

Of Monsters and Maladies

By Rehann Rheel

Your footsteps echo loudly on the cobblestones as you walk through the narrow alleys of the dark city. Your breath blooms in front of your face, obscuring your already depleted vision more and more as fear makes you breathe faster and faster. Your mother warned you never to wander alone at night.

You turn a corner and see a figure hunched over a dead body. The figure turns, and you're horrified to see the figure is covered almost completely by fur, with canines long and glowing in the scarce moonlight. Both fur and teeth are covered in blood. Your heart stops; your breath catches.

A werewolf is standing just in front of you.

...Or not.

The Instinct to Explain the Unexplainable

Humans simply do not like not knowing, you see. We're not content to watch lightning flash in the sky or hear people speak in different languages or see our neighbors' child born with a congenital defect and say, "Meh. I don't know what's going on here, but it is what it is. Can I have some more ale, please?" But, for much of human history, we were lacking the technology and knowledge to properly explore the things we witnessed. [So we turned to another human instinct to keep the unknown at bay](#): storytelling. It is that penchant for prose that is at least partly responsible for three myths that persist in our modern world: that of the werewolf, the vampire, and demonic possession.

Werewolves and Vampires and Demonic Possession—Oh My!



Figure 1: "The Hairy Man" ([Hoefnagel](#))

Werewolves

One human condition that is likely responsible for the werewolf myth is a rare disorder called [hypertrichosis](#). With hypertrichosis, a person gets abnormal excessive body hair growing on most of their body. This excess of hair makes the bearer look much like an animal—or a werewolf. In addition, those with hypertrichosis may also suffer from additional anomalies like gingival hyperplasia (which causes the gums to pull make and make teeth much more prominent) and bone abnormalities; both of these conditions can make the

hypertrichosis sufferer resemble a werewolf even more.

Rabies is another potential origin of the werewolf myth. Though today most households just have a dog or a cat that they keep inside, things were different during the time period when werewolf and vampire myths were most prevalent. Back then, many households kept a more diverse range of animals, and those animals would have been outside more often and for a lot longer. In addition, villages were close to forests, which teemed with undomesticated animals. Thus, the chances of your dog contracting rabies—and passing it on to you—were much higher. Symptoms of rabies include [severe aggression, aversion to light and water, and biting](#). Basically, all of the “am I a werewolf?” boxes that *could* be checked *were* checked. “There is a degree of folk wisdom in the werewolf myth, a warning for people not to connect yourself too much to the natural world,” said Roger Luckhurst, editor of a *Dracula* reprint “You had to remember your humanity.”

Vampires

Porphyria is the one of the most likely origins for the vampire myth. The term refers to a group of congenital disorders caused by a defect in one of the enzymes that helps create heme, the chemical compound that creates the hemoglobin found in blood.

The specific kind of porphyria most similar to the vampire myth is erythropoietic porphyria. Also known as Gunther’s disease, this particular strain of porphyria often causes extremely pale skin and light sensitivity, to the point where the sun actually severely damages the skin. In some cases, the skin can become so damaged that victims lose their ears and noses; thus, those with such severe cases often resemble the vampire from *Nosferatu*.



Figure 2: The vampire Count Orlok from *Nosferatu* ([Mental Floss](#))

And what about the pearly whites that are better to eat you with, my dear? In very bad (though, admittedly, rare) cases, the gums actually can recede from the teeth. This makes the teeth appear far more prominent than usual. Toxic porphyrins also gather in the bones and teeth, causing a red discoloration to the teeth and likely caused the blood-drinking mythology. But, for the record, those with erythropoietic porphyria do *not* crave blood. This part of the myth was perhaps originated by diseases such as catalepsy that cause sufferers to fall into a catatonic sleep and make their pulse impossible to detect. Friends and family believed their loved one to be dead, so they buried them alive. When the victim woke up, they were driven so mad with fear and hunger that they would sometimes bite themselves. Thus, if the coffin were ever unearthed, the corpse’s mouth would be ringed with blood.

Amazingly, even a vampire's aversion to garlic can be explained by this disease. Certain compounds within garlic induce a heme-degrading enzyme called heme oxygenase-1. And so garlic could actually worsen the symptoms of erythropoietic porphyria.

Demonic Possession

When it comes to demonic possession, there's no shortage of stories. One only has to look at *The Bible*. Mark 5:1-20 in the New Testament tells of "[a man with an impure spirit](#) [that] came from the tombs to meet [Jesus] and who would cry out and cut himself with stones." Before people understood mental health, it was assumed that anybody who suddenly and drastically experienced a change in behavior or personality or a loss of motor control must be [possessed by a demon](#).

Thankfully, today, there's no shortage of scientific explanations for such conditions. Like dissociative identity disorder (DID), for instance. Patients with DID (which was previously called multiple personality disorder) [exhibit two or more distinct identities](#), as well as changes in behavior, memory, and thinking.



Figure 3: Girl Being Exorcised ([Jeanne](#))

It's no wonder, then, that people suffering from DID were thought to be possessed. Especially because, in some cases, [those distinct identities called themselves demons](#). Take the case of Jeanne Fery, a Dominican nun from the 16th century. Records from the time tell of several internal "devils" that resided inside Jeanne. There was Namon and Béalial, who were often blamed for acts of sacrilege; Cornau, who controlled Jeanne's disturbed eating; Sanguinaire, who made Jeanne cut herself; Garga, who forced Jeanne to perform acts of harm like headbanging and suicide attempts; and many more.

Another disorder that was a likely cause of the demonic possession myth is anti-N-methyl D-aspartate (NMDA) receptor encephalitis. This is an autoimmune disorder that [attacks the brain's NMDA receptors](#), which are proteins that control autonomic functions like memory. At first, patients with NMDA receptor encephalitis think that they just have the flu. But all too quickly their symptoms suddenly morph, leaving sufferers in the ICU with seizures. Before that, though, patients suffer symptoms of psychosis, [including anxiety, hallucinations and delusions, agitation, and abnormal behavior](#).

Malleus Myth-ficarum

In a world without the tools necessary to do proper research, congenital defects and diseases and mental disorders are absolutely terrifying. Because the unknown is terrifying. But just because a rational explanation can't be found, doesn't mean that one doesn't exist.

So that dead body you saw in the alley? Just a pile of trash from the shops in that building. The blood dripping down the figure's chin? Just the cherry filling from his grandmother's famous cherry cobbler. And the figure? Just a man. Who, true, apparently doesn't believe in cutlery but *does* believe that all food can be finger food if you're determined enough. But he was still just a man. So, there's no need to pack silver bullets and knives the next time you go walking at night. Though perhaps bringing along a spare napkin would be handy.