

Shapeshifters of the East: How *Manga* and Japanese Animal Spirits Depart from the Conventions of East European Gothic

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A number of popular *Manga* and *Anime* have moved the figure of the shapeshifter away from its long accepted position in Western culture as the threat of the other and the fearsome monster in the forest. These narratives are chiefly the *shojo*/teenage girl staples of the high school romance, or the pastoral love story set in a past time.

The shape-shifters derive from spirits in Japanese folklore which have the ability to hold animal and human form, and are closely involved in everyday life, the seasons, the harvest and trade. This points to a close relationship between the human and spirit worlds and they are not always viewed as a negative force: the *Kitsune* or fox spirit is traditionally seen as a trickster but also symbolises marital fidelity and enduring love.

In *Fruits Basket*, Sohma family members transform into Chinese zodiac animals from contact with outsiders but the most powerful and least sympathetic character retains human form. In the *anime Wolf Children Yuki and Ami* a young girl struggles to bring up her half-wolf children alone in the city, and relocates to a rural area which brings its own dangers. Proximity to nature brings change which is not all positive. *Spice and Wolf* concerns Holo, a human/wolf spirit who ensures a good harvest, but the traditional festival involves chasing her aggressively from the fields. She and Lawrence develop a close friendship as they travel together but romance is secondary to the deals he makes and she is not always on his side. The divide between human and animal shifts constantly, creating subtle shades of good and bad, human and beast.

Beverley Dear graduated from UEA in 1986 with a degree in French and Russian. She recently completed an MA in Modern Literary Cultures at the University of Hertfordshire, including a dissertation on late Victorian psychic vampires. She is involved with the Reading the Gothic group which meets regularly at the University. The Group has have looked at a number of texts from the eighteenth century to the present day in a bid to define what makes Gothic writing, which led to a paper on Anime and the Gothic which Beverley gave at CRSF in 2014.