SHE-WOLF

Since antiquity, the she-wolf has served as the potent symbol of Rome. For more than two thousand years, the legendary animal that rescued Romulus and Remus has been the subject of historical and political accounts, literary treatments in poetry and prose, and visual representations in every medium. In She-Wolf: The Story of a Roman Icon, Cristina Mazzoni examines the enduring presence of the she-wolf as a cultural icon in Western history, art, and literature, from antiquity to contemporary times. Used as the image of Roman imperial power, papal authority, and the distance between the present and the past, for example, the she-wolf also served as an allegory for greed, good politics, excessive female sexuality, and, most recently, modern multicultural Rome. Mazzoni engagingly analyzes the various guises of the she-wolf over time in the first comprehensive study in any language on this subject.

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SHE-WOLF

THE STORY OF A ROMAN ICON

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For Paul, who tames a wolf every day.
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During the course of a year I spent in the Eternal City, the Roman she-wolf edged her way into my daily life, subtly yet insistently demanding this book be written. Living in Rome made the encounter inevitable: No one can go to Rome and not meet the she-wolf. There was a stone she-wolf suckling twins on the façade of my children’s elementary school and other she-wolves lactating on several public buildings that my family passed every day. A she-wolf, teeth and udders exposed, was stuccoed above each entrance to the neighborhood covered market where we did much of our shopping. She-wolves were engraved on the potholes and trash cans in our neighborhood and airbrushed on the sides of the delivery van to the little grocery store next door, and – more predictably – she-wolves graced the sides of monuments that we admired and the hallways of museums we visited.

The timing of our arrival in the summer of 2006 made the she-wolf’s presence all the more unavoidable: She had just been chosen – not surprisingly – as the mascot for Rome’s first film festival. In preparation for the weeklong October event, posters featuring the photograph of a live wolf dotted the city. Although she strikes the pose of the bronze statue in the Capitoline Museum – standing and looking intently at her viewer, ready to attack, heedless of the babies tugging at her distended udders – the focus is on the animal’s face, adorned by a glittering red carnival mask shaped like a butterfly. Through this accessory, the masked she-wolf playfully and competitively hints at Venice, home to Europe’s best carnival as well as the Italian capital of cinema. For several months, the butterfly-masked beast was everywhere, her mysterious countenance plastered all over Rome – a place that is and always has been hers.

At the same time, another she-wolf entered my family’s life. Weeks after our move to Rome, my oldest child was diagnosed with lupus – wolf...
Preface

in Latin. Because Paul’s is a skin lupus, I call it his *lupa* – she seems less malevolent than the systemic kind and her maternal instincts keep at bay her more ferocious mate. Lupus is named after the wolf, some say, because the patient’s face acquires a wolfish appearance from a characteristic reddish, swollen rash, called a “butterfly mask.” For months, the she-wolf on the poster grinned at me knowingly through her own butterfly mask, red and raised like my son’s rash. Others believe that the rash makes the patient look as if a wolf has bitten him. The illness is furtive like a wolf and can be as destructive and unpredictable. However, Rome’s she-wolf is a mother – I kept telling myself – neither an angry ruler nor a vindictive deity. She guards her cubs and nurses hard-hit boys into healthy growth. In my sweetest dreams, the red butterfly across my son’s face will fly away for good, settling instead on the muzzle of a movie-hungry, Roman she-wolf far more eager to don its scarlet wings.

No single volume of publishable size can aim to include every representation of the Roman she-wolf; neither can any single scholar reasonably aspire to such a task. This book provides numerous examples from a wide range of times and places, and it has been great fun to come across each successive she-wolf in these past few years. Underlying this outwardly overambitious project, however, is a haunting, humbling awareness of how elusive the she-wolf is and how much work there remains to be done. The she-wolf is a slippery beast, quick-moving and ever-changing; the last thing I want to do is cage her, even in words. Fleeting as they are, however, the glimpses of the beast described in this book could not have been captured had I been alone; many have accompanied and aided my metaphorical wolf hunt.

First, the librarians at the University of Vermont: For many years now, Barbara Lamonda and the interlibrary-loans staff tirelessly tracked down for me the often hard-to-find books and articles necessary for my research. The Department of Romance Languages and the College of Arts and Sciences Dean’s Office provided welcome financial support both at the beginning and at the end of this project. The advice of friends and colleagues was invaluable, particularly the feedback and encouragement of Rudy Bell, Joyce Boyer, Dino Cervigni, John Cirignano, Andrew Elfenbein, Gayle Nunley, Frank Oveis, Barbara Rodgers, Robert Rodgers, and especially Vincent Pelletier. At Cambridge University Press, I benefited from the comments of two generous, constructive readers and the support of a smart, efficient, and always-kind editor, Beatrice Rehl. At the final stages of the project, the editing work of Peggy Rote and her team helped improve the book’s legibility. The
she-wolf speaks many languages, and I am grateful for the work of translators and my language teachers over the years – above all, in this twentieth anniversary of my life-changing Latin class with him, to Reggie Foster. When translations are not indicated in the bibliography, they were not available and I provided my own.

The selection of the objects that appear in this book (i.e., she-wolves of metal and stone, pigment and ink) and the methods employed to understand them (strings of words are the snares I lay for the beasts) are determined by a background in which the personal and the professional cannot be disentangled from one another. The eclectic style of my criticism comes from training in comparative literature, with its tendency to flout disciplinary boundaries and sense of entitlement to poach from all; and from a feminist bent, with its focus on what happens to women in the precarious process of representation. Both backgrounds shape the readings of this book – that is, the traps I laid for the she-wolf but also the traps the beast surely has laid for me. My birth in Rome and frequent residencies in that city since then come first, and none of it would have been possible without the sustaining work and help of my mother, Stefania Mazzoni, as well as, in memoriam, my father Giuseppe Mazzoni and grandparents Ida and Lamberto Filippi. Later personal coincidences continued to bring me close to the Roman beast: I went to high school in Palestrina (the ancient Praeneste), where the mirror that first represented a she-wolf nursing human twins is believed to come from; I was raised in Valmontone, hometown of the accomplice of those thieves whose hands were nailed next to the bronze she-wolf in the fifteenth century; and my husband and children are part Hirpini – descendants of the Southern Italian people whose ancient name means “wolves.” Most recently, the experience of mothering a child with lupus promoted within me an intimate sensitivity to every mention of wolves. These, as well as considerations of time, space, and personal preference, are some of the reasons I chose the particular she-wolves discussed in the following pages. Many more beasts – visual and verbal, literal and metaphorical – reside in the virtual forest of my laptop’s hard drive. When in my quest for the she-wolf I become either cocky (“Hey, I’ve got her now, I finally know what the she-wolf is about!”) or discouraged (“Will the she-wolf ever stand still and let me grab at least her tail?”), I go browsing through these beasts. Their number, ironically, comforts me, for that pack of she-wolves makes it clear that we cannot know all of the she-wolf’s signs, much less the whole of her. In her immense variety, the she-wolf understands our uncertainties, because uncertainty makes her
who she is: As a critic, too, she tells me it is okay not to be sure. Finally, the she-wolf confirms our sense that there are always other meanings beyond the obvious ones, more interpretations to consider, and different values deserving of recognition. Few can listen to the she-wolf’s stories and disagree.