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Neurological Signs: Lycanthropy



Werewolf: engraving by Lucas Cranach der Ältere, 1512.

I had always understood lycanthropy to mean the transformation of a human into a wolf (Greek: *lukos*=wolf, *anthropos*=man). Such animal-like behaviour has a long history.^{1,2} The mythical werewolves so beloved of the film industry aside, these cases, sometimes labelled “clinical lycanthropy” to emphasize the distinction, usually seem to be associated with psychiatric disorders such as psychosis or depression and have been understood as delusional disorders in the sense of self-identity disorder.³

I was somewhat surprised to read in a recent case report the word lycanthropy used to denote conversion to a pig.⁴ However, this was simply a reflection of my own ignorance, since in a review of over thirty published cases of clinical lycanthropy only a minority had wolf or dog themes.³ Hence the “animal-like behaviour” may encompass a broader phenotype than simply that of the wolf. (I have seen one patient with behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia who, according to his wife, used to bark like a dog.) Perhaps Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis into a gigantic insect in Franz Kafka’s story *Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*, 1915) is therefore also an example?

This broader definition including the pig obviously stimulates a few literary reminiscences, perhaps first to come to mind being George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), wherein the pig Napoleon and his supporters gradually adopt human characteristics, walking on two legs.

Lycanthropy as pig conversion may perhaps be one of the oldest neuropsychiatric syndromes described in literature, not just the medical literature, since a possible example occurs in Homer’s *Odyssey* which may date from the 8th century BC, and be based on even earlier traditions of oral

story telling. In Book X, Odysseus and his men encounter the beautiful Circe, “a formidable goddess with a mortal woman’s voice”, on the island of Aeaëa:

Circe ... prepared them a mixture of cheese, barley-meal, and yellow honey flavoured with Pramnian wine. But into this dish she introduced a noxious drug, to make them lose all memory of their native land. And when they had emptied the bowls which she had handed them, she drove them with blows of a stick into the pigsties. Now they had pigs’ heads *and bristles, and they grunted like pigs; but their minds were as humans they had been before*. So, weeping, they were penned in their sties. Then Circe flung them some forest nuts, acorns, and cornel-berries – the usual food of pigs that wallow in the mud [my italics].

Odysseus’s men may not be alone, since “Prowling about the place were mountain wolves and lions that Circe had bewitched with her magic drugs”.⁵

John Wain’s short story *A message from the Pig-man* (1960) may perhaps be seen as within the same tradition, conveying a six year-old child’s anxieties about encountering the “Pig-man”, whom he imagines to be part man part beast.

As a footnote to this consideration of some of the interrelationships between pigs and men, Ambrose Bierce in his *Devil’s Dictionary* (1906) defined trichinosis, infection with the nematode worm *Trichinella spiralis* due to ingestion of undercooked pork containing encysted *T. spiralis* larvae, as “the pig’s reply to proponents of porcuphagy”. ♦

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