

# Introduction, a Postscript

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This book can be described as a historical experiment that starts from a single document and explores its possible contexts. As Marcel Mauss famously observed, “A single case analyzed in depth will suffice to provide the basis for an extensive comparison.”<sup>1</sup> Today, in an era of big data, a project like this may sound irrelevant. Even more so, since the document we start from is exceptional (although not unique). But exceptional in what sense?

## I

Compared to the massive, heterogenous evidence (literary, judicial, medical, and so on) about werewolves dating from Greek and Roman antiquity, the 1691 trial of Old Thiess, a Latvian peasant, is exceptional both as a document and in its content, being thus doubly anomalous.<sup>2</sup> But, as Thomas Kuhn argued in his famous book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, anomalies can identify the limitations of a well-established scientific paradigm, paving the way to the construction of a new paradigm.<sup>3</sup> Even if the implications of our experiment would turn out to be minimal, its legitimacy should not be questioned.

It has been objected, however, that the category of “werewolves” is itself misleading, since it arbitrarily conflates local phenomena that differ in their particulars.<sup>4</sup> In principle, such an objection looks dubious, since every word historians use has

more-than-local dimensions. It must be admitted, however, that although Thiess's voice is filtered by a notary and possibly by a translator, the discourse that figures in the transcript of his trial involves some *emic*—and not just *etic*—categories, to echo the distinction familiar to linguists and anthropologists between actors' and observers' categories.<sup>5</sup> How can we approach Thiess's singular voice?

A preliminary remark is needed: the distinction between *etic* and *emic* categories opens a series of Chinese boxes, not a simple dichotomy. In a passage of his *Otia imperialia*, Gervase of Tilbury (1155–1234) wrote: "In England we have often seen men change into wolves according to the phases of the moon. The Gauls call men of this kind *gerulfi*, while the English name for them is *were-wolf*, *were* being the English equivalent of *vir* ['man']."<sup>6</sup>

Gervase of Tilbury's medieval Latin lists the vernacular nouns in which the actors' categories were (perhaps) articulated. A large part of the evidence related to werewolves displays this double distance. To quote an example that is closer in both time and space to the trial of Old Thiess: in the 1670s, the German physician Rosinus Lentilius spoke scornfully of Latvian peasants, calling them "cunning people, treacherous and most deceitful" (*vafra gens, versipellis et dolosissima*). Clearly, Lentilius was playing on the ambiguity of *versipellis*, a Latin term that can mean "cunning people" but more literally denotes a shapeshifter or werewolf, as in a famous passage of Pliny's *Natural History* (VIII, chapter 37 [22]).<sup>7</sup> To take that word as evidence for a continuity of beliefs about werewolves from antiquity to seventeenth-century

Latvian peasants would obviously be absurd—even if such continuity may have existed in Lentilius’s mind. But sometimes even a piece of evidence written in Latin can lead us closer to the most unexpected features of Old Thiess’s trial. In his *Encomion urbis Rigae Livoniae emporii celeberrimi* (1615), Heinrich von Ulenbrock commented on the beliefs about werewolves shared by Latvian peasants:

Oh vanity of vanities! Oh deplorable illusion! Have the peasants of Livonia been once maddened by such ungodliness, I wonder, that they succumb to the same insanity today, in the light of the Gospel, and that they even dare to invoke a most precious title for their diabolical cabal [sect]? For they consider themselves to be in friendship and familiarity with God, and they call themselves the friends of God.<sup>8</sup>

The convergence between von Ulenbrock’s remark and Thiess’s claim that werewolves like himself were “hounds of God” seems to open up, it has been argued, “two distinct windows onto the world of a peasant counterculture.”<sup>9</sup> Such convergence was perhaps not limited to Livonia.

## II

In the early seventeenth century, an intensive witch-hunt took place in the Pays de Labourd, the French part of the Basque region. A few years later, Pierre de Lancre, who had been actively involved in those trials as a judge (he was royal counselor at the Parliament of Bordeaux) published a treatise based on his own

experience: *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et demons, où il est amplement traicté des sorciers et de la sorcellerie* (Paris, 1613). De Lancre spoke at length of werewolves and their diabolical transformations; but he also mentioned that, strangely enough, some werewolves claimed to be the enemies of witches. As an example of this bizarre claim, he referred to a case described by the Italian bishop Simone Maioli in his massive work *Dies caniculares*.<sup>10</sup> The event had taken place in Riga—or possibly Reggio, guessed de Lancre, who had spent some years in Italy and was fluent in Italian.<sup>11</sup> But de Lancre was wrong. Maioli was tacitly quoting a page from Kaspar Peucer's *Commentarius de prae-cipuis generibus divinationum*, a “true narrative” about a Livonian peasant who, like the mythical Lycaon, was able to turn himself into a wolf. The peasant had proudly said he was pursuing a witch (*venefica*, literally, “poisoner”) who was flying around in the shape of a fire-colored butterfly: “Werewolves boast that they are compelled to keep away witches,” commented Peucer, literally echoed by Maioli.<sup>12</sup>

This remark helped de Lancre to make sense of a case he described in detail in his *Tableau*. Jean Grenier, a thirteen-year-old boy, had been put on trial in 1603 as a werewolf and condemned to spend his life in a Franciscan convent. Due to his young age, he had not been submitted to torture. In 1610, de Lancre, clearly intrigued, decided to have a long conversation with the young man (who died the year after). After a vivid description of Jean Grenier's physical appearance, de Lancre remarked: “Il n'était aucunement hébété” (He was not in the least an idiot).<sup>13</sup> “He naively

confessed to me,” de Lancre went on, “that he had been a werewolf, and therefore he had run across the country by order of the Lord of the Forest. He said this freely to everybody, without denying anything, believing that he was exempt from any reproach or guilt, since he wasn’t a werewolf anymore.”<sup>14</sup>

“In the past,” de Lancre explained, “it has been said that this Lord of the Forest hunts down witches and wizards across woods and fields, and takes them out of their coffins when they die, enjoying tormenting and pursuing them even after their death.”<sup>15</sup>

The young werewolf, commented de Lancre, “did not invent the name of Lord of the Forest, as he labels the evil spirit.”<sup>16</sup> The distance between the actors’ and the observers’ categories is explicit. De Lancre had no doubts: the Lord of the Forest, the “big, black man” who had given Jean Grenier his wolf’s skin, was a demon. But de Lancre also duly recorded the beliefs related to the Lord of the Forest, associating him with the Livonian werewolves as enemies of witches.