A touch of shape-shifting in popular storytelling need not be associated with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. It is a universal element in folklore from everywhere and a common plot feature in comic books, fantasy, and science fiction. It is also found in fable-like modern fiction such as Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. There are three factors that influence the impact and meaning of metamorphosis in fiction: our expectations based on the genre of the work; the function of transformation in the narrative; and the way these irregular events are explained.

Essentially metaphoric in many folktales, metamorphoses seem tied up with life lessons. This is usually the case in the countless folktales about marriage and transformation from all over the world. Gawain’s knowledge of the answer to the riddle of what women most want helps him to transform the Loathly Lady from a hag to a maiden, and offers the same humorous clue to successful marriage given by the Wife of Bath. Some transformations seem to warn of careless wishes, such as the Brothers Grimm fairy tale “Hans My Hedgehog,” in which a man wishes for a child so vehemently that he thinks a hedgehog will do – and gets a hedgehog as a son. In Celtic myth, Math and Gwydion morph flowers into a beautiful woman (Blodeuwedd); but, when she is unfaithful to her husband, Lleu, he is transformed into an eagle and she into an owl. In these cases, transformations serve a didactic purpose, but the larger story has a religious or spiritual meaning. It is interesting to reflect that the transformed adulterers and political zealots in Dante’s *Inferno* have their origin in pagan folklore.

Sometimes the transformed person, as a remarkable character, is the main object of interest in the story. This is the case in most contemporary “superhero” stories, and, in many cases, an ordinary human – such
as the comic book characters Spider Man, the Fantastic Four, or the Incredible Hulk – is transformed by a freak accident involving radioactivity. Once transformed, these characters remain stable, becoming heroic warriors by virtue of their abilities. However, they face conflicts between their essential humanity, commonplace needs, and their superhuman qualities. The X-Men are explicitly presented as examples of human evolution besieged by ordinary people who perceive them as a threat. In myth such characters would probably be gods or spirits, but still representative of human potential. One difference is that Venus in *The Aeneid* often helps the plot along by appearing to a character in a changed form; Athena in *The Odyssey* does the same thing. In the superhero story, the permanently changed person or continually changing shape-shifter is the story.

When the reader of the story accepts at the outset that the events and setting of the story are not mimetic of “real life,” he or she is likely to understand the story as, firstly, entertaining (since supernormal characters are inherently interesting) and, secondly, as indirectly communicating meanings about life. In many cases, these stories, like the metamorphic satire discussed in the previous chapter, expose intersections between humanity and animality. We might describe these intersections in the folkloric tradition as attempts to differentiate between the bestial and human, while acknowledging connections between them. In the contemporary context, they suggest that the roots of human evolution lie in its connections to nature.

However, such a formula is not likely to hold in every case. Ancient and ever-popular vampire and werewolf stories exploit a duality between the normal or acculturated human and an ancient hybrid lineage that mingles human qualities with those of feral creatures (wolves, rats, bats). These stories are classical in origin: mentioned in Herodotus; suggested by the Lycaon episode in Ovid (in which a cannibalistic king of Arcadia is turned into a wolf by Zeus); told by Agrippus via Pliny concerning a man turned into a wolf as punishment for cannibalism; and told by a guest at Petronius’ famous dinner in *Satyricon*. Encouraged to speak up, Niceros tells of his misadventure with a friend whose help he solicits in the pursuit of a maiden:

“The moon was shining so brightly it was light as midday. We passed between the tombs; when your man began to piss against the monuments, I walked on, singing away and counting the gravestones. But when I looked back at my companion, he stripped off and laid all his clothes by the side of the road. My heart was in my mouth,