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Lycaon and classical *versipelles* in MTV's *Teen Wolf*

Abstract The modern conception of the werewolf is heavily influenced by Gothic reinterpretations of medieval European stories. This kind of werewolf is the one that has appeared on screen and written fiction for decades, but MTV's *Teen Wolf,* a re-boot of the 1980s film which aired between 2011–17, is different. In this young adult supernatural drama, werewolves descend directly from Lycaon, and a substantial proportion of the show's werewolf lore derives from Graeco-Roman stories about wolf-shifters and *versipelles.* This paper wants to explore the extent of the use in the show of the myth of Lycaon in particular, of Classical *versipelles* in general, the significance of these two references for the narrative, and the degree of innovation in modern supernatural fiction of this adaptation of Greek and Roman stories.

Keywords Teen Wolf, Werewolves, Versipelles, Lycaon, Television series, World-building

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2011 and 2017, MTV produced *Teen Wolf,* a supernatural teen drama loosely based on the 1980s film of the same name starring Michael J Fox.[1] The show follows the story of Scott McCall (played by Tyler Posey) and how his life changes overnight when he is assaulted and bitten by a werewolf. Throughout six seasons and 100 episodes, three comic books, a novel titled *On Fire,* one web mini series called *Teen Wolf: Search for a Cure,* and a new film that aired in January 2023, we see Scott trying to finish high school and live a normal teenage life despite the constant threats against him and his fiends. *Teen Wolf* is one of the first in a line of recent adaptations of teenage fiction with a supernatural element, like *Shadowhunters* (Netflix, 2016–19) based on *The Mortal Instruments* novels, or *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2018–20) and *Riverdale* (CW, 2017–), both based on the Archie comics. Additionally, *Teen Wolf* it also is part of the larger body of television and written fiction aimed at teenagers and younger adults (usually shortened to YA) that includes werewolves as characters.[2]

The setting and themes of *Teen Wolf* are more mature and grittier than the original film,[3] and because of the format, and in order to create an adequate mythos for the story, creator and showrunner Jeff Davis (b. 1975) had a chance to develop an extensive intra-universe lore in which the Classical past plays a subtle and unexpected role.[4] References in the dialogues to Orestes are accompanied by the appearance of Cerberus, semi-divine twins with star-crossed fates, references to the ouroboros – the ancient symbol of the snake eating its tail – and the deciphering of Latin texts. Most surprising of all, however, is the key role played by Lycaon in *Teen Wolf*'s lore.

The Classical world was rich in werewolf-related folklore (creatures known in Latin as *versipelles*),[5] but most of those stories have not been preserved in

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1 Fradegradi (2016); Neff-Strickland (2022).

2 Crossen (2019) 175–221.

3 Álvarez Trigo (2021); Brembilla and Checcaglini (2020); Drumm (2018); McMahon-Coleman (2014). Cf. Petridis (2021).

4 Martínez Jiménez (in press).

5 Less occasionally as *lycanthropi* or *lukanthropoi,* since this was a medical term, cf. below, n. 14.

the literary record. However, one of the stories about *versipelles* that has been transmitted is that of Lycaon of Arcadia, whose tale has gained prominence in popular and scholarly media.[6] Lycaon's story was repeated, retold, and reiterated many times between the 6th century BCE and the 9th century CE in Greek and Latin literature. It is from these (especially through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Pausanias' *Description of Greece*) that a modern perception of the Classical werewolf has developed.[7] Classically-inspired shape-shifter stories in modern fiction are rare; *Teen Wolf* is an unusual example of classical reception in modern television.

In this paper, I want to address the importance of Lycaon's myth, especially in its Ovidian version, in the world-building of *Teen Wolf*. I will first give an overview of Greek and Roman attitudes to werewolves and Lycaon's story before briefly introducing the role of the werewolf in modern supernatural and Young Adult fiction. Then I will analyse the way in which *Teen Wolf* incorporates these stories into its narrative before concluding that, much like in Classical tales, *Teen Wolf* is a story about werewolves that, through a Classical lens, prompts the viewers to rethink their own attitudes towards humanity, monstrosity, doing good and making the right choices.

LYCAON AND THE CLASSICAL *VERSIPELLIS*

Dogs (κύων/*canis*) and wolves (λύκος/*lupus*) are essential creatures in the narratives and stories of ancient cultures, since they inspire both fear and admiration; the Graeco-Roman world is no exception.[8] From Cerberus, the three-headed guardian of the Underworld, to the she-wolf that nursed Romulus and Remus, and to Argos, Odysseus' faithful dog, canids of all types appear in Greek and Latin stories. The stories in which we encounter wolf (or dog) shape-shifters are also numerous.[9]

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6 Stypczynski (2013) 19–21.

7 Ogden (2021).

8 Anderson (2012).

9 Gordon (2015); Ogden (2021).

Greek and Roman werewolf folklore

Greek and Roman stories of humans transforming into wolves fit only with difficulty in the established categories of 'werewolf' stories that appear in the literature about the supernatural,[10] because there are a range of examples where humans transform into wolves at will, forcefully, regularly, permanently, and temporarily. Some of the human-wolf transformation stories can be excluded from werewolf lore in the strictest sense, as they involve witches, sorcerers and herb collectors transforming themselves or other people. These include mentions of Circe turning men into wolves,[11] shamans deep in Scythia who could turn their people into wolves,[12] and witches and herb-collectors like Meroe who could change their shape whenever they wanted.[13] Similarly, 'lycanthropy' was considered to be a medical condition in later medical treatises; a melancholy of sorts that caused those who suffered it to walk around the streets at night with dogs (and wolves), bumping their shins against tombstones.[14]

However, at least nine stories of 'true' werewolves have come down to us in various forms, and they are a testimony to the rich werewolf folklore that once existed in the Classical world.[15] The most famous example in modern popular culture is the story-within-a-story about the soldier in the *Satyricon*.[16] In this story, during Trimalchio's dinner, Niceros tells a story about how he was travelling with a soldier who, during the night, took off his clothes by a monument in a graveyard, urinated around them, and turned into a wolf while his clothes turned to stone. The most widely-circulated story in Antiquity of werewolves, nevertheless, is that of Lycaon of Arcadia and the rites associated with the cult of Zeus Lykaios, which will be detailed below.

We cannot create a 'Classical werewolf archetype' that matches every story from these Classical stories about wolf shape-shifters. This is because were-

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10 Ogden (2021) 7, n. 27, citing de Blécourt (2015).

11 Hom. Od. 10.210.

12 Hdt. 4.105.2.

13 E.g.: Apul. Met. 2.22–5; Verg. Ecl. 8–9.

14 Metzger (2015).

15 Following a folklorist definition of what a werewolf is; an individual who has the potential to turn oneself into a wolf. Ogden (2021) 206–7.

16 Petron. 61–2.

wolves were part of folklore, and their sole purpose was to be the focus of a story. Because of this, they were never part of a larger, structured narrative (or an educated one, Lycaon being the main exception), so the werewolf existed in the way and form required by the story it appeared in.[17] We can, however, highlight a handful of main werewolf characteristics that seem common across these tales.

Classical werewolves are all able to make a full transformation from human to wolf and vice versa, without it being possible to tell which one is the 'original' form. We can infer from this that these werewolves kept their human sense of self even while in wolf form.[18] This preservation of the human consciousness is key, because werewolves in wolf form had to make conscious decisions in order to shift back. Discarding their human clothes and recovering them were essential steps in the transition human-wolf-human, and the same could be said about avoiding human contact or interaction with other humans.[19] Additionally, the way one became a werewolf was not through a bite or a scratch,[20] but rather by breaking bread with a stranger,[21] an idea perhaps designed to warn travellers, as a moral within werewolf stories. Lastly, to signify their supernatural essence, we find that a werewolf's eyes glow, sometimes with fire.[22]

The stories about Lycaon are intrinsically connected with a series of religious rituals that existed in Arcadia and that were focused around the cult of Zeus Lykaios, with offerings that included human sacrifices, and rites of passage.[23] These were already discussed in Platonic texts and compiled by Herodotus,[24] but

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17 Ogden (2021) 8–9, 210.

18 Ogden (2021) 7.

19 Ogden (2021) 82–4.

20 A trope that only appears in the mid-twentieth century, Priest (2017) 22.

21 Petron. 62. Niceros swears he would not share food with the man after finding out he was a werewolf: *nec postea cum illo panem gustare potui, non si me occidisses.* Cf. Ogden (2021) 99.

22 Ov. Met. 1.238: *oculi lucent,* Ov. Am. 1.8.15–6, Philostr. VA 4.10. Cf. the children of Helios and their radiant eyes as described by Apollonius (Apoll. Rhod. Argon. 4.726–9: πᾶσα γὰρ Ἠελίου γενεὴ ἀρίδηλος ἰδέσθαι ἦεν, ἐπεὶ βλεφάρων ἀποτηλόθι μαρμαρυγῇσιν οἷόν τε χρυσέην ἀντώπιον ἵεσαν αἴγλην).

23 Ogden (2021) 178–86.

24 Ps. Plato Min. 315b–c and Hdt. 7.197, as cited by Ogden (2021).

Pliny discusses these rituals and links them to werewolf folklore (*fabulae*), albeit if simply to underline the gullibility of the Greeks. Pliny and, later, Pausanias, mention how during the ceremonies linked to the temple of Zeus Lykaios, local young men went through a rite of passage in which, after de-robing and making the recommended offerings, they crossed a pond in the further reaches of the temple's territory from which they emerged, in the forests at the other side (away from sight) as wolves, and they lived in that wolf form for years (up to nine), only to return back home as men if they abstained from having contacts with other humans, eating human flesh, or staring into a man's eyes.[25]

These are not many defining characteristics, but are already very different from medieval perceptions of the werewolf – traits that are later adapted in nineteenth-century Gothic literature and later transmitted to modern fiction.[26] Classical werewolves do not 'shift' into wolf-human hybrids, nor do they become senseless monsters; and if they go on killing sprees, it is usually sheep that are the target, not directly other humans.[27] In some aspects they are similar to their Gothic counterparts, since werewolves follow deeply-rooted Indo-European tales of the dangers that lie beyond the known space, especially in the forest where wolves dwell,[28] and it is possible that the moon had an effect on their transformation,[29] but the werewolves of Classical folklore fail to match the modern expectations of werewolves in fiction.

The Ovidian Lycaon

The story of Lycaon appears repeatedly in Greek and Latin texts between the 6th century BCE (Hesiodic compilations) and the 9th century CE (Vatican Mythographer). The story, boiled down to its basics, tells us that Jupiter/Zeus punished Lycaon and his progeny for their hybris after offering the god human flesh as a sacrifice or as a meal. In all cases, Lycaon's crime is the epitome of hu-

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25 Plin. Nat. 8.34; Paus. 8.2.6. Cf. Gordon (2015) 47.

26 Crossen (2019).

27 Gordon (2015).

28 Bernhardt-House (2006) 160.

29 Ogden (2021) 191–2.

mankind's wickedness that ends up prompting Deucalion's deluge, which was to bring the Bronze Age to an end. With this came the end of conviviality between humans and gods, and mortals were forced to re-think their relationship with the animals.[30] The human flesh that is offered is usually that of a young boy, sometimes a hostage, sometimes a son of Lycaon's, sometimes a random person. Lycaon's punishment is to be transformed into a wolf (hence the connection between his name and the Greek word for wolf, *lykos*), but this is not always specified.[31]

While there are many versions of the story, it is Ovid's version that is the most relevant for our current discussion, because it is the most complete and the one that had the greatest impact on later perceptions of the Classical werewolf – including *Teen Wolf*.[32]

Ovid's version specifies that Lycaon tried to determine Jupiter's true divinity by testing him with human flesh and the god, upon realising the ruse, unleashed his thunderbolts, which turned Lycaon and his children into wolves:

> {226} And not content with that, [Lycaon] took a hostage who had been sent by the Molossian race, cut his throat, and some parts of him still warm with life, he boiled, and others he roasted over the fire.{230} But no sooner had he placed these before me on the table than I [Jupiter], with my avenging bolt, brought the house down upon its household gods, gods worthy of such a master (*in domino dignos everti tecta penates*). The king himself flies in terror (*territus ipse fugit*) and, gaining the silent fields, howls aloud, attempting in vain to speak (*exululat frustraque loqui conatur*). His mouth of itself gathers foam, and with his accustomed greed for blood (*solitaeque cupidine caedis*) he turns against the sheep, delighting still in slaughter. {236} His garments change to shaggy hair (*villos abeunt vestes*), his arms to legs. He turns into a wolf (*fit lupus*), and yet retains some traces of his former shape. There is the same grey hair, the same fierce face, the same gleaming eyes (*oculi lucent*), the same picture of beastly savagery (*feritatis imago*).[33]

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30 Ogden (2021) 167–74.

31 Ps. Apoll. 3.96–9. Cf. Hyg. Fab. 176.

32 Gordon (2015) 35–40; Martínez Jiménez (in press).

33 Overall, Ovid. Met. 1.219–39, transl. Miller (1916).

A very similar story is preserved in Pausanias and later compilers, including Augustine and Isidore.[34] Whereas Lycaon's story is a cautionary tale and an explanation for the almost-complete lack of human sacrifices in Graeco-Roman religion,[35] it also explains the origins of werewolves. Neither the Ovidian narration, nor any of the other versions of the story, explain how (or if) Lycaon turned back into a human, but the story, set in the distant past, gives a mythical explanation for the existence in remote, rural, liminal areas, of *versipelles* (werewolves). Pliny might consider these stories *fabulae,* but these lupine shape-shifters were part of the understanding of the natural versus the supernatural world. And this is the key aspect that is taken up in *Teen Wolf* that sets this series apart from depictions of other werewolves in modern fiction.

WEREWOLVES IN CURRENT FICTION

The presence of werewolves in literature continued long after Antiquity, with many new European and Christian perspectives added, over centuries, to Greek and Latin folklore. These post-Antique additions formed the core of the archetypical werewolf adopted by Gothic literature, which, in turn, has determined the way current fiction depicts these lupine shape-shifters.[36] The werewolf's popularity may be derived from its deep roots in Indo-European folklore and the associations between wolves, tricksters, violence, and intelligence. However, the duality of the werewolf (human-beast), its transitional undefined status, and its belonging to the liminal margins of society, means that werewolves can be adapted to tell many stories. In fact, there is an abundance of werewolves in modern media. This is, in turn, reflected in the interest shown in modern media studies, to the point that many publications state that there is too much material to classify or to consider in depth.[37]

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34 Paus. 8.2.2–3. Cf. Aug. Civ. 18.17 and Isid. Hisp. Etym. 8.9.5.

35 Henrichs (2019).

36 Stypczynski (2013) 1–2; McKay and Miller (2017).

37 E.g., Frost (2003); Mann (2020); McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012); McKay and Miller (2017); Stypczynski (2013).

21st century werewolves

In the 21st century, the werewolf depicted in fiction has, to an extent, moved on from the idea of the medieval/Gothic monster.[38] There are still elements essential to the werewolf (wolf-transformation, inherent violence, influenced by the moon, etc.), but the context in which the werewolf exists has changed. The werewolf is no longer a lone individual cursed or afflicted with lycanthropy whose purpose is to add horror to a story.[39] Werewolves in the 21st century are used to discuss the conflict between the rational and the feral, but with new understandings of what it is to be human and an individual: controlling trauma and choosing how to live (and fit) in a community.[40] Werewolves are also used to tackle, indirectly, issues of class and race and to make allegoric references to the struggles of minorities in modern communities.[41]

Werewolves now belong in packs, much like real wolves.[42] The transition from the lone werewolf to the communal one begins in the 1990s, but this was originally linked to werewolves coming together, with patterns of behaviour closer to those of criminal gangs and still very much connected with the hypermasculine werewolf of the late-twentieth century.[43] It is not until the 2000s and 2010s that the werewolf pack begins to be perceived as an integrated community, a group of individuals with shared interests with familiar bonds and support networks of solidarity.[44] In *True Blood* (2008–14), *The Mortal Instruments* (2007–14) and *The Vampire Diaries* franchise – especially in *The Originals* (2013–18) – werewolves have their own neighbourhoods or settlements, something that also happens with the werewolves in *Twilight* (2005–08), where they try to live their own shape-shifting lives in isolation, usually at the margins of society.[45] In

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38 Cf. Germanì (2012).

39 Stypczynski (2013) 11–3.

40 Germanì (2012).

41 Hudson (2013); McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012) 3–11.

42 de Blécourt (2014); McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012) 92–116.

43 Mann (2020) 166.

44 Cf. de Blécourt (2014) and Hudson (2013). For an introduction to community belonging, Delanty (2018). The werewolf pack as a threatening group of 'others' still exist (with added racist problematics) in *Twilight,* Bartosch and Caruso (2017)

45 Boyer (2017) 76–83.

these packs, hierarchies exist with an alpha at its apex, and while this structure can be imposed through violence and coercion, new alphas with new, kinder and less violent ways, usually emerge to lead their packs to a more civilised way of life.

Despite this, the characterisation of the werewolf as a violent thug when in human shape still exists as a trope, usually linked to lower socio-economic and marginalised environments, and partly derived from/caused by their secluded community life.[46] But werewolves who want to improve, break with their violent past, and move beyond it, are becoming more prominent, including Luke Garroway in *Shadowhunters* (the television adaptation of *The Mortal Instruments*) and Tyler Lockwood in *The Vampire Diaries.* This is also the case of Scott McCall in *Teen Wolf.* Much like in the Arcadian rite of passage, for many teenagers turned into werewolves in modern fiction (including and especially in *Teen Wolf*) a pack offers a chance to explore the transformative male experience with peers and to learn about himself in order to return to the community.

21st century werewolves are, moreover, no longer exclusively male. In the recent years there has been a growing revision of the female and the werewolf, giving increasingly larger roles and more agency to female werewolves, opening new avenues to address feminism and teenage angst.[47] Most of these female werewolves have emerged from YA fiction aimed at teenage girls, like *Dark Divine, Bitten* or *Wolves of Mercy Falls,* and it is in these contexts that we encounter supernatural female characters better-developed than those from screen adaptations.[48] In a similar fashion, werewolves have been used to explore themes of sexuality,[49] especially themes related to queerness and homoeroticism.[50] Even when the werewolf is not represented as queer (and, at points, even as homophobic) the popular reception seems to favour the queerness of werewolf characters, usually through Slash (male-male) fanfiction and fan art.[51]

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46 Amador (2020); Jowett (2017).

47 McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012) 41–67; Williams (2021).

48 Priest (2018). A trend that does not change in Netflix's recent (2022) show, *Wednesday,* a coming-of-age supernatural show based on the *Addams Family.*

49 Williams (2021).

50 Cf. Bernhardt-House (2006).

51 Elliott (2016).

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Most werewolf-related fiction in the twenty first century is, lastly, aimed at teenagers.[52] At least from the late 1950s (*I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, 1957), werewolves have been used to represent the intergenerational tension that exists between teenagers and adults,[53] and to represent the mutable and un-defined nature of teenagers themselves, but the popularity of the teenage werewolf has exploded in the last few years. Werewolves have become a perfect allegory for teenagers because of the intrinsic identity crisis, the physical changes, and the constant reborn-redefinition cycle.[54]

MTV's *Teen Wolf*

While there are no '*Teen Wolf* Studies' at present in the way that there were '*Buffy* Studies' or '*Xena* Studies',[55] there is a surprisingly large amount of literature on *Teen Wolf*.[56] This academic interest reflects a social interest, and the television series has attracted a lot of attention. In fact, while *Teen Wolf* includes the tropes and topics that have been highlighted for the 21st century werewolf, it is undeniable that the influence of the show has helped create this modern idea of the YA werewolf.

As briefly introduced above, *Teen Wolf* tells the story of Scott McCall, a teenager who lives in the small town of Beacon Hills in Northern California. One night he is assaulted by a creature that bites him, which transforms him into a werewolf. Throughout the six seasons, Scott spends most of his time trying to maintain normalcy in his usual life as a teenager (graduating, going to prom, dating a girl, playing lacrosse, maintain positive familial and social relationships,

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52 McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012) 15–40; Crossen (2019) 175.

53 Mann (2020) ch. 3.

54 Crossen (2019); Franck (2016) and (2020).

55 Lavery (2004); Potter (2018).

56 This exists mostly in gender and queer studies: Elliott (2016), Elliott and Fowler (2018), Evans and Pettet (2018), Johnson (2016), Kendal and Kendal (2015) and Rocha (2018). Naturally, within fandom studies *Teen Wolf* has also received much attention: Ballinger (2014), Brembilla (2016), Espinoza (2015), Neff-Strickland (2022), Willard (2017). There are also other works that focus on other elements of *Teen Wolf*'s narrative: Andrianova (2016), Diviny (2016), Martínez Jiménez (in press), Pettet and Ellison (2019), Stamati (2022), Thomas (2017).

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etc.) while dealing with all the supernatural circumstances he finds himself involved in. While he at first tries to search for a cure to his lycanthropy (the main objective of the short web-series, *Teen Wolf: Search for a Cure*), Scott learns to accept his 'werewolfness' and (later on) his true alpha status because it allows him to save his friends (his pack) from the many dangers that are drawn to their small city. Throughout the show, these include a hunter-werewolf war, hired assassins, rival werewolves, and mad scientists among others. All of these are elements that, as mentioned, characterise the modern, 21st century werewolf.[57]

The show focuses a considerable amount on the social dynamics of Scott and his human and supernatural pack members and his allied werewolves, placing the werewolves as the primary characters and the focus of the viewers' sympathy.[58] *Teen Wolf* underlines, through Scott's actions, the importance of making the right decision even when good intentions could prompt an easier (but wrong) route, and that compassion (and neither revenge nor violence) is the correct social action, with a core message that werewolves are not monsters.[59] In the words of Lydia Martin (played by Holland Roden), a member of Scott's pack, 'not all monsters do monstrous things.'[60]

Jeff Davis and his writing team created an extensive lore for *Teen Wolf,* one that expanded beyond werewolves to include supernatural creatures from various cultures: 'Viking' berserkers, 'Celtic' banshees and druids, Mesoamerican were-jaguars, Japanese kitsunes, and Native American wendigos and skin-walkers.[61] The mixture of various 'pagan' mythologies with Judeo-Christian figures appears very commonly in modern YA fiction, with *Supernatural* and *The Mortal Instruments* as the most typical examples of this use of demons and angels alongside magical and Gothic creatures. In general, it is very rare in these stories

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57 Evans and Pettet (2018); Fradegradi (2016); Thomas (2017).

58 Elliott (2016).

59 Diviny (2016); Thomas (2017).

60 'Monstrous' (season 4, episode 10) 39:38–39:42. Cf. what Scott himself says earlier that season to Liam Dunbar (Dylan Sprayberry), a younger teenager who was forced to turn into a werewolf: 'You're not a monster; you're a werewolf, like me.' in *The Benefactor* (season 4, episode 4) 39:56–40:15. Cf. Thomas (2017).

61 In general, Stamati (2022). The use of Native American myths and folklore has been highlighted as insensitive and even problematic: Johnson (2022).

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to adapt only one mythological tradition.[62] Moreover, Classical myths, leaving aside *Percy Jackson* and shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys,*[63] are hardly as prominent as they are in *Teen Wolf.*[64]

In *Teen Wolf* we encounter creatures taken directly from Classical myths, including a hellhound shapeshifter who identifies himself as Cerberus[65] and The Mute, an *astomus* without a mouth.[66] We have references to myths mentioned in the dialogues, like Orestes and the furies,[67] Artemis and Actaeon,[68] and Hercules and the hydra.[69] Most important for this discussion, however, is the importance these references have in the story. More than once, Scott and his pack have to translate texts in Latin in order to defeat their opponents,[70] but one of the things they learn is that Greek myths hold truth, that Classical stories form part of the arcane body of knowledge that the teenagers lack (or do not understand) and that the older antagonists have access to – and can use this knowledge against them.[71] Jeff Davis has commented in an interview that he 'go[es] back to Greek myth quite a bit',[72] but where Classical myth plays a more determining role in *Teen Wolf* is its connection with the myths of Lycaon.

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62 Brown (2017).

63 Morey and Nelson (2015). Cf. Walde (2016).

64 Martínez Jiménez (in press).

65 'A credible threat' (season 5, episode 17).

66 'Muted' (season 4, episode 3). A second astomus is seen briefly in a cell in Eichen House.

67 'Fury' (season 2, episode 10) 27:44–28:16.

68 'A promise to the dead' (season 4, episode 11); more anon.

69 'Frayed' (season 3, episode 5) 10:17–10:40.

70 Above all, the Argent family's bestiary: 'Abomination' (season 2, episode 4). Later in the show ('Said the spider to the fly', season 6, episode 11, 11:22–12:00), an antagonist posing as the school's counsellor, discourages, as part of her plan, one of the werewolves in Scott's pack from taking up Latin.

71 Pettet and Ellison (2019) 48. This inherent danger is specifically mentioned in dialogue when referring to Lead Hunter Gerard Argent, who 'knows all the stories. All the folklore. Everything written, and everything passed down' ('The sword and the spirit', season 5, episode 14, 27:55–28:00). Gerard Argent would be the one to mentor Tamora Monroe, the antagonist in season 6 mentioned in the previous foot note.

72 Ferrante (2012).

Modern werewolves, old myths?

Teen Wolf's use of Classical myths, limited as it is, incorporates Greek and Latin werewolf folklore in a way that no other recent supernatural or horror fiction does. A brief survey shows that, in most cases, intradiegetic explanations for the origins of werewolves look to demonic or magical causes. In these cases, lycanthropy is almost universally depicted as a 'curse', an illness, or a punishment. In a few cases we find the origin of werewolves described as mutations, adaptations, or accidental evolutions of mankind.[73] In one recent case (*The Order,* Netflix, 2019–20) Lycaon is mentioned as the first werewolf,[74] but only in the *Percy Jackson* novels and in *Teen Wolf* are werewolves directly linked to Zeus' punishment of Lycaon (table 1).

CAUSE OF LYCANTHROPY	EXAMPLES
Demonic illness/curse	1. *Warhammer Fantasy* (1983–2015) 2. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the WB/UPN, 1997–2003) 3. *The Mortal Instruments* (2007–14) = *Shadowhunters* (Netflix, 2016–19) 4. *Being Human* (BBC, 2009–13)
Evolution/human mutation/ adaptation	5. *Twilight* (2005–08) 6. *True Blood* (HBO, 2008–14)
Magical illness/curse	7. *The Vampire Diaries* (1991–2012) = *The Vampire Diaries* Franchise (CW, 2009–) 8. *Harry Potter* (1997–2017) 9. *Wolves of Mercy Falls* (2009–14) 10. *Hemlock Grove* (Netflix, 2013–15) 11. *Bitten* (Syfy, 2014–16) 12. *The Order* (Netflix, 2019–20)
Created by Eve	13. *Supernatural* (CW, 2005–20).
Descendants of Lycaon	14. *Percy Jackson* (2005–09) 15. *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011–17, 22–)

Table 1

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73 For the dangerous racial connotations of this, see Boyer (2017).

74 'Spring outbreak, part two' (season 2, episode 8).
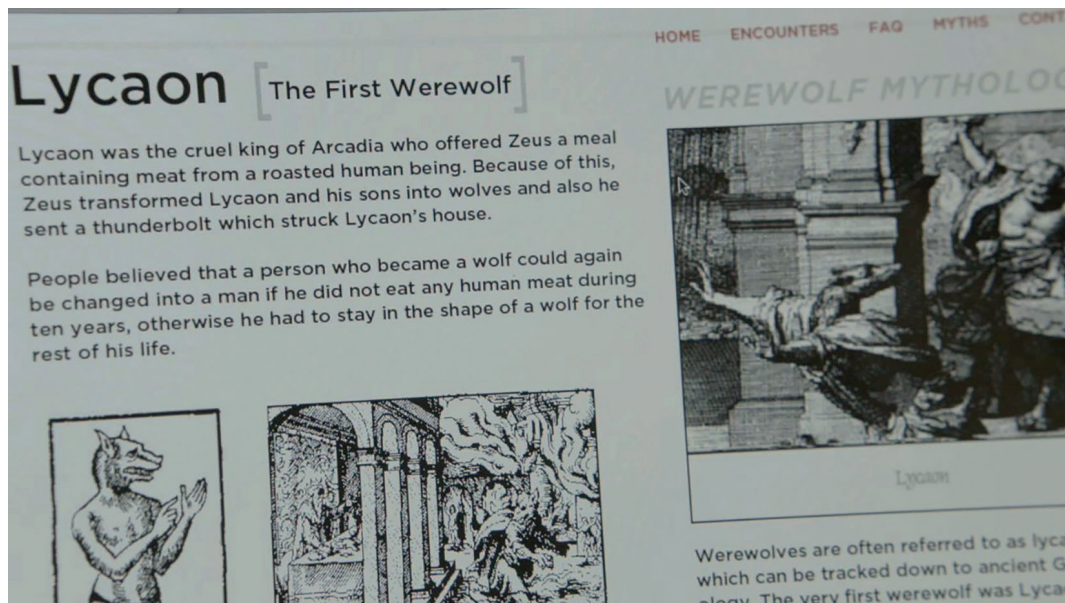
Figure 1 Prop-website consulted by Stiles Stilinski with information on Lycaon, where he is described as the 'first werewolf' and 'cruel king of Arcadia who offered Zeus a meal containing meat from a roasted human being [this is also mentioned by Ovid (Met. 1.229: *torruit igni*)]. Because of this, Zeus transformed Lycaon and his sons into wolves and also he sent a thunderbolt which struck Lycaon's house [cf. *everti tecta* (1.231)].' (*Teen Wolf,* 'Wolf moon' [season 1, episode 1], 26:47.)

In *Teen Wolf* this connection with Lycaon is mentioned three times. The first mention is in a prop in the pilot episode, when Stiles Stilinski (Dylan O'Brien) is doing research on werewolves and a webpage with Lycaon's name can be seen (figure 1).[75] The second connection appears in the first episode of *Teen Wolf: Search for a Cure,* when Dr Fenris (John Posey), a local academic who used to research the supernatural, mentions that '[t]he term lycanthrope is derived from the Greek myth of Lycaon, King of Arcadia'. This connection with the myth is, however, later revealed to be part of the body of unknown, supernatural knowledge that Scott and his pack lack. In 'Visionary',[76] Scott goes to visit former enemy and hunter leader Gerard Argent (Michael Hogan), seeking information

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75 'Wolf moon' (season 1, episode 1) 26:47.

76 Season 3, episode 8, 22:56–23:40.

on how to defeat current enemy Deucalion, a powerful werewolf who leads a pack of alphas.

> Gerard: "Do you know the myth of Lycaon?"
> Scott: "I know it's where we get the word lycanthropy... [NB: this is described in *Teen Wolf: Search for a Cure*]
> Gerard: "According to myth, some Greek citizens believed they owed their lives more to Prometheus than to the gods of Olympus, and some followers even took names to honor the Titans instead of the gods."
> Scott: "... Like Deucalion."
> Gerard: [nodding] "The son of Prometheus."
> Gerard: "Lycaon didn't just refuse to honor the gods – he challenged them. He invited Zeus to a banquet and then tried to serve him the flesh of a human being. Angered, Zeus blew the place apart with lightning bolts and then punished Lycaon and his sons by turning them into wolves."
> Gerard: "The part that's lesser known is how Lycaon sought out the Druids to help turn him back to human."
> Scott: "Why Druids?"
> Gerard: "The belief was that the ancient Druids knew how to shapeshift. They couldn't make Lycaon and his sons human again, but they did teach them how to shift back and forth. And so, the Druids became important advisors to the packs."

This exchange is presented in between flashbacks, during which Gerard's narration is contrasted with images of what happened. Gerard is, by these means, revealed to have been an unreliable narrator, lying about his relation to Deucalion and how he destroyed his vision of peaceful habitation among Californian werewolf packs. However, this does not mean that we should doubt Gerard's explanation for the origins of werewolves – after all, all the other information the hunter gives about the relationship between druids and packs corresponds to what we see on screen, and gods of other pantheons (Tezcatlipoca,[77] the Anukite,[78] Odin,[79] even Cerberus) are shown in the show to directly interfere with the

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77 'Monstrous' (season 4, episode 10), 'Parasomnia' (season 5, episode 2).

78 Cf. 'Pressure test' (season 6, episode 15).

79 Odin's presence is indirectly implied through his Wild Hunt, first hinted at in season 5, but central in season 6.

affairs of the supernatural. From this we can assume that what Gerard is explaining is the actual in-universe truth.

It is noticeable how Gerard's story follows quite closely the Ovidian version of the myth quoted above, including 'testing' Zeus' divinity, human sacrifice (figure 2a), destruction of Lycaon's palace with thunderbolts, and the ultimate wolf transformation (figure 2b). Hollywood creators are not necessarily Classical scholars, so it is more than likely that whatever research they made into Classical myths on werewolves pointed them to Ovid or an Ovid-derived adaptation first.

Moreover, the way werewolf hunter Kate Argent (Jill Wagner) taunts Scott with Actaeon's myth[80] is yet another example of a reference to the *Metamorphoses*.[81]

> Kate: "They ever teach you the myth of Artemis and Actaeon in school?"
> Kate: "No? I didn't think so."
> Kate: "Well, Artemis was a goddess, and Actaeon was a hunter that happened to see Artemis bathing naked one day. This did *not* make the goddess too happy. In fact, she was so angry, Artemis turned Actaeon into a deer and sent his own hounds into a frenzy. He was actually torn apart by his *own hunting dogs*."
> Scott: "What are you doing?"
> Kate: [chuckling] "I'm not gonna turn you into a *deer...*"
> Kate: "But you *are* about to become something unrecognizable to your friends. They won't know what they're fighting... or *killing*."

In this case, Kate turns Scott into a bone-clad berserker who cannot talk to his friends. This is something that Ovid underlines both for Actaeon (Met. 3.201: *me miserum! dicturus erat: vox nulla secuta est!*) but also for Lycaon (Met. 1.233: *exululat frustraque loqui conatur*). By removing this one aspect of humanity, Kate expects Scott's pack to mistake him for an enemy in the same place they had chased off berserkers earlier that season (cf. 3.228: *ille fugit per quae fuerat loca saepe secutus*).

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80 'A promise to the dead' (season 4, episode 11) 39:29–40:40; Spikeface (2022).

81 Ov. Met. 3.138–252.
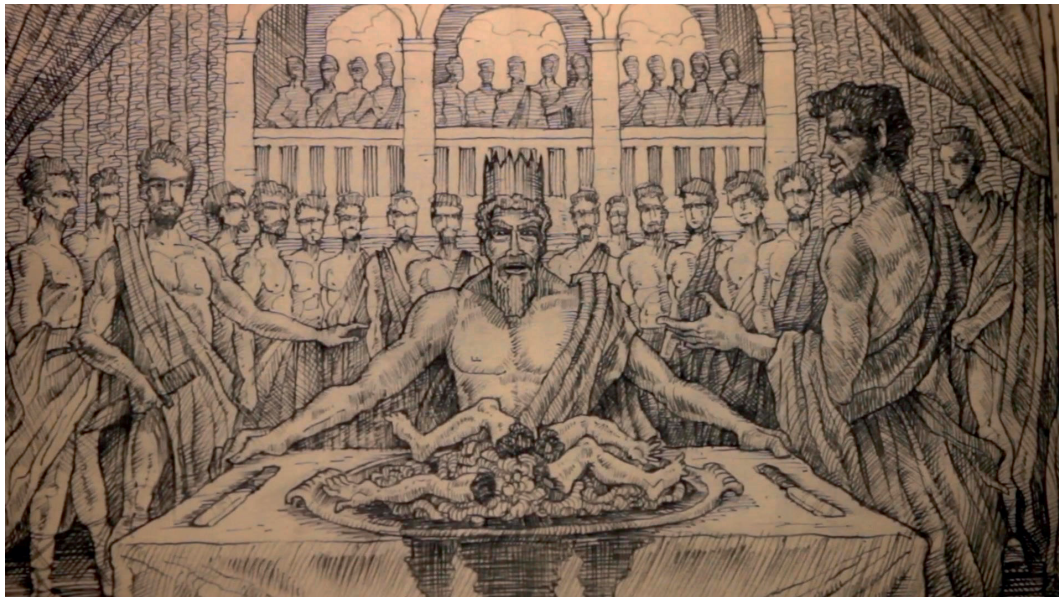
Figure 2 a) King Lycaon, with the trick feast for Zeus, as depicted in an image from Gerard Argent's bestiary; b) Zeus transforming Lycaon and his sons into wolves and destroying the palace with thunderbolts, as represented in the Argent bestiary (*Teen Wolf,* 'Visionary' [season 3, episode 8], 23:32–23:35).

Considering these two direct Ovidian inputs into *Teen Wolf*'s mythos,[82] it may be the case that more supernatural elements in the show are consciously taken from Classical myths and folklore.

TEEN WOLF: CLASSICAL WEREWOLVES?

The Ovidian version of Lycaon's myth, combined with the presence of an unexpected number of Classical references throughout the show, opens up the possibility that the concept design for the *Teen Wolf* werewolves was conceived with various aspects of the Classical *versipellis* in mind. Three characteristics highlighted above encapsulate these aspects: full-wolf transformations, glowing eyes, and the preservation of the human sense of self while in wolf form, plus a fourth one that could be a direct adaptation in the show of the Ovidian narrative: the thunderbolt. It should be noted, however, and as it happens with many other works of modern fiction, that this use of Classical elements is never done with an aim to recreate, deconstruct, or analyse the Greek or Roman story, but rather as a way to add legitimacy to the show's lore.[83]

1) *territus ipse:* the person in the wolf

The main defining element of Classical inspiration in *Teen Wolf*'s werewolves, I argue, is the preservation of the werewolf's sense of human self while in wolf form.[84] Contrary to proposals of the Ovidian werewolf as a bloodlust-blinded cannibal,[85] Ovid's Lycaon preserves some of his own personal qualities once he is turned into a wolf (1.237: *veteris servat vestigia formae*), one of which is bloody sadism, but only because he had it before; besides he was not at any point a can-

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82 In the interview mentioned above (Ferrante 2012), Davis makes a point of comparison, describing Stiles as Perseus, whose story also appears in Ovid (Ov. Met. 4.753–803), although this is a much less direct connection.

83 Lindner (2017).

84 Franck (2016) 196.

85 Stypczynski (2013) 19–21.

nibal in Ovid's story. Other werewolves in Greek and Latin folklore, as mentioned above, also remain aware of their human selves even in their wolf form.[86]

The werewolves of *Teen Wolf,* as other werewolves in modern fiction, must struggle to gain control over their base impulses, but they remain themselves throughout.[87] This is best exemplified with Scott's erratic behaviour during his first weeks as a werewolf in season 1, which included trying to save a man from being murdered by the (at that point) unknown alpha[88] and his inability to resist being kissed by Lydia despite knowing that his best friend Stiles was in love with her:[89]

> Stiles: [exasperatedly] "You kissed her, Scott! Okay? You kissed *Lydia.* That's, like, the *one girl* that I ev–"
> Stiles: "And, you know, the past three hours, I've been thinking, it's probably just the full moon, you know? He doesn't even know what he's doing, and tomorrow, he'll be totally back to normal. He probably won't even remember what a complete *dumbass* he's been – a son of a *bitch,* a freaking *unbelievable* piece of *crap* friend –"
> Scott: [interrupting] "She kissed me."
> Stiles: "…What?"
> Scott: "I didn't kiss her – she kissed me. She would have done a lot more, too. You should have seen the way she had her hands all over me. She would have done anything I wanted. *Anything*!"

In this scene in question, Stiles wants to justify Scott's actions, blaming them on the effect the full moon has on werewolves, but by that point the key to Stiles' anger is that both he and Scott understand that werewolves are conscious of what they do while they are in wolf form, even if they are more prone to act on instinct than on reason. This is better seen in other scenes in the show, especially in those where shape-shifters have changed to their full animal form (more on this below). The way in which *Teen Wolf*'s Lycaon and his sons sought the druids so they might help them learn how to shift back into humans further underlines this Classical understanding of shapeshifters as human minds in animal bodies.

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86 See above, n. 18.

87 Andrianova (2016).

88 'Pack mentality' (season 1, episode 3).

89 'Lunatic' (season 1, episode 8) 29:12–30:00.

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2) *oculi lucent:* visual tell-tales

Another characteristic that has Classical connotations is the glowing eyes (figure 3), something that all shapeshifters share in *Teen Wolf.* Each type of supernatural shapeshifter, including werewolves, has glowing eyes of a specific colour: red for alphas, yellow for betas who have not taken an innocent life, blue for betas who have, orange for hellhounds, etc. This echoes the Ovidian description of *oculi lucent,* and other descriptions of 'fiery eyes' in other shapeshifters in Greek and Latin folklore.[90]

Glowing eyes are so intimately connected to the essence of being a werewolf that, in many occasions in the series, we see werewolves revealing themselves to each other by making their eyes glow. Sometimes this is done on purpose, but sometimes this is an unconscious reaction of mutual recognition, as it happens when Scott first discovers that Isaac is the new werewolf in his lacrosse team[91] or when Scott recognises that the coyote living near an eight-year old car wreck is Malia Tate (Shelley Hennig), a missing child who happens to be a coyote shapeshifter trapped in her animal form.[92] A key feature in the 2023 *Teen Wolf* movie is how young werewolf Eli Hale (Vince Mattis) cannot fully transform and Scott needs to teach him by making their eyes glow in response to one another.

Pliny mentions in his description of the Arcadian rites that a *versipellis* who wanted to return to his human form had to stay away from humans (Plin. Nat. 8.34.81: *si homine se abstinuerit, reverti ad idem stagnum et, cum tranaverit, effigiem recipere*). The expectation there being to being able do so, one had to avoid eye contact, although Pausanias suggests that not eating human flesh would be another determining factor.[93] In the context of *Teen Wolf,* werewolves' supernatural glowing eyes need to be concealed from humans, lest the secret of the supernatural is uncovered,[94] however, it is the mutual recognition between

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90 Above, n. 22.

91 'Shape shifted' (season 2, episode 2) 16:42–16:50.

92 'Anchors' (season 3, episode 13) 40:13–40:20.

93 Paus. 8.2.6 and see above, n. 25.

94 A central theme in season 5, partly shown when Cerberus takes over his non-supernatural alter ego Jordan Parrish (Ryan Kelly) to burn the bodies of dead supernatural creatures. Cf. when druid-turned-veterinarian Alan Deaton (Seth Gilliam) tells the Sheriff to keep quiet about the body of a dead supernatural 'unless [he's] prepared to hold a press conference an-

Figure 3 Isaac Lahey (Daniel Sharman), a secondary character in the early seasons of the show. His eyes glow yellow even while not fully shifted, indicating he is a beta werewolf who has not taken an innocent's life. (*Teen Wolf,* 'Venomous' [season 2, episode 5], 36:01).

the supernatural beings that allows them to change back into their human form, restoring their humanity, a conscious inversion of Pliny's proposal.

3) *fit lupus:* full transformations

The glowing eyes (together with claws, fangs, and extra facial hair) characterise the 'wolf shift' of most *Teen Wolf* werewolves. This is a subtler transformation than the hybrid, bipedal, furry, anthropomorphic werewolves that appear in other television and film productions – the kind of creatures that seem closer to the Etruscan 'wolfman' (figure 4). However, in *Teen Wolf* some individuals achieve a 'full shift'. This is something that only a few characters, like Talia

nouncing the presence of supernatural creatures in Beacon Hills' in 'Condition terminal' (season 5, episode 4) 9:50–9:59.

Figure 4 Etruscan Black Figure Plate with the wolfman (centre) and Herakles pursuing the centaur Nessos in the presence of Deianira (sides). Found at Vulci, Osteria Necropolis, Tomb 177 (Hercle Society excavations), ca. 540–510 BCE, currently in the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. (Photograph by Dan Diffendale [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0]).

Hale, Derek Hale, Laura Hale, Theo Raeken (Cody Christian) and Malia Tate have achieved, although a clear explanation for this is never given. While this shift is not the default transformation for most werewolves, from Derek Hale's arc[95] we know that it is possible for any werewolf to become a full wolf with glowing eyes in the way of Classical werewolves like Lycaon or the soldier in the *Satyricon.*

In the few examples we see of fully-shifted werewolves changing back into their human shape, including Talia Hale,[96] Malia Tate,[97] and Theo Raeken,[98] they go back to the place where they left their clothes. Naturally, this is done in order not to show full nudity in a young adult-oriented television show, but it resembles the way werewolves must return to their human clothes in Pliny's account of the Arcadian rites and what the werewolf would have done in the *Satyricon.*

Lastly, and going back to an earlier point, these fully-shifted were-creatures retain their human sense of self throughout, a characteristic that defines Classical *versipelles.* Talia Hale entered a werewolf meeting in her wolf shape; Derek, her son, consciously attacked enemies in his wolf form during the season 4 finale; Malia, her niece, walked around a crime scene sniffling for clues that might help the pack solve it in her coyote form.[99]

4) *vindice flamma:* lightning and electricity

One of the key weaknesses werewolves have in *Teen Wolf* (a werewolf weakness which seems unique to this show) is electricity. A strong shock is capable of sending a werewolf into hospital, preventing them from using their supernatural healing abilities, as it happens to Isaac when he steps in a puddle in which a high-voltage cable had been thrown.[100] Isaac himself, together with Derek and

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95 Cf. 'Smoke and mirrors' (season 4, episode 12).

96 'Visionary' (season 3, episode 8).

97 'Memory lost' (season 6, episode 1).

98 'Parasomnia' (season 5, episode 2).

99 'Visionary' (season 3, episode 8), 'Monstrous' (season 4, episode 10), and 'Memory lost' (season 6, episode 1).

100 'Letharia vulpina' (season 3, episode 19).

Vernon Boyd (Sinqua Walls) tried to use that same tactic against the alpha pack earlier that season.[101] This weakness is something that werewolf hunters are aware of, and something that they use to their advantage, usually using tasers and cattle prods to stun werewolves and knock them out. In fact, hunters know that a controlled current is capable of keeping a werewolf human, as we see them doing to captured werewolves, including Peter and Derek Hale, Erica and Boyd, or Jackson and Ethan.[102] In the words of Chris Argent (JR Bourne):[103]

> You know, my family has done this for a long time – long enough to learn that a certain level of electric current can keep you from transforming. At another level, you can't heal. A few amps higher, and no heightened strength. That kind of scientific accuracy makes you wonder where the line between the natural and the supernatural really exists. It's when lines like that blur… you sometimes find yourself surprised by which side you end up on.

This vulnerability is not a usual characteristic in werewolf lore in other works of fiction, and it is not evidently connected with Classical ideas about *versipelles.* However, *Teen Wolf* is known for subverting certain tropes and concepts. In *Teen Wolf,* werewolves are not vulnerable to silver (as it is usual in most stories) per se, but to the French family of hunters that bear that name. Quoting Jennifer Blake (Haley Webb), a druid in season 3: 'Argent… the French word for silver. Interesting how truth becomes altered by legend… when it's not actually the metal silver that kills werewolves, but the family.'[104]

Considering this, perhaps we can re-read Jupiter's rage against Lycaon in *Teen Wolf*'s mythos under a different light. The thunderbolt was essential in the representations of Zeus Lykaios, and the lightning strike essential in many versions of the human-wolf transformation.[105] In Ovid's version, it is Jupiter's avenging *flamma* (which can be read as thunderbolt in this context) that destroys Lycaon's

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101 'Currents' (season 3, episode 7).

102 Respectively, in episodes 'More bad than good' (season 3, episode 14), 'Master plan' (season 2, episode 12), and 'Werewolves of London' (season 6, episode 17).

103 'Master plan' (season 2, episode 12) 12:32–13:11.

104 'Alpha pact' (season 3, episode 11) 17:22–17:48.

105 Ogden (2021) 175.

palace,[106] and in Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* it is a lightning strike (ἐκεραύνωσε) that blasts Lycaon and his sons.[107] As we have seen, this is also highlighted in *Teen Wolf*'s narration (fig. 2a), so it is possible that the choice of electricity as a werewolf vulnerability was conceived with Lycaon's story in mind.

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In modern fiction, the use of Classical elements serves to adapt those stories into a neo-myth, perhaps because fiction is meant to entertain, not to educate. *Xena: Warrior Princess, Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Percy Jackson* (or films like *Immortals, 300,* or *Troy*) are not direct narrations of Greek or Roman stories, but rather adaptations for modern audiences. Despite the overabundance of references to gods, heroes, and creatures, modern examples of 'swords and sandals' fiction form a new, timeless rendition without expecting modern viewers to have the insider/emic social and cultural understandings that an Ancient audience might have had.[108]

Then again, *The Hunger Games* dystopian trilogy (2008–10) offers a completely different approach to reworking of the Classical past in its world-building.[109] In the books (later films), the privileged elites (who use ancient names like Caesar, Cinna, or Plutarch) have appropriated the Roman past and its myth-building paraphernalia as part of their political discourse. Circus-like parade grounds are filled with quadrigae. Moreover, the main character, Katniss Everdeen, is chosen alongside other teenagers to go to the Capitol as a tribute to secure peace, much like Theseus was part of the youths demanded by Minos to appease the Minotaur in Crete.

In *Teen Wolf* the inclusion of Classical elements is more limited and less evident. The story of Lycaon adds flavour and depth, but it is not essential to the understanding or the development of the plot. That the way in which lycanthropy works in the *Teen Wolf* universe takes some key aspects of Greek and Latin folklore may pass unnoticed to most viewers. But still, the inclusion of adapted Classical myths in the dialogue and the visual elements adds in-universe *gravi-*

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106 Ov. Met. 1.230.

107 Apollod. 3.8.1.

108 Cf. Morey and Nelson (2015) and Augoustakis and Raucci (2019).

109 Makins (2014 and 2015).

tas and authenticity to the story-telling, while incorporating Graeco-Roman elements into twenty-first century werewolf lore,[110] helping to change the werewolf paradigm away from the Gothic monster of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSIONS

When describing the way modern fiction tends to imitate Classical epic patterns, Laurel Bowman said that '[w]here the Greeks had a rich oral tradition as a basis of their work, the Californian film-maker has a theoretical model.'[111] While it is true that many stories in film and television give main characters narrative arcs that follow the 'hero's journey', the comparison can also be applied to *Teen Wolf*'s world-building. On the one hand, the show is indubitably a result of the innovations in the depiction of the werewolf that characterize the 21st century version – which are in part a consequence of the 1985 *Teen Wolf* film. On the other hand, the show creators went out of their way to create a rich mythos as part of their world-building. And yet, by engaging with Classical folklore, the final result is surprisingly new and substantially different from other works of supernatural fiction.

Of course, druids (or witches) helping werewolves, werewolves who fully turn into wolves, or werewolves who keep their human consciousness and have glowing eyes, cannot be claimed to be original innovations in *Teen Wolf;* they are part of the 21st century werewolf lore, which has deliberately moved on from its 20th century predecessor. Even if these elements in particular look back to the *versipelles* of Ovid and Petronius, the distinction between elements that pertain to the 'Classical werewolf' and those from Medieval/Gothic werewolves is not clean-cut any more. However, the recurrent way in which other Greek and Roman elements appear in *Teen Wolf* may indicate a series of conscious choices. These werewolves exist because of Lycaon's curse, after all.

Curious as it might have been to see Scott McCall (or any other of his pack-mates) transform into wolves only after shedding their clothes and urinating around them, the werewolves of *Teen Wolf* are not Classical *verispelles.* But not even the werewolves that appear in *Percy Jackson* are Classical *versipelles.* An-

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110 Weiner (2017).

111 Bowman (2002).

cient myths are not repeated in modern fantasy because they do not belong in the same context. Their aesthetic appeal and themes make ancient werewolves attractive to script writers who want to add flavour to their shows, but these will always be adaptations.

And it is precisely from this perspective that the werewolves of *Teen Wolf* are just like Classical *versipelles;* like the hero of Temesa, the soldier who accompanied Niceros, or Lycaon himself. These werewolves are the centre of the tale, the heart to the story; they exist in a way that helps the creation of a narrative. In a way that mirrors Greek and Latin folklore, these werewolves exist to make us think about ourselves. If the werewolves are central to the story, and are not really the monsters of the show, perhaps us viewers do not have to be either.

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