

# The werewolf, the tomato and hairy girls

Lawrence Money

The tomato, ingredient for the “rocking horse/sauce” that Aussies traditionally slop over their meat pies, was once a less celebrated vegetable. In the 16th century the tomato was known as the “wolf peach” and suspected of being used by witches to turn people into werewolves.

Perhaps the unfortunate 16th-century Frenchwoman Arline of Barioux tangled with a tomato sandwich for it was her misfortune in 1588 to be burnt at the stake, accused of what is known as “lycanthropy”, or werewolfism. There was no doubt of her guilt, if you are to believe French judge Henri Boguet.

He wrote that a huntsman, attacked by a wolf, hacked off a paw, which was later found to be wearing a gold ring. A villager near Aphon recognised the ring as his wife’s and subsequently found his wife concealing her arm in an apron. Her hand was missing. That unfortunate amputee, wrote Boguet, was Arline of Barioux.

Tomatoes, amputated paws – Melbourne artist and lecturer Jazmina Cininas has collected these and many more bizarre examples of female werewolves as part of an eight-year PhD on the subject at RMIT. What Dr Werewolf does not know about the subject is not worth knowing.

“There have been many more female werewolves than is generally acknowledged,” she says. “Else of Meersburg, for example, who was brought to trial in Lucerne in the 1400s for ‘riding on wolves and dogs’.

“Else confessed – probably under torture – to having caused hailstorms by throwing water from a stream and calling upon her demons, Beelzebub and Krutli.”

However, werewolfism has not always been a disadvantage. In the courts of 16th-century Europe three facially hairy sisters were celebrated as marvels of the age. Maddalena, Antonietta and Francesca Gonsalus had thick hair on their forehead and cheeks, a phenomenon explored in a



2009 biography entitled *The Marvellous Hairy Girls* (Yale University Press).

Says Cininas: “A court painting of Maddalena hangs in the Ambras castle in Innsbruck, Austria, alongside portraits of her equally hirsute brother and father. That is the reason werewolfism is sometimes called Ambras syndrome.”

In 1977 the *American Journal of Psychiatry* published the case of a 49-year-old woman who believed she was a wolf. Psychiatrists Harvey Rosenstock and Kenneth Vincent wrote that, when the woman looked in a mirror, she saw the head of a wolf instead of her own body – “a long-nosed wolf with teeth, groaning, snarling, with fangs and claws”.

The woman, married 20 years, would growl, scratch and gnaw at the bed after sex and claimed the devil invaded her body, turning her into an animal. Cininas said the case echoed the Victorian-era psychiatric theory that

women were mentally and morally inferior to men, giving reason to deny them the vote.

Cininas has used her extensive research to produce a linocut print series she dubs “The Girlie Werewolf Hall of Fame”. Her print of Else of Meersburg shows a wolf with one human hand and leg, typical of the sort of descriptions witnesses gave of werewolf sightings in Europe from the 15th to 18th century.

“One witness,” says Cininas, “claimed a wolf had human toes on his hind-paws and another, who died of injuries from a wolf attack, said the paws were hairless and looked like human hands.”

Another Cininas print, *Micah the Girlie Werewolf*, has toured Australia for three years in a collection of works by 45 artists collated by the Print Council of Australia. The prints will be auctioned on August 16 at Steps Gallery in Carlton.

**Jazmina Cininas has made an intensive study of werewolves.**  
Photo: Justin McManus