaction with supernatural powers.

Directly after the encounter with the wolf, the ballad takes the form of a dialogue that constitutes the main part of the text: the young woman's negotiation with the wolf whose evil intentions are not immediately explicit, but become clear with her appeal "kära Du Ulfver du bit inte mig" (O dear wolf do not bite me). The maiden bargains for her life and offers the wolf her silk robe, her shoes with silver buckles, and her golden crown. The two first items are well-known parts of a noblewoman's clothing; the third is of a more symbolic character. The crown points both to the maiden's social status and to her innocence. It invites comparison with the Virgin Mary, who is often

⁴ I am grateful to Alan Crozier, who provided me with English translations of these ballads.

depicted with a crown as the Queen of Heaven – although unlike Mary the maiden is not a virgin, as the final part of most variants of the ballad reveals that she is expecting, which of course links her to Mary via motherhood. All the pieces of her outfit are intimate and affluent attributes that tell of her noble background. The colour scale has shifted to silver, gold and red, and stands in contrast to the black and grey in the introduction (the evening, the wood, and the wolf). The young woman's belongings indicate pleasurable life and sexuality. But it does not help, the wolf responds with a dismissal of every offer: "Ditt unga lif och blod det måste nu gå" (Your young life and blood is what must go). It is her blood he desires; all in accordance with the curse thrown upon him.

In the imaginary of Scandinavian folk belief the werewolf is determined by his lust for young women and the babies they are carrying (Odstedt 1943; Klintberg 2010, 306–310). In most texts he is atoning for his mother's crime of having used magical means to ease delivery pains, thereby violating the God's Biblical command to Eve "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16). This explains the wolf's overpowering lust for life and blood, and his special interest in foetuses. In this regard, the werewolf is an innocent perpetrator driven by this curse, albeit one who commits atrocities of a violent nature. Not even the straightforward inducements from the maiden are enough for him. Every negotiation is destined to fail as the wolf is driven by a curse stronger than any temptation. Curses may also be lifted in ballads, though this is more common in the legends, where the story closes with the curse being broken when someone reveals the true reasons why a person is a werewolf. As we have seen, this ballad has another twist.

Stanzas 9 and 10 depict the breakdown of the negotiations, the unsuccessful warding off of the threat, and ends with a direct attack. The maiden takes refuge up a tree and the wolf walks (like a man) on the ground. In stanza 9 "ek" (oak) rhymes neatly in Swedish with "skrek" (cried), but it may not be an over-interpretation to think that the tree is of the same kind that has been shivering in the refrain since the beginning. The wolf appears to be of a more human bodily shape while lurking under the tree; he does not accept being left on the ground and now it is the maiden who screams while the wolf digs up the tree by its roots. Her loud cry alerts her lover who immediately understands the situation.

The sexual overtones are already apparent during the dialogue with the wolf and even more so during the physical attack. The harshness in the wolf's lust becomes apparent in his forcing himself on the maiden. A number of ballads tell of seduction by means of runes, spells, and material objects (TSB A1–10), and seduction by means of magic against the will of the desired party can lead to violent death and suicide. The ballads range from representations of love and tenderness to songs about incest, abduction, rape, and jealousy. In 'The Werewolf' the text does not depict the original relationship between the maiden and the young man, but the werewolf's abuse is followed by a rightful response from the young man.

In a final attempt to escape the maiden climbs up a tree, but "Ulfven han grafde den eken till rot" (the Wolf dug the oak to the roots). Now the lover has heard the

woman's scream and mounts his horse to save her. Alas, too late. In the quoted version above, the sight of a bloody arm meets him and the rest of the scene seems deserted. Other versions in *Sveriges medeltida ballader* are even more drastic: the young man meets the wolf with the foetus in its mouth, or, as many legends express it, "with threads between his teeth" (Odstedt 1943, 164–178; Klintberg 1972, 123–125).

In connection with the compact and dramatic scenes found in such ballads, the concept of "places of indeterminacy" (*Unbestimbarkeitsstellen*) – introduced by the literary theorist Roman Ingarden (1973) and further developed in Wolfgang Iser's reception aesthetics as "empty places" (*Leerstellen* 1978) – could be employed in order to clarify an important trace in the narrative mode of the ballads: the empty spaces in a text that the singer/listener/reader fills out by being familiar with variants and the intertextual references in the song (Raudvere 2020, 159–162). The version of 'The Werewolf' quoted above requires that the audience has some knowledge of both ballad themes and the logic of the supernatural world in order to see the reason why the young woman leaves the safety of the home (and her liaison with the young man), the background of the wolf, and that the maiden and the young man must have been engaged, considering his immediate action to save her and role of the unborn child ("the child of a betrothal") that also plays a large role – and is killed – in other variants of the motif.

"Your young life and blood is what must go"

In the three last stanzas, there is a substantial shift in terms of voices and perspectives: the young man is the main agent and explicit Christian motifs are introduced. The wolf has disappeared from the narrative and so has, for obvious reasons, the maiden. The third party enters the scene, and finds himself left behind. He turns to God and, in the last stanza, he is the voice that concludes the tragic events; it is a monologue, in which he asks God both to comfort him and to improve him. Though the young man is the only one of the three characters that has not violated any imperative, but rather acted in compliance with decorum and cultural expectations. In his prayer the young man points to his double loss: the maiden and the horse. Mentioning the horse may seem odd under these circumstances, but like the clothes for the virgin, the horse is a marker of his social status. Ballads with such overt Christian motifs are customarily labelled "legendary ballads", but this one is still labelled "supernatural" in the archives and printed editions due to the werewolf.

The young man's prayer constitutes a genre within a genre. Even if the supplication has only two lines, these have a different tone to the rest of the text. In his essay "Some Notes about Song" in his last collection *Confabulations* (2016), John Berger reflects on the closeness between song and prayer: "prayer in most, if not all, religions, temples and churches, is double-faced. It can endlessly reiterate dogma or it can articulate hope. And whichever it does, doesn't necessarily depend upon the place or circumstances where the prayer is being prayed. It depends upon the stories of those praying" (Berger 2016, 114–115). Even read from a content angle rather than a performative one, the text offers three voices in addition to the perspective of the narrator.

Taking the *Leerstelle* into consideration, the ballad was not likely enjoyed for its surprising turns, but for its confirmations.

The immediate moral in 'The Werewolf' is that transgressing norms and ethical regimes cannot be done without consequences, and that the young man as a good Christian can strive to better himself, but the werewolf is doomed by the ritual acts of his mother and trapped in his animal body. Viewed from a perspective with less focus on supernatural beings, the ballad represents concepts such as destiny and free will, which seem to separate humans from such beings. Throughout the ballad, all three characters stand out as contrasting with one another: the maiden chooses to walk away from her home, the werewolf follows the paths of his fate, and the young man acts a good Christian should. The young man's call to God has its theological background in the principle of humans being able to better themselves thanks to free will, and thus also bearing a moral obligation to separate good from evil. Few other ballads have such clear-cut Christian morals. Honour and duty are other moral principles where the maiden fails twice (leaving the home against advice and trying to negotiate with the werewolf) whereas the young man makes the right choice twice (attempting to save his betrothed and asking God for help).

Good and evil are depicted in absolute categories, tools to make the morality workable. The question is whether the wolf is evil: is he lustful as an animal or a restless victim of his mother's crime? There is a certain ambiguity as to whether there is a conventional hero or heroine in this version of 'The Werewolf'. Kværndrup calls this kind of first verse a "presentation stanza" (2006, 323–333) and the young woman is the character we follow to the bitter end, but is she a heroine? And the werewolf, is he an evildoer using the shape-shifting for his own benefit (in this case his lust) or is he a victim where the conflict with the young woman is the beginning of his redemption.

Another version of the ballad can be quoted in extenso in order to indicate how different details within the same motif put a different moral emphasis.

Jungfrun hon bad sin moder om lof:
– För linden han dammar uti lunden
att hon till sin käraste få gå
– för hon var med älskona bunden

Gerna skall du till din käresta få gå
Men akta dig väl för den lilla ulfven grå

Nog aktar jag mig för lilla ulfven grå
Bara att jag till min käresta får gå.

Jungfrun hon går sig åt Rosende Lund
Då möter hon den lilla ulfven grå.

Hör du lilla ulf Inte biter du mej
Det röda guldbandet det gifver jag dej.

Det röda guldbandet det har jag när jag kan
Men aldrig så skön jungfru jag fann.

Jungfrun sprang opp i det högaste träd:
Men torsa dig hit om du biter mig här

Ulfven gaf opp ett så hiskeligt rop
Så trettio ulfvar de kommo på en hop.

De refvo och sleto det trädet omkull
Så att jungfrun föll ned i den jordiska mull.

Jungfrun gaf upp ett sånt hiskeligt rop
Så att det hördes till Herr Peders borg.

Herr Peder han sahlade sin gångare grå
Han red litet for-tare än fogeln flög.

Herr Peder han red sig åt Rosende lund
Då möter han Ulfven med fostret i mun.

När det blef dager och dager blef ljus
Då var det 3 lik i Herr Peders hus.
Det ena var Herr Peder, det andra var hans mö
– För linden han dammar uti lunden –
Det tredje det fostret som Ulfven ref till döds.
– för hon var med älskona bunden. (SMB 1983, 41; TSB 20)

The maiden she asked her mother for leave:
– For the lime tree is scenting the grove –
That she might to her sweetheart go
– For she was bound by love.

You may gladly to your sweetheart go
But do beware of the little grey wolf.

I shall beware of the little grey wolf
If only I can to my sweetheart go.

The maiden she went to the Rosy Grove
There she met the little grey wolf.

Listen, little wolf, do not bite me
I shall give you the band of red gold.

The band of red gold I can have when I want
But I never found such a beautiful maid.

The maiden jumped up the tallest tree:
But dare to come up if you bite me here.

The wolf gave out such a terrible cry
That thirty wolves came there together.

They tore and they toiled till they tossed the tree
So the maiden fell down in the soil on the ground.

The maiden gave out such a terrible cry
That was heard all the way to Sir Peder's castle.

Sir Peder he saddled his steed so grey
He rode a little faster than the bird could fly.

Sir Peder he rode to the Rosy Grove

There he met the wolf with the baby in its mouth.

When the morning came and the day grew light
There were three corpses in Sir Peder's house.
One was Sir Peder, the other was his maid
– For the lime tree is scenting the grove –
The third was the baby that the wolf clawed to death.
– For she was bound by love. (Trans. Crozier)

This version has an extended domestic scene in the first three stanzas where the mother plays a crucial role and where home stands out as a clear contrast to the wilderness. The lover (“käresta”) in the first stanza and the refrain suggest that the young woman is pregnant: “för hon var med älskona bunden” (for she was bound by love). The short dialogue in the second and third stanzas puts emphasis on the warning and the young woman’s independent mind.

The encounter with the wolf just leads to a shorter verbal exchange that follows the pattern we have seen before, but this time only with one offer (the red-golden ribbon which is tempting to read as her honour) and one refusal. It is explicitly mentioned in connection with the offer that the young woman is attractive, which adds to the sexual imagery. But the furious wolf wants more than that, and cries out to make a whole pack of thirty wolves come and help him dig up the tree. The large wolf pack surrounding the tree constitutes a telling contrast to the home and house at the beginning, and it sounds as if the young woman falls directly into her grave: “Så att jungfrun föll ned i den jordiska mull” (so the maiden fell down in the soil on the ground).

Her lover is now given a name, Sir Peter. His title, that he resides in a castle (“borg”), and the fact that he is a horseman all tell of his status. He arrives on his horse, but too late and the scene is a *fait accompli*; Sir Peter meets the wolf with the foetus in its mouth. The last stanza is as beautiful as it is cruel.

The ballads provide several variants where the origin of the dark lust for blood is placed more directly in times before the ballad takes place – in the story about the evil stepmother who puts a curse on her stepson to “run as a wolf” until he has drunk the blood of his brother causing split in the family. In other variants of the werewolf ballad, the poor man speaks about himself in the first person in order to recapitulate the story:

Så skapte hon Mig i Vlffen grå
Och bödh Jagh skulle äth Skogen gåå.
Och sade Jagh skulle aldrig fåå booth
Förähn Jagh hade drucket min Broders blodh. (Visböcker II:285)

She turned me into the wolf so grey
And ordered me to the wood to go.
And said I would never be reprieved
Until I had drunk my brother’s blood. (Trans. Crozier)

These short examples of werewolf ballads indicate how flexible a motif could be. Basic assumptions about the possibilities for shape-shifting constitute the point of departure for the logic, but the moral character and the destiny of the agents differ, as do the

imaginaries. The format of the ballad is kept, the rather strict genre limitations give quite compact stories with explicit messages about what happens when the borders between human and supernatural are transgressed, and we are reminded that young women should keep within domestic spaces.

Kerstin Ekman, in her book on the cultural history of the wood, has a chapter called “The Reek of Wolf Fur” which takes its point of departure in the first version of ‘The Werewolf’ quoted above (2007, 194–198). Ekman underlines the vulnerable position of women and the dangers lurking outside the domestic realm. In her reading of the ballad, the werewolf is among a wide range of other attackers to whom women are prime targets. The features that make the wolf a werewolf are his lust and his inability to fight it. Therefore, he cannot accept the gifts offered to him, his desire is not negotiable, and he takes to violent action when rejected. He is repeatedly described as the grey wolf, which is of course the correct zoological description of a wolf’s fur, but it is also a contrast to the three garments offered by the maiden and the blood he is lusting after. As a shape-shifter, his body makes him: his fur, his paws that dig up the roots of the tree, and his teeth that eventually will kill the young woman (and her baby). He is just not any predator, however; it is his human side that makes him a werewolf.

Supernatural or Real?

“Songs connect, collect and bring together. Even when not being sung they are attendant assembly-points” (Berger 2016, 105).

Christian imaginary was fundamental to agrarian society in Scandinavia during the period when many of the ballads were written down. Lutheran teaching dominated, although with many Catholic traces recognizable in what can be identified as folk religion. The strong position of the Church did not hinder individuals from telling of encounters with beings from a realm that was neither the heavenly sphere nor everyday life, or letting spells and witchcraft serve as explanations of illness, misfortune, and tragic love. From a narrative point of view, two kinds of characters – the humans and a supernatural being – are in confrontation with each other in the werewolf ballads discussed above. Perspective shifts from the maiden to the young man, but the werewolf remains their antagonist. Two sides of reality are visualized, as are two different human strategies for handling conflicts and threats. One question impossible to answer will always linger with us modern readers when we approach the ballads: what did people at various points in history hear and imagine when they experienced ballads in performance?

In his reflection on the ways in which a song differs from prose, the essayist John Berger states: “The words of songs are different from words which make prose. In prose, words are independent agents; in songs, they are first and foremost the intimate sounds of their mother tongue. They signify what they signify, but at the same time they address or flow towards all the words which exist in that tongue” (2016, 106). Such an idea about flow could to some extent be applied to ballads even when in search

of content rather than performance, as Berger's view points to the many possible interpretations of the texts with all their individual variations, stresses, and breadth of themes.

As much as other genres about the supernatural, the ballads tell of human agency and the limits to it. Humans find themselves in need of help to deal with a situation when in contact with powers from outside the everyday world; yet it is the human actions and choices that are at the core of the moralities on display. Hence ballads can be a valuable source for the history of religions, especially if the interest in "beings" is shifted to include broader concepts like morals and existential matters. The ballads define vices and virtues that are neither exclusively pre-Christian nor Christian, they could be merely existential: "Ty hon var i vildskoga vânda" (for she was in the troublesome wild wood). In her study on male and female in the ballads, Gunilla Byrman underlines the broad spectrum of roles women could take both in songs and in everyday life (2011). Social hierarchies differentiated gender expectations and in this way Byrman's picture supplements Ekman's darker perspective on the space available for women. However, the transgressions of the women in the ballads discussed above leave little space for the acceptance of their moral behaviour. Once they have been meddling with the wilderness, the refrains tell us that they are doomed.

To return to the issue of how to label the "ballads of the supernatural". It may seem like a detail, but the problems around classification can serve as a point of departure for future discussions about what kind of religion we are searching for – not only in the ballads, but in pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia as well as in the later records of folk beliefs and legends. If religion in pre-industrial Scandinavia is allowed to include more than "beings" of various kinds, entangled in more or less complicated narrative structures where they constitute a threat to humans, such an approach could constitute an opening for studies about ethics, moral standards, and taboos that guided people's lives as much as catechisms. Folk-belief legends can to some extent also give such indications, but they are far more silent on these issues, not least because they are short – in many cases because the collectors were more focused on the fabula than how individual texts were formulated – whereas the ballads, maybe because of their poetical form, are expressive about emotions (positive as well as destructive) and seem to a larger extent to have been written down closer to how they were performed. Moreover, the plot of many ballads is more focused on transgressed borders and the consequences thereof. In combination with their intertextual links to motifs well known from the legends, this makes the ballads a category of sources that deserves more attention.

As humans, we seem to be obsessed with narratives that are not necessarily realistic in all details. From the Stone Age cave to the Cyborg, we have produced and consumed stories of symbolic and ambiguous character because they were conceived of as relevant and meaningful to performers and listeners. The ballads spring from a world of myths and legends, where the fantastic meets the poetic form and moves easily between piety and entertainment. In this moral universe of pre-industrial Scandinavia where references to the otherworld and other logics than those of everyday

life are comprehensible, they constitute shared ways of understanding the world. By raising questions about the human condition, the ballads remained relevant for centuries.

John Berger, once more, writes: “A closeness which lasts for a second or for the duration of a song being sung and listened to together. An agreement about life. An agreement without clauses. A conclusion spontaneously shared between the untold stories gathered around the song” (2016, 108). All religions and religious imaginaries have fantastic things to tell: myths from before time, truths about the present, and hopes for the future. But no worldview can move in its representations beyond what is possible to grasp for its audiences; there has to be a link to a recognizable everyday world and the problems presented must be relevant. Did people believe in the supernatural in the ballads? We should rather ask whether people were able to mirror their lives and nightmares in them.

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