Heroes to Horrors: Metamorphosis as Combat Trauma in the Mythology of the West

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“The mythology of a people is far more than a collection of pretty or terrifying fables to be retold in carefully bowdlerized form to our schoolchildren,” writes H.R. Ellis Davidson in his treatise on the *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*. Expanding on this, he argues that mythology takes the form of something like a record of ancient problem solving, a “comment... on the mysteries of human existence and the human mind” as they are understood by the people and period in question. If we hold this view to be correct, a review of ancient mythology becomes a rewarding and enlightening study on the social and cultural realities of life in an “earlier age” (*Gods and Myths* 9), and it is while looking through this lens that I began an examination of Western heroic mythologies, with a focus on how early Western societies discussed the psychology of their fighting-men upon returning home from war.

Lacking a modern understanding of trauma’s effect on the brain, the Celts, Anglo-Saxons, and early Norse nevertheless depicted their mythological warriors as suffering from traumatic symptoms identical to those seen in veterans of modern-day conflicts. In an attempt to understand the process suffered by their soldiers—many of whom left home as fit, whole men well-suited to their cultural surroundings but returned as unpredictable, antisocial “monster[s]” (*Qtd in Achilles in Vietnam* 33)—the tellers of these tales turned to the mythological conceit of metamorphoses.
Through a comparative study on the shapeshifting Cúchulainn of the Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the bestial Grendel of *Beowulf*, and the berserk, shamanistic warriors of the Old Norse sagas against the experiences of modern soldiers suffering from combat-induced post-traumatic stress disorder, I hope to show how instances of animalistic transformations served as an analogue for combat trauma in early Western storytelling.

Before engaging with the central argument of the paper, there are two matters that should be addressed: the relative silence of the classical world in the conversation ahead, and the portrayal therein of mythologized figures as living entities capable of being described as symptomatic of psychological disorders.

Given the level of interest Greek and Roman literature devotes to both metamorphosis and the psychological ramifications of warfare, a reader may wonder why classical sources are largely absent in this study. To put it simply, the link between traumatic battle experience and transfiguration seen so readily in the mythologies of the British Isles and Scandinavia is not nearly as apparent in the literature of Greece and Rome. *The Iliad* comes close, with Achilles (whose status as a traumatized soldier hardly requires justification, given Shay’s extended argument on that very subject) comparing himself to predatorial animals like “lions” and “wolves” (Lattimore 442) and “flirt[ing]…with cannibalism1” (*Achilles* 88)—two dire symptoms of the traumatized state—but the text stops short of drawing a blatant connection between trauma and the loss of one’s humanity. That said, the classical

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1 “...Would God my passion drove me to slaughter you and eat you raw...” (Qtd in *Achilles* 88)
texts do, at times, create an intriguing parallel between the process of metamorphosis and the institution of slavery: a link that serves to reinforce the argument to come.

For both modern and ancient soldiers, Jonathan Shay—a physician with an acute interest in combat-induced psychological trauma—argues that to participate in combat is to fall under a “condition of captivity and enslavement” (*Achilles* 35). He describes a long-term armed conflict as, essentially, a “mutual struggle to paralyze or control the will of enemy soldiers by inflicting wounds and death and creating the terror of these”: a “reciprocal” attempt on both sides to reduce their foe to “the broken mental state of a slave” (*Achilles* 35). This process becomes particularly relevant to the discussion at hand when one considers that—in some classical texts—to undergo a metamorphosis into an animal is analogous to suffering enslavement.

The clearest instantiation of this trope can be found within Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, which follows the transformation of a privileged highborn adventurer, Lucius, into a donkey: a working animal that Hopkins notes as being a classical “symbol for a slave” (Hopkins 15). This change immediately precedes his abduction by a group of bandits and a series of events in which he is sold to one owner after another, suffering all the while intense, life-threatening beatings that leave him covered in “blood smeared” (Walsh 130) abscesses. His tortured descent into a condition “menial” (Walsh 121) even for an ass, and his state of enslavement—brought on by metamorphosis—necessarily reminds a reader of Shay’s description
of warfare. If to participate in war is to become a slave, and to become a slave is to become an animal, this classical viewpoint could be seen to support the idea that post-combat trauma is closely tied to metamorphosis in certain subsets of the western mythological canon.

As to the second point: for the sake of clarity, I discuss mythological characters proceeding through the events of their respective narratives as though they were biological entities responding to real experiences. This conceit makes it easier to follow the chronological progression of their lives, accounting for the psychological and physiological changes they develop along the way. It is important to remember that—despite this technique—these characters are representative of cultural ideals that extend far beyond the level of the individual: the story of Cúchulainn exists today because it addressed an issue important enough to the society that produced it to merit passing it down through oral tradition.

In recounting the clinical criteria for diagnosing a patient with post-traumatic stress disorder, Shay tells us that someone who “has experienced an event that is outside the range of usual human experience and that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone” is at risk of developing a bevy of psychological symptoms. Of particular interest here is a tendency on the patient’s behalf towards “outbursts of anger” and “random, unwarranted rage” (Achilles in Vietnam 165-166) towards friends and family: a psychological profile that is particularly prevalent among those who developed their “psychological injury” (Odysseus in America 4) on the battlefield.
This idea that some soldiers who return from warfare struggle to contain an inner “monster” (Qtd in *Achilles* 33)—a second self prone to uncontrollable bouts of violence, forged in the heat of war and unknowingly brought home after the cessation of conflict—is a concept that would perhaps strike an early Celtic listener as hauntingly familiar. Within the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, an ancient Irish vernacular epic, violence against friends and family is almost invariably carried out by battle-scarred veterans whose characterizations are laden with animal imagery. The clearest example of this can be seen in the epic’s principal character, Cúchulainn: a man who killed countless hundreds of his allies on the battlefield whilst under the influence of a grotesque and maddening metamorphosis.

While the exact nature of Cúchulainn’s physiology is a matter of some confusion, given that he is said to be the product of a divine father and mortal mother, his first precocious experiences with combat imbue him with an “animal essence” (Larsen 175) that follows him for the rest of his life. Throughout the narrative—and particularly so after he begins life as a fighting man, as Larsen notes: “When Chú Chulainn fought it was as if an animal fought” (Larsen 175)—Cúchulainn is described in a manner more befitting a beast than a man: he bears a constant “snarl” as he “prowl[s]” across the battlefield, “melted to a mis-shape” (Kinsella 62, 63), and when he “wrenches into shapes” on the warpath, his enemies are forced to endure the sound of his “howls” (Kinsella 109) echoing across the space.
At very young age, Cúchulainn sets out armed with a “toy shield... and javelin” to visit his uncle and adoptive father, Conchobor. Nearing his uncle’s hold, he encounters a group of his maternal cousins, who—not realizing the identity of the child—deny him a “promise of safety” and subsequently launch a violent assault against him. Enraged by the sudden provocation, the young Cúchulainn undergoes his first “warp-spasm” (Kinsella 77): a disfiguring metamorphosis that distorts his body into inhuman form. One eye is “squeezed... narrower than the eye of a needle” while the other opens “wider than the mouth of a goblet”, and his mouth splits into an animalistic snarl that reaches ear-to-ear. So transformed, he “make[s] onslaught” (Kinsella 77) on his attackers, beating down fifty before Conchobor steps forward to halt the fray.

His first physical transformation as a child is accompanied by a metaphorical metamorphosis as well. Some time after making peace with the boy-troop, and shortly after Cúchulainn has his first brush with actual combat—an episode in which he sustains “fifty wounds” (Kinsella 81) and kills nine men—Cúchulainn is invited to attend a feast at the hold of Culann, an ally of his adoptive father. When the child arrives, however, he is attacked by Culann’s guard dog. Cúchulainn defends himself in a barehanded assault that mimics the animalistic ferocity of his foe, “clutch[ing] the hound’s throat-apple in one hand” (Kinsella 83) and throwing it at a nearby pillar with such intensity that the animal’s limbs are ripped from their sockets. Though impressed with the child’s prowess, Culann is distraught at the death of his “valued servant, [the] hound”. Cúchulainn swears to make the situation
right, declaring that—until such a time that he could “rear... a pup from the same pack”—he would act, himself, as Culann’s guard dog. In promising this, he earns himself a title that meshes well with what Larsen describes as his “essentially animal” (Larsen 175) nature: “Cúchulainn... the Hound of Culann” (Kinsella 84).

Though these youthful experiences with combat are relatively benign when compared with the carnage Cúchulainn witnesses (and takes part in) in his later years, they are laden with the sort of experiences that Shay describes in Achilles in Vietnam as being particularly likely to result in combat-induced trauma. Cúchulainn approaches the hostile “boy-troop” (Kinsella 76) as both a blood relative and a friend, and anticipates a similar reception. Their unexpected violent reaction—to which he responds with self-righteous fury (“‘I am in the right, friend Conchobor,’ [Cúchulainn] said. ‘I left my home... to join their games, and they treated me roughly” (Kinsella 78))—is a violation of Cúchulainn’s cultural and moral expectations, a group of beliefs that Shay gathers together using the Greek word “themis” (Achilles 5).

Themis, at its core, describes a warrior’s sense of “right and wrong”, his “moral order[s], convention[s], normative expectations, ethics, and commonly understood social values”. When a fighting man’s sense of themis is wronged—particularly when the offender is an ally—the reaction is invariably “violent rage” (Achilles 5), as we have just seen in The Táin. When this “betrayal of what’s right” (Achilles 9) comes down on a warrior from a superior officer and places the soldier in question in a position of danger, this sense of “indignant wrath” (Achilles 21)
festers, and when combined with the mortal fear involved with having one’s life placed in unjust and unnecessary risk, creates what Shay calls “the first and probably primary trauma that... [leads] to lifelong disability... Indignant rage is uncomfortably familiar to all who work with combat veterans” (Achilles 21).

Bearing this in mind, look back to Cúchulainn’s encounter with the guard dog. Though Cúchulainn is meant to travel to the feast alongside Conchobor, the boy lags behind in order to play with his friends for a little while longer. The older man—who, it must be mentioned, holds a dual position of power over Cúchulainn, as Conchobor is both a military leader on a local scale and the child’s adoptive guardian—“forget[s]”, when asked if anyone will be following behind him, that his foster son will soon be joining them. He thus allows Culann to “shut the gate” (Kinsella 83) to his keep and unleash his guard dog. Conchobor’s negligence results in Cuchúlainn being attacked by the beast: a “savage hound” of such tremendous strength that “three chains... with three men on each chain” are required to hold him back (Kinsella 83). Though the boy shows no fear himself, the ferocity attributed to the animal he faces and the terrified “anguish” (Kinsella 83) of the onlookers inside the keep indicate that he is in a situation of considerable danger.

To reiterate: Cuchúlainn again finds himself under attack in a space he considered to be safe, a clear violation of his warrior themis. He is placed in this unnecessarily perilous situation by a negligent superior (an instance of “friendly fire” and incompetence on the part of a commander that Shay notes as being a betrayal of trust “that the combat soldier finds most offensive” (Achilles 19)), and,
following a brief but intense bout of combat, is subject to a metaphorical transformation into a “hound” (Kinsella 84) that follows him until his death: the first of many instances in Western mythology where bodily or spiritual transformation follows a traumatic combat experience.

These moments of wartime betrayal and subsequent metamorphosis appear so often within the events of *The Táin* that they become impossible to ignore. When the battle for Ulster is underway, and Cúchulainn stands alone against Medb and her immense army, the latter attempts to stem the massive losses she is suffering at the hands of the Hound by appealing to his honor and offering him a series of one-on-one duels with the best of her warriors. Cúchulainn accepts, but is quickly subject to his opponents “breaking the rule of fair fight” (Kinsella 96). In one of the earlier appearances of this trope, Cúchulainn is attacked by three warriors who have—in a dishonorable and unusual strategy—armed their charioteers as well as themselves. Though Cúchulainn prevails, he immediately swears an oath that he would “hurl a sling-stone” (Kinsella 96) at Medb whenever he sees her, and in carrying out this process, exemplifies his increasingly bestial nature: he stalks around the outskirts of the enemy camp, throwing stones that slaughter small pets belonging to Medb and her husband. Cúchulainn, like a predator, seeks out and destroys small creatures of prey: a pet squirrel and bird, respectively.

These betrayals continue as the conflict wears on, and the one-on-one fights become increasingly weighted in his enemy’s favor. Medb sends multiple warriors out to fight the duels under various pretenses, and plots, at one point, to request a
peaceful meeting with her opponent in order to use the opportunity to “set a great number of keen and spirited men on him” (Kinsella 137, 138). While he remains victorious, the “cruel treachery” (Kinsella 139) of his enemy begins to wear on Cúchulainn. Having suffered numerous injuries in a duel in which he was interfered with by an outside force, he collapses in “great weariness” and bursts out into a lament:

I am alone against hordes.

I can neither halt nor let pass.

I watch through the long hours

alone against all men...

I am almost worn out

by single contests.

I can’t kill all their best

alone as I am. (Kinsella 136)

Beyond the obvious psychological weariness this outburst from a previously indomitable warrior indicates, the passage can be read as further evidence of Cuchúlainn undergoing a metamorphosis in the throes of combat trauma, given
that it reads like a perfect instantiation of that “consistent complaint of the monster in his narrative... that he is excluded from receiving any human affection and is, instead, in receipt only of human aggression” (Bond). The Hound fights in seclusion, the sole fighting-man preventing Ulster from falling into ruin while his comrades labor under a supernatural disability, and this quest—being carried out “alone” (Kinsella 136)—places him in a position of social isolation that speaks to his newly-wrought animal nature, where to be “unlike humans” makes taking an active role in society “impossible” (Bond).

The transformative burden of social isolation is one well-known to survivors of warfare, modern and ancient alike: Shay speaks of “the destruction of... social trust” and “isolation” (Achilles XX) as key symptoms of the traumatized state. Combat survivors—particularly those who have previously entered into a “berserk state” (Achilles 77) on the battlefield, a style of combat that Cúchulainn thoroughly embraces—begin to “speak of themselves as animals [in] pain” who, by their “nature... are thought incapable of [mental, ethical, and social restraint]”, removed as they are from the realm of “humanity” (Achilles 84), and thus “cut off from all human community” (Achilles 86). In these passages, where Cúchulainn fights with darkling bestial fury against an overwhelming foe, he takes on a role reminiscent of another ancient literary figure: that of Beowulf’s Grendel.

Though it is difficult to classify Grendel as a warrior who has undergone metamorphosis, given the unclear nature of his physiognomy, it is undeniable that he is a creature begat in violence and trauma: a “god-cursed brute” and descendent
of the first Biblical murderer, Cain, whose progeny are doomed to roam the earth as “banished monsters” (*Heaney* 42). Much in the same way as Cúchulainn, Grendel is described via thoroughly “animal[istic] imagery” (Larsen 180): he is called a “prowler” (*Heaney* 57) in possession of “wild strength” (*Heaney* 55) who moves through “loping” motions and kills men barehanded in the night, “gorg[ing]” on their remains (*Heaney* 55, 56) before returning to a rough “den” (*Heaney* 56) far out in the wilderness. Some translations describe him in terms even more befitting an inhuman horror: Williamson speaks of the creature “writhing” and “sliding” (Williamson 56) towards the sleeping men of Heorot, intent on taking their lives. Given his overt animality, the fact that Grendel adheres quite closely to Shay’s image of a traumatized warrior becomes significant. Grendel “scorns” (*Heaney* 50) the use of weaponry and armor, preferring instead to tear his opponents apart in frenzied fits of “blood-lust” (*Heaney* 43) using his own “rabid hands” (*Heaney* 44). The bestial ferocity of his assaults and his immunity to the “blacksmith’s art” (*Heaney* 57) place him squarely under the classification of a berserk warrior: indeed, when H.R. Ellis Davidson writes about the “berserks” who appear in the Icelandic sagas, he explicitly notes their “practice of fighting without armor” (*Gods and Myths* 66, 67), and their supposed immunity to bladed weaponry.

We will discuss the significance of the “berserk state” (*Achilles* 75) in further detail in due time: for now, it suffices to say that Shay emphasizes that the act of berserking is a process of becoming an “animal”, and that it forms “the most important and distinctive element of combat trauma” (*Achilles* 83, 75). Thus, when
Grendel descends on Heorot, “maddening for blood” (Heaney 55), he joins Cúchulainn in the ranks of mythological warriors who exhibit clear signs of psychological trauma and animalistic metamorphosis brought on through violence. The uncanny similarities between Cúchulainn and Grendel strengthen the argument: Grendel assaults Heorot in darkness, carrying away tens of enemy soldiers in the process. His nocturnality is so well-established that he carries the epithet of “shadow-stalker” (Heaney 55), a fitting title for a creature that kills his foes in a sneaking, predatory manner. Cúchulainn behaves similarly: he pesters Medb’s army by skulking around the periphery of their camp in darkness, lashing out with his sling to kill hundreds of his foes as they set up camp and sleep. The nightly massacres reduce the army to a state of cowering fear: they are in constant motion by day to avoid Cúchulainn’s assaults, and the men “daren’t make water in ones or twos outside the camp, but have to go in twenties and thirties” (Kinsella 112). The terror that grips Medb’s army is comparable to that plaguing the men of Heorot in Beowulf, who—“numb with grief” (Heaney 44)—leave their hold to molder in darkness as they “shift... to a safer distance” away from the trappings of organized civilization and into crude “bothies”: small huts set up far outside the walls of Heorot (Heaney 44).

Grendel likewise echoes Cúchulainn’s state of social isolation, and, in the eyes of some commenters, extends the trope to its logical conclusion: Kathryn Hume argues that each of the “monsters” encountered in Beowulf, including Grendel, represent distinct “threats to social order” (Hume 5)—threats that are carried out
by figures “operat[ing] from outside” the realm of human society (Hume 7). The idea is hardly a new one: Widdowson has pointed out that animals act as “threatening figures” in folklore around the world: deadly sentinels who linger on the outskirts of human life, seeking the barest pretense for latching on to those who stray from traditional modes of “social control” (Widdowson 41). One of Grendel’s principle motivations, Hume argues, is “a kind of envy… of the dweller in darkness for those in light, of one from the lonely moors for those of the hall” (Hume 6). The idea that Grendel terrorizes Heorot out of a deep-set desire for unobtainable human contact is borne out by the text: his “rage boil[s] over” (Heaney 55) at the very moment he touches the door of Hrothgar’s hold, and the noise and light of human habitation, the “song and celebration… story telling and social bonding” (Williamson 29) that take place within the halls of Heorot serve as a “hard grievance” (Heaney 43) for a creature who can never take part in them.

This envy on the part of the outsider is, Shay tells us, often expressed by soldiers returning home with post-traumatic symptoms. He quotes one such veteran as saying the following during an interview with him:

I’m so envious of the normal people who can just go to the mall and hold hands with their wife and walk around. You see, I could never do that, because I’d be looking everywhere. Fuck! I even envy you… Here I did three combat tours serving my country and I feel like a fucking fugitive… like a complete freak… nobody can understand, ‘cept maybe another ‘Nam vet. (Achilles xviii-xix)
The connection is clear: a warrior who returns from combat having undergone significant psychological changes may well view himself as an “outcast” (*Achilles* xix): a self-descriptor exacerbated by the manner in which his society—having no frame of reference for what he has undergone—treats him as a “dangerous” unpredictable “psycho” (*Odysseus* 16). Cúchulainn’s isolation and Grendel’s hatred for the trappings of human civilization imply that this post-war isolation afflicted ancient warriors in much the same way as modern veterans.

We have already seen that Cúchulainn—a man whose body and spirit alike are so given to inhuman flux—has undergone a bestial metamorphosis. Grendel might well be thought to have suffered a similar process, given his status as a berserk—and thus necessarily traumatized, as Shay argues—warrior. It would be prudent to further establish how this transformation is intimately related to the psychological trauma both have undergone.

When a reader looks at Cúchulainn’s plight with a modern understanding of war’s psychological impact, the hero’s despair becomes understandable: even a warrior of mythic proportions is not immune to what Shay calls “the undoing of character” (*Achilles*, title), an affliction that comes as a natural result of *The Táin*’s particular brand of violence. The consistent battering of Cúchulainn’s *themis* removes the “convention” that “makes [him] stable”, and “produce[s] bestiality, the utter loss of human relatedness” (Qtd in *Achilles* 23). Indeed, when one looks at the text with Shay’s writing in mind, the underhanded and unpredictable tactics of Medb and Cúchulainn’s requisite state of constant vigilance come across as
remarkably comparable to modern descriptions of the Vietnam Conflict, a war that inflicted post-traumatic symptoms on “more than half” (USVH 2) of the male veterans involved and which was marked by Vietnamese guerilla tactics that dealt “severe damage to a part of mental function [of the American forces] that is critical to the maintenance of social trust: the trustworthiness of perception” (Achilles 34).

Unlike more classical “Homeric” descriptions of warfare, where combat is “suspended every night from sunrise to sunset” (Achilles 173), Cúchulainn’s struggles are punctuated by the same sort of “light, unrestorative dozing” and “persistent mobilization for danger” (Achilles 173) endured by American soldiers in Vietnam: his skirmishes with Medb’s foes continue at all hours, resulting in nighttime battles with as many as “one hundred” (Kinsella 114) casualties each. More explicitly, Cúchulainn is said to only rest “against his spear for an instant... with head on fist and fist on spear and spear against his knee” (Kinsella 142): an image of a warrior armed even in sleep that is echoed almost exactly in Shay’s description of Vietnam veterans who sleep “the same way they did in combat, on their backs with weapons... ready to attack” (Achilles 174).

In the aftermath of both his bloodsoaked childhood and the endless betrayals of trust Cúchulainn is subjected to, he continues to be described as displaying hallmark symptoms of what we now understand to be post-traumatic stress disorder. At the age of seven, he places himself in a position to fulfill a druidic prophecy, and he picks up his first set of true weaponry on a day in which it is foretold that “he who [takes up] arms for the first time... will achieve fame and
greatness. But his life [will be] short” (Kinsella 85). Cuchúlainn receives his promise of a glorious, though shortened life with ambivalence. Shay describes a similar phenomenon occurring among traumatized American soldiers during the Vietnam conflict: soldiers under intense psychological strain were quoted as being disaffected by the prospect of death: “It wasn’t that I couldn’t be killed. I didn’t care if was killed… I didn’t care if I lived or died, I just wanted blood” (qtd in Achilles 52). This grim statement from one of the Vietnam veterans Dr. Shay spoke with over the course of his research resonates closely with Cuchúlainn’s reaction to his own prophesized doom: “That [dying young] is a fair bargain,’ Cuchúlainn said. “If I achieve fame [in combat] I am content, though I had only one day on earth” (Kinsella 85).

Perhaps the most illuminating example of Cúchulainn’s resonance with these similarly afflicted modern soldiers is brought up in Shay’s discussion of post-traumatic stress disorder’s physical effects: a soldier afflicted with combat trauma is locked in a state of “hypervigilance” (Achilles 170) that makes him prone to “split-second... self-defensive responsiveness” and “combat reflexes” that persist even into civilian life. One veteran discusses his experiences with this heightened state of attention: “Once when my daughter was younger and I was that way, she came up behind me and before I knew it I had her by the throat up against the wall” (Achilles XVI). This instinctive reactivity carries on into the state of sleep: Shay notes that “friends, family, and co-workers of Vietnam combat veterans have learned that it is most unsafe to approach these men unannounced” (Achilles 174),
lest they—like the man who described the “crazy shit” he did when suddenly awoken “at night” (Qtd in *Achilles xvii*)—react with violence. Cúchulainn displays remarkably similar behavior in *The Táin*: at one point following his childhood battles in Conchobor’s fort, a member of the household attempts to shake the sleeping boy awake. Cúchulainn responds by instinctively “strik[ing]” the luckless man “on the forehead with his fist… driv[ing] the dome of his forehead back into the brain” (Kinsella 79) and is subsequently left to wake of his own accord.

This incident marks the first moment of *The Táin* in which Cúchulainn performs an act of violence against a friend, ally, or family member, and it is certainly not the last: Cúchulainn’s monstrous “warp-spasms” (Kinsella 249) transform him from a reasonable man into a slavering beast who slaughters friend and foe alike in his blind “battle-madness” (Kinsella 248), and it is after he is struck by the first of these metamorphic episodes that he begins his campaign of violence against “kith and kin” (Kinsella 247). Shortly after Cúchulainn takes on the title of “Hound” (Kinsella 84) and receives the news of his shortened lifespan, he ventures out into the wilds of Ireland, “looking for danger” (Kinsella 88)—an aimless quest for violence that immediately calls to mind Shay’s anecdote of one Vietnam vet who roamed dangerous areas of Boston at night, seeking fights— and, having succeeded in killing his prey—both human and animal alike—returns to Conchobor’s hold in a frenzy, demanding a bout of single combat with his own people:

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2 See pages xvi-xvii of *Achilles in Vietnam*
‘Cúchulainn turned the left chariot-board toward Emain in insult, and he said: “I swear by the oath of Ulster’s people that if a man isn’t found to fight me, I’ll spill the blood of everyone in this court.” (Kinsella 92)

Though Conchobor’s timely intervention (To wit: he sends the women of Emain forward with bared breasts, embarrassing the still-youthful Cúchulainn long enough that he can be quite literally cooled down from his simmering state of rage) here prevents Cúchulainn’s slaughter of friends and family, the years of combat that follow lead him down a path that results in the murder of his own son, Connlia—a child begat at swordpoint and raised under a geis to “refuse no... combat” (Kinsella 33)—and the development on Cúchulainn’s behalf of a berserk fighting style that sees his body wrenched into a “mottled... terrifying” (Kinsella 195) shape with a psychology to match: the very sound of distant combat sends Cúchulainn into an incoherent bloodlust, hungering at the thought of “play of swords — men smothered in blood — bodies swallowed up!” (Kinsella 248).

Cúchulainn’s blood-fury leads us to a line of inquiry that has as of yet been only lightly touched upon: the prevalence of berserker tactics among the fighting-men of the Western mythological canon, and the importance that distinction bears when considering them in the light of modern psychology. Our discussion thus far has been highly concerned with the idea of physical metamorphosis being a way for

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3 “a prohibition or taboo, a positive injunction or obligation, something unlawful or forbidden, a curse, or a spell or incantation.” (Quinion)
early societies to come to terms with how their warriors changed over the course of their combat careers. It seems appropriate, then, that post-traumatic stress disorder should be thought to alter the “brain chemistry, function, and even gross structure in those suffering from combat PTSD” (Achilles 172). This apparently very real metamorphosis may explain why Shay feels that a warrior who “enter[s] the berserk state” is both “changed forever” and doomed to suffer “life-long psychological and physiological injury” (Achilles 98).

Though instances of berserker-class warriors have been recorded into the historical record since the time of Tacitus⁴ (and almost certainly existed long before written record as a whole), the term itself is derived from the culture best known for fielding them: the early Norse. To be a berserk—particularly in an Old Norse setting—is to fight as a beast given to “wild fury” and “animal rage” (Shape-changing 126), and, in most cases, to return home mentally scarred, socially estranged, and prone to “fits of rage” (Gods and Myths 68).

Old Norse literature is laden with references to such warriors undergoing both physical and metaphorical metamorphosis into suitably animalistic forms, and many Icelandic discussions on berserks resonate strongly with the modern post-war anecdotes put forward by Shay. Descriptions of berserkers in the various Icelandic sagas differ in the levels of animality they attribute to the warriors. Some mythological texts speak of berserkers as literal “shape-changers”, capable of taking on “animal form” (Gods and Myths 68): one such example appears in Egil’s Saga,

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⁴ Gods and Fighting Men 66
where a retired “berserk” is rumored to shapeshift into a wolf every night, giving him the nickname of “Kveld-Ulf” (Palsson, Edwards 21). Others, like the saga of *Hrolf Gautreksson*, depict berserkers as something more akin to shamanistic figures, capable of sending their spirit outward to “fight in the form” (*Gods and Myths* 68) of wild animals while their human bodies rest inert, far away from the site of combat.

In both cases, berserkers who survive the violence inherent to their combat style “[lose] their humanity” (*Achilles* 82), and find returning to society to be a difficult ordeal. Earlier, we discussed a soldier who instinctually attacked his daughter when she snuck up behind him, an episode of violence towards loved ones that is echoed in other post-Vietnam narratives: “The [desire for] revenge never left me,” one veteran who “went berserk” (*Achilles* 94) recounts in *Achilles in Vietnam*. “It consumed me. It consumed my mind. It consumed my body… I carried this home with me. I lost all my friends, beat up my sister, went after my father… every three days I would totally explode, lose it for no reason at all… I’d be sitting there calm as could be, and this monster would come out of me with a fury that most people didn’t want to be around” (*Achilles* 95).

In a startlingly clear parallel, Old Norse sagas depict retired berserkers dealing with similar “fits of rage… inconvenient in private life” (*Gods and Myths* 68). In one such instance, we see the titular hero of *Egil’s Saga* as a young child playing a “ball-
game” (Pallson, Edwards 94) with his father, Skallagrim, a berserker and “shape-changer” (Palsson, Edwards 72) who was said—in a manner suggestive of the werewolf-esque Kveld-Ulf before him—to grow stronger as evening falls. Caught up in the competition, Egil’s father lapses into a berserk state, murdering one of his opponents by picking him up and “dash[ing] him down so hard that... he died on the spot” (Pallson, Edwards 95). This achieved, Skallagrim grabs Egil with similarly dark intent, and would have succeeded in killing his child had a bystander not drawn Skallagrim’s ire onto themselves.

Episodes like this placed berserkers into an unusual social position. Though their prowess in combat led many of their kind to become “celebrated” (Gods and Myths 68) warriors, the mental scars left by their experiences and their unpredictable spells of violence made re-integration into peaceful society almost impossible: a complaint expressed numerous times throughout Shay’s text. There was a definite social stigma surrounding the act of going berserk in early Iceland: In Egil’s Saga, retired berserks are often depicted as being somehow wolf-like, or as being prone to literally becoming wolves in private settings. Given that both Scandinavian and Germanic cultures referred to “outlaws” and “those who had forfeited the rights to participate in human societies” as “vargr”6 (Guðmundsdóttir 282), and given the general cultural understanding of wolves as dangerous, “utterly ruthless” (Shape-changing 134) animals, it is easy to infer that berserkers were not readily accepted into society at large. Compounding this further, Guðmundsdóttir

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6 Wolf
notes that “the ability to transform”—an act “usually associated with war and warlike activities”—is “generally viewed negatively” (Guðmundsdóttir 277, 279) by society as a whole.

The argument is somewhat muddied by the fact that berserkers are a fact of history. While they may have been depicted in mythological settings as shapeshifters or literal animals, the warriors who inspired the tales were considerably more mundane. Even setting the mythological aspects aside, however, there still exists considerable evidence that berserkers suffered from social stigmatization and isolation: much of which can be derived from an excerpt of Snorri Sturluson’s Poetic Edda entitled Sayings of the High One, which acts as a both a religious text and a compendium of “human social wisdom” (Larrington 14). In laying out the social guidelines for success in the Viking world, Sayings of the High One advises strongly against the berserker lifestyle, arguing that “it is better to live than not to be alive” (Larrington 23) and thus disdaining the risk-taking and general “inattent[ion] to one’s own safety” that formed core “characteristics of the berserk state” (Achilles 82).

Given the level of similarities seen thus far between modern and ancient survivors of berserk episodes, it seems reasonable to assume that the “socially disconnected” (Achilles 82) nature of the modern berserker was similarly present in the berserks of early Scandinavia. This, Sayings of the High One tells us, is a dangerous prospect: an antisocial man with “few people” to speak for him and a poor reputation is at risk of slander and false “accusation[s]”, which, given the nature of
the society in question, could well result in “fatal... wound[s]” (Larrington 22, 30) or social exile. The text likewise castigates those who overindulge in psychoactive substances:

It isn’t as good as it’s said to be,

ale, for the sons of men;

for the more he drinks, the less he knows

about the nature of men (Larrington 12).

These lines implicate the berserker lifestyle on several fronts. For one, research suggests the possibility that berserkers developed their “indifference” (Achilles 92) to pain—and thus their reputation for being impervious to weaponry—by consuming massive amounts of alcohol and “amanita muscaria mushroom[s]”: a “hallucinogenic” fungus that contains a chemical compound implicated in schizophrenia and psychosis (Fabing abstract). The downside of this process—that is to say, forgetting “the nature of men” (Larrington 12)—carries a polyvalent criticism of the berserker style of combat: someone who knows less of “the nature” of the men around him may well struggle—as we have witnessed in previously examined berserk fighters—to differentiate friend from foe. The criticism could also be read as a warning against the metamorphic effects of giving in to berserk rage. A warrior who knows less of the “nature of man” necessarily knows less about his own
human nature: his mind is clouded by animalistic impulse, and he loses touch with the principle characteristics of humanity.

To return to our discussion on mythological Norse berserkers, we can look to the _Saga of the Volsungs_, with a particular emphasis on the ‘donning of the skins’ episode and Fafnir’s transformation from man to dragon in the latter portion of the narrative. Prior to his metamorphosis in the forest, Sigmund—the sole surviving son of the late King Volsung and a warrior who has already displayed some measure of bestial prowess by killing a wolf with his teeth alone⁷—is living as a refugee in a woodland den. His sister Signy has been forced into marrying the man who murdered her father, and she sends what offspring the union produces to Sigmund to test their strength, and to raise them up as warriors who will take their mother’s vengeance against their own murderous father. The first two children are found lacking, and thus die at Sigmund’s hand. The third, Sinjotli—who, unbeknownst to Sigmund, is actually the product of an incestuous pairing between himself and Signy⁸—survives his father’s tests and begins learning the art of combat.

In order to “accustom the boy to hardship”, Sigmund brings him deep into the forest, where they “kill… men for booty” (Byock 44). While carrying out this process, they come across a small house holding “two sleeping men” bearing “wolfskins”. Sigmund and Sinjotli take the skins, and find themselves transformed by a “weird

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⁷ See Byock 41
⁸ For the sake of clarity: Sign bore a supernatural disguise during the act of conception.
power”, the effects of which they are unable to undo. The exact nature of the transformation is uncertain, but given that they are said to “howl” with the voice of a wolf and attack by biting the windpipes of their enemies, it is safe to assume that the metamorphosis brought on by the enchanted skins is both literal and gratuitously physical (Byock 44).

This passage is suffused with the same sort of material that characterizes both Cúchulainn and Grendel as traumatized warriors. Sigmund, for his part, has a history laden with traumatic experiences: he stands as the sole survivor of a war that killed his father and the majority of his family, and he was made to watch as nine of his brothers were bound outdoors and left to be devoured by a wolf, one by one. Sigmund himself would have met a similar fate, had the experience not awakened an animal impulse within him: when the creature drew near to his face, he “bit into the wolf’s tongue” (Byock 41) and held on until it was wrenched out “by the roots” (Byock 42). Sinfjotli was likewise subject to physical abuse from early childhood, and was thrust into combat around the age of ten. Their mutual transformation is brought on by wolfskins discovered whilst on a campaign of violence, and while the fate of the men who originally wore them is not spelled out in the text, it would be safe to assume that the skins did not change hands peacefully. Sigmund and Sinfjotli’s metamorphosis is precipitated by violence: violence carried out by individuals likely laboring under some measure of combat trauma.
The similarities to our earlier discussions continue. Just as Cúchulainn is said to have murdered his son and Grendel—a descendent of Cain—is described as a “kin-killer” (Williamson 28), Sigmund’s transformation into a wolf leads him into a violent confrontation with his own child. Prior to falling under the influence of the skins, Sigmund treats Sinfjotli with grudging respect: while he erroneously believes the boy to be the “son of King Siggeir”9, he notes that Sinfjotli “[takes] much after the Volsung race”, and thus refrains from injuring him in the same manner as his half-brothers before him. Once in the form of a wolf, however, Sigmund becomes prone to bouts of unpredictable rage: when Sinfjotli pays Sigmund disrespect by questioning his prowess in combat, the latter pounces on his son and “fiercely… [bites] him on the windpipe” (Byock 45). While the wound is not fatal, the attack was severe enough to disable Sinfjotli: he must be “carried” (Byock 45) back to their dwelling, where he lays in recovery for an unspecified number of days. This episode hearkens back to our earlier discussion: “rage at [one’s] family” and “social… isolation” (Achilles 16510) are hallmark symptoms of combat induced trauma, and Sigmund has given himself over to both.

Furthermore, the event that provokes Sigmund’s anger falls very much in line with our earlier conversation regarding the erosion of themis and the betrayal of “what’s right” (Achilles 3) that provokes wronged soldiers to anger. Before setting out their separate ways into the forest, Sigmund lays out the following rules of engagement:

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9 The aforementioned murderer of King Volsung.
10 Shay specifies “unwarranted” rage: the seemliness of Sigmund’s reaction to his son’s banter is debatable.
Now they set out into the forest, each going his own way. They agreed then that they would risk a fight with as many as seven men, but not with more, and that the one being attacked by more would howl with his wolf’s voice. “Do not break this agreement,” said Sigmund, “Because you are young and daring, and men will want to hunt you” (Byock 44).

Sinfjotli scorns his father’s orders, choosing to remain silent as he battled with “eleven men” (Byock 44). He is victorious, though he suffers significant wounds in the process, and his taunting after Sigmund arrives on the scene (“I did not want to call you for help. You accepted help to kill seven men. I am a child in age next to you, but I did not ask for help in killing eleven men” (Byock 45)) is what drives his father into a rage. Sigmund had laid out a very specific plan of action for both himself and his comrade-in-arms: both men’s lives were dependent on it being followed. When Sinfjotli “break[s] the agreement”, he disrupts Sigmund’s sense of themis and damages the bond of “social trust” (Achilles xx) the two shared.

Sinfjotli likewise displays symptoms of psychological trauma, and unlike his more cautious father, he embraces the delusional ethos of the berserker: a combat style perhaps influenced by his experiences in the forest, given that Shay lists both “being wounded” and “being surrounded” (Achilles 81) in combat as typical triggers of the berserk state. By fighting in an animalistic mode against an overwhelming foe and rejecting aid from nearby allies, Sinfjotli becomes a quintessential image of a berserker: a “soldier who routs the enemy single-handed” (Achilles 77) and who
feels that he “[can not] be killed” (Qtd in *Achilles* 80). He mirrors, also, the kin- killing nature of the berserker. Just as in the case of Cúchulainn, Sinfjotli’s exposure to combat metamorphosis as a child leads almost immediately to unrestrained violence towards his kin: Sigmund leads Sinfjotli to the hall of the murderous King Siggeir, where the two “fierce men… in shining mail” (Byock 45) encounter the king’s young children. Unlike Sigmund, who stays his blade against his sister’s remaining offspring, Sinfjotli “[does] not falter” (Byock 45), drawing his sword and summarily executing his youthful half-brothers on the spot.

The influence of the father turning his child into a bestial murderer is a trope that necessarily recalls the events of *Egil’s Saga*. Egil, like Sinfjotli, is raised by a violent survivor of war, and he becomes embroiled in deadly combat at a very young age: when he is six, he grows angry upon losing a game of strength against another child, and attacks him with a bat. His intended victim “[takes] hold of him, [hurls] him to the ground, and [gives] him some very rough treatment”. Becoming even more furious, Egil goes off and retrieves a “thick-bladed axe”, which he proceeds to bury handle-deep into the skull of the child who bested him (Palsson, Edwards 94). This early episode of violence precedes others, many of which are carried out in typical berserker style: Egil, a “drunken vainglorious lout” possessed at times by “uncontrollable battle-fury”, learns to fight like an animal, “rush[ing]” and “grappling” with one particular opponent before leaning forward and “bit[ing] right through his throat” (Palsson, Edwards 10-11, 175).
The manner of his murdering calls to mind the bestial transformations other literary examples of youthful combat yield, and is, on some level, suggestive of cannibalism. Similar language is employed in *The Táin* when Cúchulainn enters into a “warp-spasm” upon hearing the sounds of combat, and, in his “battle madness”, expresses an incoherent desire to slaughter and consume his enemies:

“Blood blocks my heart—battle madness tears! Undo these twigs quickly\(^{11}\)…Loosen the hazel twigs! Quickly!” Cúchulainn said. “Play of swords… men smothered in blood… bodies swallowed up!” (Kinsella 248).

This cannibalistic\(^{12}\) urge on the part of the berserker appears in *Beowulf*, as well. Grendel seeks to “stalk and kill a mouthful of mankind”, and his attacks are grotesquely steeped in predatorial language:

[Grendel] was driven to find a fulfilling feast—

His fate was one last feeding on mankind.

...The monster never thought of holding back—

He seized the first sleeper, slit his body,

Bit open his bone-house, drinking his blood,

Swallowing flesh, feasting on hands and feet,

\(^{11}\) He had been tied up in restraints in order to recover from the grievous wounds of his earlier fighting.

\(^{12}\) Though, admittedly, there is some question as to whether or not Grendel ever was a human at all.
Eating greedily the unliving one. (Williamson 57)

The desire to pay one’s enemy the ultimate insult by consuming their corpse is, Shay tells us, a rare but serious side effect of the berserk state, as he writes in *Achilles in Vietnam*:

Clinicians working with combat veterans need to be aware that berserking may arouse a lust to eat the enemy. Even the remembered wish is extremely disturbing to veterans, and when it has been carried out, the ensuing post-traumatic stress disorder is particularly devastating and intractable. (*Achilles* 219)

Though we have established a connection between a berserker undergoing metamorphosis following a traumatic experience and then engaging in violence against loved ones, that particular pattern of cause-and-effect is not always consistent. Within *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Sinfjotli follows the more common progression for a berserker: he suffers trauma, undergoes a period of transformation, and returns home to murder his father and half-brothers. Fafnir, a character who appears later in the narrative, undergoes the same process in reverse. Fierce, greedy, and otherwise dragonish from birth and hailing from a family with a penchant for shapeshifting (his late brother, Otr, “had the likeness of an otter during the day” and “was in many ways like an otter” even when human), Fafnir murders his father after the family comes into a large payment of gold, taking it all for himself. Soon afterward he stashes the gold into a “horde” and—
through unspecified means—becomes “[a] most evil serpent” (Byock 59). The transformation is not metaphorical, but rather bodily and quite literal: When Sigurd does battle with Fafnir later in the saga, the his foe is described as a crawling “worm\(^{13}\)”, massive in size and capable of “blow[ing] poison” from his mouth. (Byock 63). For Fafnir, the initial combat experience and violence against kin occurs in the same instant, but the end result—metamorphosis, and thus traumatization—is carried out in the same, now familiar fashion as the berserkers previously discussed.

So concludes our study on the mythological mechanic of metamorphosis in those exposed to combat trauma. Earlier, we discussed how the narratives of mythological figures are crafted by their respective societies to deal with important cultural ideals, and it is this process that allows us to infer that the recurrent trope of post-traumatic transformation in western mythology acts as a metaphorical equivalent to the psychosocial disturbances seen in ancient survivors of armed conflict. Cúchulainn fought with the might of an entire army in his solitary defense of Ulster, and Norse berserks fought in a manner that exposed them to the highest possible level of psychological trauma: both figures can be seen to act as representations of their culture’s fighting men as a whole. For these cultures, to fight is to court flux: the man who leaves home a hero comes back, all too often, a horror.

\(^{13}\) Read: dragon
Works Cited


