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# Werewolves as Translation: Bisclovret, Melion and Alphonse

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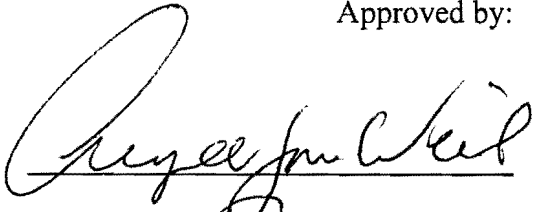
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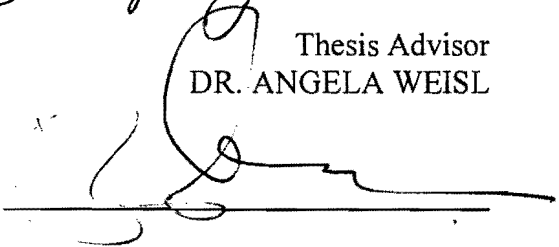
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Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

### WEREWOLVES AS TRANSLATION: BISCLAVRET, MELION, AND ALPHONSE

by

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Supervised by Dr. Angela Weisl

“Melion,” Marie de France’s “Bisclavret,” and *William of Palerne* offer fertile ground to discuss the ways in which the marginalization of the werewolf opens a liminal space in which to build the narrative around medieval cultural anxieties and enables possibilities for redefinitions of social centers. In their transformation and marginal existence, werewolves operate as translations of human society who express the fears associated with identity and sovereignty in societies who were continually attempting to define the boundaries of these constructs, and the narratives constructed around them serve as conduits through which cultural norms are reinstated. The three texts work to craft a system of values based in the sovereign societies at the tales’ centers, and as creatures existing beyond the boundaries of the allowable, and even the possible, the werewolves draw attention to the places where society fails because they maintain the values of these narratives more successfully than the people. The werewolves open a space in which the non-human becomes the exemplar upon which human society can read itself reflected. Thus, as *translatio*, Melion’s, Bisclavret’s, and Alphonse’s grotesque and marginalized bodies become sites of contestation and reinscription. In their transformations from human to monster, these werewolves display a deformation of the human social code, and, through their monstrous bodies and acts, they depict the limits of human culture.

## WEREWOLVES AS TRANSLATION: BISCLAVRET, MELION, AND ALPHONSE

Recent incorporation of werewolf tales into the canon of contemporary popular culture has re-centered public attention on this shape-shifting creature and, for the most part, solidified its depiction as a ravenous, bloodthirsty, wild beast. As Philip A. Bernhardt-House says in his discussion of werewolves, “lycanthropy appears like a step not only backward, but downward on the evolutionary scale, into the dirt and excrement of earthly existence, a world both visible and distant from ordinary human operations” (165). Echoing this idea Leslie Sconduto says, “Lurking at the edges of our imagination, in the darkened corners of our childish nightmares, and in the shadowy forests that border our towns and villages, the figure of the werewolf in popular culture still conjures up frightening images of violence and bestiality” (1). Yet, literary werewolves comprise a much wider and more nuanced phenomenon. The werewolf’s path can be traced back to antiquity, and its metamorphosis from savage, terrifying beast to sympathetic hero leaves a tangled web of metaphors about what it means to be human throughout history.<sup>1</sup> Bernhardt-House examines the werewolf’s position in society over the years and concludes that the werewolf’s “hybridity and transgression of species boundaries in a unified figure is, at the very least, unusual,” and the Middle Ages represent a significant and complex break from the werewolf tradition of antiquity – a tradition that was later reincorporated in the Renaissance when a growing fear of the occult realigned the figure of the werewolf with the magical and the dangerous (159).

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the various depictions of the literary werewolf from antiquity through the renaissance, see Leslie Sconduto’s *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity through the Renaissance*. For additional reading including medical and court documents, trial recordings, and critical discussions, see Charlotte F. Otten’s *A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Literature*.

The break from tradition during this time spurred several analyses of the medieval werewolf in Victorian times, and in 1894, Kirby Smith expanded the existing understanding of the werewolf transition, adding the category of “constitutional werewolves” (those whose power to change form is “ascribed to the individual”) to the already established “Teutonic theory of the werewolf” which employs some element of magic beyond the individual’s power as the means of transformation (10, 22). Shortly after Smith’s now seminal categorization, Kate Watkins Tibbals expands this dual categorization of the werewolf metamorphosis in her 1904 analysis of *William of Palerne*. She identified three types of human transformations into animals: the constitutional (werewolf by nature), the Teutonic (werewolf by apparel or talisman), and the involuntary (unwilling werewolf by outside force). Having outlined the types of werewolves as such, Tibbals explains that the first class of werewolves is responsible for forming the understanding of a werewolf as maintaining a dual nature while the second and third classes of werewolves are responsible for the idea that appearance makes a man, or animal (15).

Several years later in 1951, Robert Eisler built on Smith and Tibbal’s groundwork and provided an overview of man’s transformations into wolf-like creatures from an anthropological point of view. In doing so, he discusses lycanthropy as madness, the origins of pelt-wearing, and the traditional association of clothing with human reason. Two decades after Eisler, Beryl Rowland analyzes the popularity of animal fables which continued to grow from the early Middle Ages until Chaucer’s time (2). She investigates the animal world as a place beyond human knowledge and experience and follows the Augustinian line of questioning that focuses on the importance of what fantastic animals in literature mean, rather than on questions about the truth of their existence (1, 4). More recent investigations into the werewolf’s literary significance include Willem de Blécourt’s further expansion of the types of werewolf tropes in Flemish,

Dutch, and German legends listing such categories as the back rider, the lover, the oven, and the wound each with its own unique method of transformation and behavioral characteristics (26-30) as well as several studies advancing into the areas of film studies and popular young adult literature.

Clearly, as Smith says, no creature “has kept such a hold on the popular imagination as... the Werwolf [sic]” (2). This fascination with a single literary figure arises, perhaps, from the multiple depictions of werewolves over time, but it also suggests a deeply-rooted fascination with this creature of duality. The werewolf has not remained static, but has morphed and evolved through the centuries, discarding certain motifs at times, reincorporating them later. These radical changes began in the twelfth century which ushered in what Caroline Walker Bynum calls a cultural renaissance of the werewolf – a time when ancient lycanthropic legends were reawakened, rethought, and revised (94). Existing as a radical break from ancient precedent, it is this moment of history which supplies some of the most complex and problematic portrayals of the werewolf as a cultural signifier, and the variety of werewolf tales from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries begs the question: as a constantly-evolving collaboration of man and beast, what can this creature mean, and how can his footsteps across the human and animal realms expose truths about humanity?

The medieval church responded quite early to the figure of the werewolf with a clear disavowal that such a creature could exist. Early church leaders, including Tertullian, Augustine, and Aquinas, assert that while men can appear similar to animals, they cannot actually become them. Man, as they explain, is made in the image of God with a soul – Augustine’s *homo interior* – that is therefore inherently different from a beast’s makeup. God alone can change matter, and

anything or anyone else who claims to do so is merely enacting “demonic trickery” (Augustine 624). Sconduto explains:

Since the act of metamorphosis cannot occur without the help of the phantasm, and the phantasm, as Barkan<sup>2</sup> has pointed out, exists materially “only in the immaterial world of dreams or the imagination” (101), Augustine established a direct link between metamorphosis and the imagination, whether he meant to or not. Moreover, since Christian writers must deny the truth – the “facts” – of the pagan tales of metamorphosis, they will also be compelled to search for what these stories might mean or represent.

Metamorphosis thus becomes metaphor. (25)

However, it is also this very metaphorical metamorphosis of the werewolf figure that enables him<sup>3</sup> to exist simultaneously within and forever excluded from human society. In this sense, the werewolf’s ability to slide between human and animal realms becomes a kind of translation. “Translation,” from the past participle *translatus* (of the Latin *transfero*) meaning “to carry over or across; to transfer, transport, convey,” is process rooted in ideas of exchange. Transformation, therefore, is translation, and because he can transform corporeally from man to animal while still maintaining human faculties of rationality and social conduct, the werewolf himself becomes a translation of human society and the human experience. At its most basic, the werewolf is the embodiment of the very act of *translatio*. The indeterminacy of his nature and his slippage from man to metaphor becomes a threat to the coherent ideology of identity attempting to establish itself at this time.

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<sup>2</sup> See Leonard Barkan’s *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* for a more complete discussion of metamorphosis theory and the phantasm.

<sup>3</sup> Although few mentions of female werewolves exist in Old Norse Sagas, the medieval period is notably devoid of such creatures. Women more often serve as the catalyst for male transformation in both antiquity and the Middle Ages.



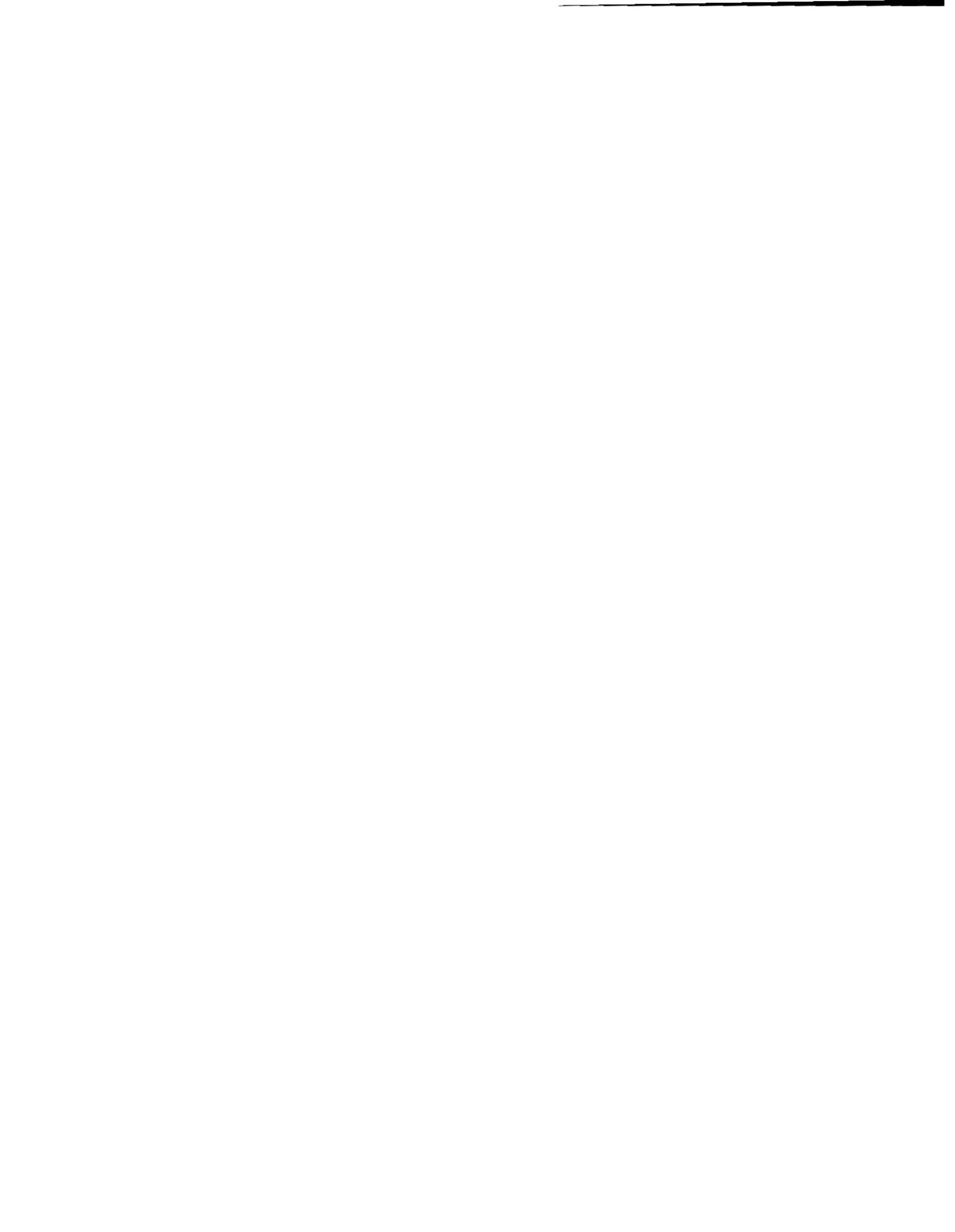
As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us, even the body itself is not as stable a signifier as we imagine it. He says, “removed from that system of judgment so intent on organizing its parts into a well-managed and diminutive unity, the body unravels” (*Medieval Identity Machines* xvii). Reviewing medieval fascination with “composite monsters,” Cohen explains, “such metamorphoses find inspiration in Ovid, the Roman poet of mutability who was obsessed by what might be called *possible bodies*, bodies whose seeming solidity melts, flows, resubstantiates into unexpected configurations that violate the sacred integrity of human form” (xviii). Cohen uses the story of King Alfred and his hemorrhoids to explain how narratives can explore the boundaries of the body. He explains how hemorrhoids open King Alfred's body to outside forces intent on destroying it, much like the Viking invasions narratively linked to the disease attempted to penetrate and destroy the borders of his kingdom (xix-xxi). Lycanthropy similarly opens the noble body to forces beyond its physically bounded self including animal wildness, geographic tensions, female power over men, trickery, and deception. In other words, the werewolf, able to translate humanity into the world of animals and animality into the world of men, simultaneously explodes the possibilities of the human while warning of the dangers of such an explosion. The narratives that surround them, then, must re-contain this explosion in order to signify cultural unity.

For these reasons, medieval werewolf tales offer fertile ground to discuss the ways in which the marginalization of the werewolf opens a liminal space in which to build the narrative around medieval cultural anxieties and enables possibilities for redefinitions of social centers. As Cohen states, “The monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions, envaluing others” (*Monster Theory* 13). Yet, in its ability to exist beyond these borders, the werewolf can also help define the limits of

human society. In reflecting back the inhumanity of the very culture from which it is excluded, the werewolf underscores the idea that human culture is not all that different from animal nature. In its transformation and marginal existence, the medieval werewolf enlightens a new vision of the Bakhtinian Fool, one that simultaneously draws attention to the boundaries of human society and cultural norms, breaks them down through transgressive acts, and also reestablishes, through those acts, the very cultural norms that originated its abjection and marginalization in the first place.

As a version of the Bakhtinian Fool, the werewolf operates as an outside agent who shows civilized society both its limits and its powers. It can effectively mirror human society because it exists beyond it. While discussing the role of fool characters in the novel, Bakhtin explains, "Their very appearance, everything they do and say, cannot be understood in a direct and unmediated way but must be grasped metaphorically" (159). As metaphor, the werewolf's body, then, becomes a site of contestation and reinscription, a place where society's standards can be played out, broken down, and recreated. Through the grotesque depiction of the werewolf, one can understand the process of cultural reflection and narrative construction, the cycle of exposure and normalization that drives the epic forward. Bakhtin explains, "Opposed to convention and functioning as a force for exposing it, we have the level-headed, cheery, and clever wit of the rogue... and the simpleminded incomprehension of the fool" (162).

Werewolves, seen as versions of these Bakhtinian Others, expose through their monstrosity, rather than wit or simplemindedness. Bakhtin explains, "Their entire function consists in externalizing things (true enough, it is not their own being they externalize, but a reflected, alien being – however, that is all they have). This creates that distinctive means for externalizing a human being, via parodic laughter" (160). In their transformations from human to monster,



however, werewolves more readily display a deformation of the human social code than a cheery response or simpleminded confusion, and, through their monstrous bodies and acts, they depict the limits of human culture. In other words, they enact the role of the fool or clown through a system based, not on parodic laughter, but on the divide between man and animal.

Marie de France's "Bisclavret" and the anonymous "Melion" from the twelfth century as well as the thirteenth-century *William of Palerne* develop similarly clear depictions of werewolves as hybrid creatures who express the limits of civilized society, sovereign power, and, to a large extent, the human realm. By existing on the outside of human civilization, the werewolves in each of these texts function as fool characters who are able to reflect social values back onto the civilization that has marginalized them. Existing as Agamben's *homo sacer*, werewolves link sovereign identity and the marginalized other and locate the basis of such sovereign power in the very heart of the beast (106). As Agamben says:

The realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested. (9)

The werewolf, according to Agamben, binds the natural and the political through its status as a "monstrous hybrid," figuring the double existence of the sovereign as "bare life" in the "forest" and as man in the "city" (Homo, 106–7 qtd. in Schiff 429). As a creature temporarily entering the animal world, the werewolf functions as bare life through its transformation. It embodies this state of exception – the threshold between inside and outside – because it is simultaneously both

human and animal while always being neither. The werewolf, then, can often enact the laws of human culture successfully because through its very presence, the law itself can exist. Through this link, it expresses the fears associated with identity and sovereignty in societies who were continually attempting to define the very boundaries of these constructs, and the narratives constructed around them serve as conduits through which cultural norms can be refigured and reinstated.

In each of these works, hybridization revolves around sovereign relationships, succession, and gender politics. Each tale, on its own, works to craft a system of values based in the society that produced it, and in doing so, points out the places where these standards collapse. This is the role of the werewolf. As a creature existing beyond the boundaries of the allowable, and even the possible, the werewolf draws attention to the places where society fails, to the moments when culture is deconstructed. Yet, ironically, as Angela Weisl has suggested, the werewolf often maintains the values of these narratives and, thereby, the societies that have created them more successfully than the people who comprise them (Weisl, "Friend or Foe"). He opens a liminal space in which the non-human Other becomes the exemplar upon which human society can then read itself reflected. Thus, the werewolf's grotesque and marginalized body becomes the site of cultural reinscription and, by extension, of narrative formation.

Marie de France's "Bisclavret" presents a situation in which a well-respected knight, left to the devices of a devious woman, is trapped in werewolf form for much of the tale. Marie begins in her own authorial voice with a warning about the savagery of werewolves. She says, "A werewolf is a savage beast; / while his fury is on him he eats men, / does much harm, / goes deep into the forest to live" (9-12). Yet, the tale disproves this hypothesis on nearly all grounds; Bisclavret, the titular werewolf, embodies nobility most successfully, even while in his werewolf

form. As Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante state in their analysis of “Bisclavret,” “ironically the closest the protagonist will come to [savage] behavior is biting off his disloyal wife’s nose, a gesture of justifiable revenge rather than of uncontrolled savagery” (101). Bisclavret is initially described as “a nobleman... marvelously praised” (15-16). He is “a fine, handsome knight / who behaved nobly. / He was close to his lord, / and loved by all his neighbors” (16-20). Yet, Bisclavret is already a werewolf while he garners such praise. While his lycanthropy is hidden, it appears to offer no hindrance to his performance as a vassal, knight, or husband, yet once his secret is revealed, Bisclavret faces problems. His wife immediately decides that “she never wanted to sleep with him again” (102), and through her resolution Bisclavret’s position within a society largely based on lineage and male succession is threatened. In his discussion of Marie’s use of irony, Emanuel J. Mickel points out that it is, in fact, Bisclavret’s very noble nature and his loyalty to his wife that ushers in the lai’s central conflict. Mickel says, “There is irony, of course, in the fact that she should reproach him for doubting her when, as it turns out, he would have been better off had he doubted her” (280). Shunned by his wife, he can no longer operate within a sexual economy and is banished to the woods by the very woman who not only harassed him for his secret but also beastly rejected him. Mickel says, “Because of the knight’s love for the woman and his faith in her, he reveals to her his secret and thus places his destiny in her hands. The woman now has the power to keep him beast (in a mediaeval sense) or man” (“Reconsideration” 51). The traditional gender roles have been reversed, and Bisclavret’s wife now wields the power of the phallus while Bisclavret takes on the subordinate, feminized role and is banished to the forest on the outskirts of courtly society.

Removed from the civilized world, Bisclavret lives as a werewolf in the depths of the forest. In this manner, he fulfills one of the stipulations from Marie’s introduction to werewolves

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werewolf form, and only regains physical human shape after a reinscription of the cultural norms he embodied at the tale's beginning. Melion, described as one of Arthur's most celebrated knights, vows never to love a woman who has ever loved or spoken of another man. Through this declaration, Melion separates himself from the dominant culture that values the continuation of patriarchal lines, and the women, in turn, shun him. Both Melion's declaration and the female response to it threaten the idea of lineage so integral to the formation and continuation of the patriarchal society of the time. Melion has failed in his knightly duties, and King Arthur, made uneasy by his best knight's depression, sends Melion to his country home to recover. Through this geographical change, Melion is removed from the brotherhood of knights and from society in general. He has broken through the boundaries of standard masculine behavior and becomes aligned with the outside, the margin, and the forest. Because he stepped beyond the norm of traditional gender relations that enable the continuation of family lines, Melion's chivalry fails. He can no longer live up to his position as a knight, or even a man. Yet, after having lived in the country for a year where "he asked for no other distraction than what he found in the forest," Melion encounters a beautiful maiden in the woods, falls in love, and marries her ("Melion").<sup>4</sup>

Rather than enabling him to maneuver back into human society, however, his relationship with the maiden plunges him further into the outskirts. While accompanying him on a hunt in the woods, the lady insists that Melion capture a stag they have seen. She says, "Melion, know that if I don't have some of that stag, I shall never eat" ("Melion"). In attempting to fulfill his lady's desire, Melion reveals that he possesses a magic ring that will enable him to transform into a "wolf, great and running" ("Melion"). He strips, transforms, and leaves his wife to guard his

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<sup>4</sup> The French text of "Melion" can be found in *Les Lais anonymes des XIIe et XIIIe siècles: Edition critique de quelques lais bretons* (ed. Mary O'Hara Tobin, 1976). For the purposes of this paper, I have taken quotations from the English translation available online via Dr. Helen Nicholson.



clothes. In doing so, he enables his lady to take complete control over his fate. As Melion explains, "I leave you with my life and my death; there will be no comfort for me if I am not touched with the other ring, for I will never be a man again" ("Melion"). Like Bisclavret, Melion leaves his destiny in his wife's hands and is betrayed by deceptive female power. His wife takes on the active role of directing the marriage union while Melion is forced to remain in a monstrous body under the power of his wife. As Saunders says, "The folklore tradition of the forest is rewritten to allow the metamorphosis of human into beast to become a means of exploring individual emotions and the imprisoning quality of human relationships" (54). Once Melion leaves his wife's sight, she steals away to Ireland, the land of her father, leaving Melion trapped in his wolf body.

By exciting his passions and sexual desires, the lady has brought Melion away from his knightly duties. He forsook women and society for the fantasy of perfect love and the wild space beyond social codes. It is only fitting, then, that his lady hail from Ireland, a land on the outskirts of the medieval empire. The inclusion of a reference to a specific – and marginalized – geographic location enables a literalization of the werewolf's metaphorical translation. Melion, who refused the women in society for the fairy-like maiden of Ireland whom he finds in the forest, is confined to a grotesque, beastly body. As failed knight and hybrid creature, he is relegated to the peripheries of human civilization. Subsequently, he must literally follow his trickster wife to the fringes of the society from which he is excluded. Melion's embrace of the more passionate, bodily desires manifests in his werewolf body. He has crossed the boundary of human culture and entered the realms of animal nature. The tale both translates his marginalization through a grotesque body read as metaphor and literalizes that metaphor through a specific and pointed geographic move.

In this liminal space of animal nature, Melion functions as a means through which the narrative begins to break down the boundaries of human culture. His wife has assigned him the task of hunting a stag. The symbolism of the stag, here, cannot be overlooked. Traditionally, stags are understood as mythical or divine guides to otherworldly realms and as Christian symbols of Christ. In ancient Celtic traditions, divine agents sent a white stag to guide chosen humans into strange or supernatural worlds, and in the Middle Ages, allegorical interpretations of animal symbolism based on Christian religions saw the stag as a symbol of Christ (Andrews 263). Additionally, the text specifies that Melion realizing his hunger as he arrives in Ireland, “still had his [stag] steak, which he had brought from his land; he was very hungry, so he ate it” (“Melion”). Understanding the stag’s symbolic connection to Christ, this action can be understood as a pseudo-Eucharist, prefiguring the transformation of Melion – in other words, his resurrection as a great knight – which is to come. As Corinne J. Saunders explains, “The theme of the magical and elusive stag, often an otherworldly messenger, occurs both in the lays, as we have seen, and in the saints’ lives such as that of Eustace, where the magical stag-guide represents Christ” (60). In the medieval legend of Saint Eustace, Eustace’s conversion to Christianity occurs after his encounter with a stag who acts as the messenger of Christ (Pluskowski, *Wolves* 195; Salter 65). In this instance, the stag “acts as an agent of divine providence,” remaining with Eustace through multiple Job-like trials until he is able to overcome these hardships and to be reborn through baptism (Salter 65). In becoming wolf, Melion has already transitioned into the alternate world of animal and bodily passions. He has traversed beyond the limits of human society, and the narrative must recontain his subversion.

As a human, Melion failed at maintaining cultural norms, so now he must die to that human self. Saint Paul explains in his *Letter to the Romans* that Christians must be united with

Christ in his death in order to be reborn as faithful followers living with Christ in eternal life rather than dying in sin (Romans 6:5-11). If Christians can submit themselves in this way to Christ, Paul further explains, they will find ultimate freedom in union with Christ and be reborn anew. Paul says, "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh, you shall die: but if by the Spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live" (Romans 8:12-13). Melion, therefore, must become wolf in order to be reborn a better knight, one who can function once again as a great follower of twelfth-century courtly life. It is, therefore, in the forest and the wilderness that the crux of Melion's tale occurs, and as Saunders says of the Arthurian forest, "the forest becomes once more the landscape in which the knight may through the darkness approach the divine" (114). Only in rejoining this society will Melion be able to become a man again.

Indeed, within the tale, Melion follows his wife to Ireland and ravages her hometown, killing cows, oxen, and, later, people. As a wolf, Melion does what knights do: he kills. In this process, he even obtains a pack. Significantly, once Melion gains these companions, his actions once again display human reasoning. As a solitary wolf, Melion operated based on passion and not reason, but once he recreates a sham of knightly brotherhood through his wolf pack, Melion strategizes, flatters, and evades the king's traps. As an animal, Melion relies on constructed norms of human relationships to save him from the dangers of this new world. In gaining this wolf pack, Melion appears to have a mirror of the brotherhood at King Arthur's court, yet in this group Melion is the only man. The other wolves are simply wolves with no access to human reasoning. In this sense, although Melion has what appears to be a mirror *comitatus*, the chivalric code does not direct the actions of his wolf companions. They side with him based on their

animal instinct, rather than a human bond or sense of duty. It is only when he is with his fellow human knights that Melion can find the true definition of brotherhood.

As the tale progresses, Melion loses his wolf pack but is reunited with King Arthur and his knights. When Melion learns of Arthur's arrival, "he [goes] straight to the king, although he is in danger of death. He lets himself fall at the king's feet, he does not wish to get up again" ("Melion"). Through his deference to King Arthur, Melion acknowledges the hierarchical human bond that exists between them and reenters the fabric of society. He eats prepared meat, drinks wine, and remains by Arthur's side. He also displays proper aggression when he recognizes his wife's squire: "He went to seize him by the shoulder. The other could not hold out against him; Melion knocked him down in the hall. He would have killed and destroyed him on the spot if it were not for the king's servants" ("Melion"). Melion recognizes the man associated with his wife who broke the bonds of marriage by running away. Ironically, it is this display of passionate aggression that prompts a confession of truth about Melion's humanity. After the squire explains how Melion's wife tricked him, the men coax the ring from her and allow him to return to his human form.

Once he is a man again, Arthur, Gawain, and King Ydel joyfully accept him and immediately offer clothes to cover his restored human body. As they did in "Bisclavret," clothes again serve as a means to solidify his re-entrance into human society. The idea of clothes operating as a symbol of human reasoning dates back to Genesis when Adam and Eve felt the need to cover their naked bodies after receiving reason from the Tree of Knowledge, and, here, they function in a similar manner, offering a clear distinction between animal nature and human society. Through its clearly delineated social codes, civilization separates man from the passions

of the body, and Melion's reentry into civilization is solidified when he is freed from his werewolf form.

Additionally, the tale reinforces the very social values it introduced at the beginning. Melion is reunited with his king and his fellow knight, and both the hierarchical system of vassalage and the brotherhood of knights are restored. Melion's wife is also recontained. Melion "[commends] her to the devils," and the narration, ending with a warning to those who decide to trust women, clearly marks her as a villain. Women and loving women has brought Melion to his lowest, and his story exposes the inherent danger women pose to patriarchal societies and the codes of chivalry. In loving women, men can lose sight of their more important duties to society, and the system of chivalry that forms twelfth-century society will begin to crumble at its foundation. At the conclusion of the tale, Melion is refused his desired revenge in order to maintain the family structure that will enable his lineage to continue and is reunited with King Arthur and Gawain. The bonds of chivalry are restored, and dangerous female agency is contained within the boundaries of the patriarchal order. Melion's story clearly points out the danger of straying too far from the social center, and his misfortunes highlight the repercussions of traversing beyond the norm.

While "Melion" and "Bisclavret" operate within fairly closed societies of the French and English court, *William of Palerne*, a fourteenth century Middle English translation of the late twelfth century French romance *Guillame de Palerne*, expands the geographic borders of the werewolf tale. Alphonse, the werewolf, is a Spanish prince caught in a plot to save William, the prince of Apulia and Sicily, and his love Melior, daughter of the Roman emperor. In her discussion of the narrative elements of *William of Palerne*, Irene Pettit McKehhan argues that such geographic specificity highlights the ways "a selection and a treatment of names, localities,

and incidents... suggest persons and events of considerable contemporary importance and of special interest to the author's immediate audience" (790). Schiff expands this argument suggesting that "William's translation is driven not by a populist nationalism zealous to make French texts available to Middle English speakers, but by an elitist desire for a spectacular demonstration of feudal hierarchy, the ritual debasement of non-nobles inculcating the lesson of aristocratic exception" (422). Such geographic specificity suggests this tale may function as a metaphor for the process of cultural identity formation in a world of conquest and absorption. The marginalization of the werewolf comes to represent the exclusion of those forces that significantly threaten such cultural and ideological identity.

Yet, the werewolves of these tales, like the ubiquitous werewolves of popular culture, do not remain in the margins forever, or even for that long at all. They survive and focus attention on themselves – removed from human society – so much that the center shifts, and for a moment at least the werewolf becomes the hero. It is in this liminal, uncategorized space that tales like "Bisclavret" and "Melion" underscore the importance of chivalry and fidelity, and in *William of Palerne*, this middle space occupies most of the narrative. The Old French romance *Guillaume de Palerne* was translated into Middle English around the year 1350, and it creates a system of courtly society largely based on hierarchical relationships and male lineage. Alphonse, like Melion and Bisclavret, is of noble birth and perfectly suited to his aristocratic position. He is a beautiful and courtly child. Yet, Alphonse's beauty differs from his lupine predecessors in a specific way. The poet explains:

þe kinges furst child was fostered fayre as it ouȝt... þe queene his moder on a time as a  
 mix þouȝt, how faire & how fetis it was & freliche schapen. & þis þanne þouȝt sche  
 þroly þat it no schuld neuer kuuere to be king þer as þe kinde eyre, whille þe kinges ferst

sone were *Per a-liue*.<sup>5</sup> (122, 125-29)

[The king's first child was fostered fair as it ought... The queen his mother, a vile wretch, thought how fair and how lovely he was and how nobly shaped. Then soon she thought that her child should never come to be king there naturally while the king's first son was there alive.]

Alphonse immediately faces a threat because of his noble nature – the threat of his stepmother who sees him as an obstacle to her own child's ability to fill the place of her husband's heir. She, who was learned in “*al be werk of wicchecraft*” [all the work of witchcraft], transforms Alphonse into a werewolf (118). Yet, the narrative makes it clear that Alphonse, despite his new monstrous body, remains a “witty werwolf” [witty werewolf] (145). The new queen inserts herself in the middle of the existing system of patrilineage and takes it upon herself to ensure that the line of kings will flow the way she wishes rather than follow the true bloodline.

At this point, Alphonse, who knows “*it was bi be craft of his kursed stepmoder*” [it was by the craft of his cursed stepmother] that he has become a wolf, enacts justified revenge and attacks her, but her men drive him from the castle (146). Exiled from his native Spanish land and the kingdom of which he is the rightful heir, Alphonse travels to Sicily. Unlike many of the noble literary werewolves of the twelfth century, including the Arthurian Melion (who breaks the chivalric code) and Marie de France's Bisclavret (who mistakenly trusts his deceitful wife), Alphonse has committed no wrongdoing. As Sconduto says, “Alphonse is a true victim and has

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations are taken from *The Romance of William of Palerne: (Otherwise Known As the Romance of “William and the Werwolf”)* translated by Walter William Skeat. For the purposes of this paper, I have provided the English translations of Old French sections of the manuscripts from Walter William Skeat and have provided my own English translations of the Middle English sections. Textual references indicate line numbers.

no personal potential for becoming a werewolf; the condition is imposed on him from the outside" (92). The female presence in the narrative interrupts and disrupts the line of male lineage, excluding the true heir from his kingdom and transforming his noble body into a monstrous one.

Despite his innocence and noble nature, however, Alphonse is recognized as a monster when he kidnaps William, the prince of Sicily, to save him from a plot against his life. Betraying the codes of chivalry and proper patriarchal succession, William's uncle planned to poison both the king and William, but Alphonse runs into the court and kidnaps William before his uncle can carry out his plan. Although Alphonse's intentions are noble and his action actually protects William, William's mother reads the wolf as a monstrous danger. The narration describes:

|                                                    |                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Atant esgardent la ramee,                          | [Just then they look at the bushes,          |
| Saut un grans leus, goule bae,                     | A huge wolf, with mouth wide open, leaps in, |
| A fendant vient comme tempeste;                    | Comes in at the opening like a tempest;      |
| Tuit se destorment por la beste....                | All turn aside to avoid the beast....        |
| Son fil travers sa goule prent,                    | He takes his son across his mouth,           |
| Stant sen va; mais la crie                         | And then makes off; but the cry              |
| Fu après lui mult tost levee. (85-92) <sup>6</sup> | Was very soon raised after him.]             |

Alphonse's monstrous body contrasts clearly with the civility and peacefulness of the king's court where William "florietes va cuellant / de lune a lautre va jounant" [goes gathering flowers / and playing from one to the other] (83-84). He enters "comme tempeste" [like a tempest] and

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<sup>6</sup> Some sections of the *William* manuscript are missing in the Middle English. These sections have been preserved in the Old French. All Old French translations recorded throughout are provided from Walter William Skeat's version produced for the Early English text society by N. Trübner & co., 1867. Textual references indicate line numbers.



steals the prince, yet as he flees it becomes clear that Alphonse means no harm to William (87).

In fact, he cares for the child as his own by providing food and shelter. The narration explains:

|                                 |                                        |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Lenfant de quanques fu mestiers | [Whatever the child had need of        |
| Li a porquis la beste franche,  | The noble beast provided for it,       |
| Conques de rien not mesestance. | So that it had discomfort in nothing.] |

(174-76)

Beyond the boundaries of the king's court in the wilderness, Alphonse is recognized as "la beste franche" [a noble beast], rather than a bloodthirsty monster, and he succeeds in protecting William when the king, queen, and noble court could not (175). In fact, it is William's own noble relative who wishes him dead and the woman his mother entrusts him to who betray his well-being, and it is Alphonse, the werewolf, who takes on the role of the court in protecting the sovereign heir's life. The structure of the court is rotten at its center, and the narrative, in order to demonstrate the proper codes of social behavior and responsibility, shifts its focus from this corrupted court to the wilderness and the werewolf. It is in this shifting that the narrative highlights both William's nobility and the standard by which his countrymen should live.

While within the closed and corrupted court of the king, William's life was threatened; however, living in the outskirts with Alphonse, his lycanthropic caretaker, William thrives. He is adopted by a cowherd and his wife who recognize the child's noble nature and beauty and raise him as their own son. Later, William is taken to the court of the Roman Emperor after Alphonse leads the Emperor to him in an attempt to relocate William in the noble household, and the Emperor is amazed by William's beauty and inherent nobility. Alphonse, who knows the truth of William's heritage and identity, again works to ensure that the correct noble bloodline is

restored. In bringing the Emperor's attention to William, Alphonse confirms William's nobility and gains him a place at the court.

While at the Roman court, William falls in love with the Emperor's daughter, Melior, whose father has promised her hand in marriage to a Greek prince. With the help of Melior's maid, Alexandrine, William and Melior escape into the woods disguised as white bears, and Alphonse follows them. White has long been understood as a symbol of purity and innocence arising from ancient religious practices and continuing through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in early Christian symbolism. Despite the text's claim that these bear skins are to provide a disguise to hide William and Melior as they escape, their being white suggests that the symbolic meaning may be more important as white bears certainly were not common in the forests of medieval Europe. In this way the text echoes Alphonse's privileging of the true noble line by using a color consistently associated with the divine and the pure. Additionally, this adoption of animal costumes, though apparently quite convincing, is distinct from the physical transformation of Alphonse into a werewolf. While William and Melior dress as animals using the skins as a disguise, Alphonse is magically transfigured into a distinctly different and markedly monstrous body. Alphonse's ability to maintain his human reasoning and to remain loyal to the sovereign despite his monstrous animal body, then, takes on additional significance. Not only is he noble by birth and appearance, he is also able to enact the standards of this courtly society more successfully than the members of the court, and he is able to do so despite his beastly form. Although William is the tale's titular character and the one to be named Emperor at the tale's conclusion, Alphonse is the only one of the sovereigns to, as Schiff says, "[survive] submersion into its seeming opposite – the woodland animal's body" (421).

Understanding that William and Melior need food, Alphonse finds a man on the road and attacks him in order to steal the meat he is carrying. Because he is a werewolf, this violent behavior is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the restraint Alphonse displays when attacking the man. Rather than killing the man, Alphonse:

went to him euene, wiþ a rude roing as he him rende wold, & braid him doun be þe brest bolstrauȝt to þe erþe.... þe werwolf was glad he hade wonne mete & went wiȝtli þer-wiþ þer as william rested, be-fore him & his burde þe bagge þer he leide. (1850-52; 1860-62)

[went to him even, with a rude roaring as if he would tear the man in two, and knocked him down to the earth.... The werewolf was glad he had won meat and went right away therewith to William as he rested, and before him and his lady laid the bag.]

Rather than killing the man and stealing his goods, Alphonse merely scares him and knocks him to the ground. Additionally, as Sconduto points out, Alphonse's supply of meat appears almost immediately after William prays to God for aid in finding sustenance; therefore, "for [William], Alphonse is not a monster; he is a miracle" (104). Alphonse repeats this restraint when he scares a cleric in order to supply William and Melior with wine to complete their meal (1884-1900) and, as the narration explains, "mete & al maner þing þat hem mister neded, þe werwolf hem wan & wiȝtli he brouȝt" [meat and all manner of things that his master needed, the werewolf won and rightly brought to him] (1919-20). Sconduto further explains, "The werewolf is able to take advantage of his ferocious appearance in order to assist [William] and Melior. He never intends to harm the terrified [victims]; rather, his only purpose seems to be to help the prince and princess" (105). Alphonse displays the human qualities of rational restraint and planning as he works to protect William and Melior.

In his analysis of the ways “nobles cement their exceptional status through privileged crossings into the animal world,” Schiff concludes that the “romance’s werewolf narratives reveal the predatory nature of aristocratic power, with a future prince’s animal life figuring the sovereign’s incorporation of violent nature” (418, 418). Yet, as discussed, the violence displayed by Alphonse remains subordinate to his restraint and his protection of endangered noble bodies. Through his actions, Alphonse, as a werewolf, protects the rightful heirs to the throne more successfully than the courts that are supposed to serve them. Alphonse’s actions highlight a moment in which his noble human nature triumphs over animal wildness and violence. The narration supports this vision of Alphonse as a noble creature, rather than a violent monster, in its constant assertions that Alphonse, “forto saue and serve þo two semli beres... putte him out in peril of deþe” [in order to save and serve those two seemly bears... put himself in peril of death] (2185-86). He kidnaps the provost’s son to distract a hunting party from finding William and Melior, continues to provide food and drink for the lovers, provides them with new skins to wear when they can no longer disguise themselves as white bears, and leads them to William’s native land which is being laid to waste by Spain.

Shortly after their arrival in Palermo, William, with the sign of the werewolf on his shield, aids the queen in defeating the Spanish king in battle. At the banquet to celebrate William’s success, Alphonse enters, bows to his father, the defeated Spanish king, and kisses his feet (4012-16). Through this action of supplication, Alphonse acknowledges the hierarchical human bond that exists between his father and himself, and it is this action that enables the Spanish king to recognize him as his son. As William explains, “sire, it may riȝt wel be þus.... Wel i haue it founde, þat he has mannes mind” [sire, it may rightly well be thus.... Well I have found that he has a man’s mind] (4120, 4122-23). When Alphonse’s stepmother arrives, he once

again attacks her, and William stops his attack by reasoning with him as if he were a fellow knight, rather than an animal. William says, “mi swete dere best, trust to me as treuli as to Þin owne broþer.... I sent after hire for Þi sake” [my sweet dear beast, trust me as truly as you would your own brother.... I sent after her for thy sake] (4359-60; 4363). In addressing Alphonse as both a beast and a brother, William invokes the connections of the knightly comitatus inclusive of Alphonse’s lycanthropic body. His human mind is what matters and what enables him to join in the communion with William, the sovereign, but his beastly body, not overlooked by William, enables him to highlight the failings of the court and the corruption at its center. The juxtaposition of his nobility and rationality with his monstrous form enables the court to read, though him, the corruption that has begun to destroy it. In uniting a pure, noble mind with a corrupted, monstrous body, Alphonse again enacts Agamben’s association of sovereign with bare life. One cannot exist without the other, and Alphonse as a noble werewolf, like his predecessors, highlights the intricate connection between the height of an ordered civilization and the baseness of its opposite.

After he is transformed into a man again, Alphonse explains the truth of William’s identity and requests his sister’s hand in marriage. The women who betrayed William as a child are banished to hermitage on the outskirts of society for the remainder of their lives, Queen Brande is written out of the rest of the narrative, and the Greeks return to their native land. As in “Bisclavret,” the disruptive female agent has been exiled from both the sexual economy which operates through marriage relationships and the courtly world. *William* expands on this distancing of the other by also exiling the culturally disruptive agent – the Greeks who hope to join the Empire by marrying Melior and their prince. In this way, *William*, even more emphatically than “Melion” or “Bisclavret,” draws clear boundaries for the society it creates and

maintains. Those beyond the borders are banished from the society and the page, and the resulting empire exists as a unified and meaningful entity.

The ending of *William*, thus, reinforces the values of a strong patriarchal society founded on the basis of male lineage as well as the strength of an empire united against cultural others. The women responsible for the disruption of patriarchal bloodlines are punished, and their public exposure at the court highlights the inherent danger women pose to patriarchal societies and the politics of male lineage. Additionally, the marriage alliances formed at the conclusion of the text specifically exclude the Greek prince and maintain the boundaries of the Roman Empire against such Eastern others. The tale also specifically explains that William's bloodline continues successfully throughout the years to come. Thus, the proper bonds between sovereigns are restored, not through the actions of the royal courts, but through the actions of Alphonse, the werewolf. In fact, nearly every action of the nobles endangered the sovereigns' lives while Alphonse's every action served to protect and preserve the proper heirs to the thrones. It is fitting, then, that he is the one to reunite all of the characters with their respective relatives and to direct the sovereign marriages at the tale's conclusion. Alphonse, rather than the nobles of the courts, is the one who has managed to maintain the purity of the sovereign line, and through his actions, the empire is united as a stronger force than it was at the start of the tale.

Additionally, the system of patrilineage, which when disrupted by both jealous and deceitful women as well as a man who breaks the bonds of chivalry caused all of the tale's problems, is restored. When the proper structure of patrilineage breaks down, the system of fourteenth-century society begins to crumble at its center. Just as "Melion" and "Bisclavret" showcase the boundaries of social constructs, *William of Palerne* includes the magic of a deceitful woman, female betrayal, and lack of chivalry – elements of the narrative that call

attention to the moments when social structures break down. The royal court of the king, that should be the epicenter of medieval society, cannot sustain the life of its sovereign, and the wilderness of the werewolf becomes the site of success with the werewolf acting in place of the royal court as he works to restore the politics of lineage which must be maintained as society grows and engages with an expanding international world.

All three narratives raise the question of what happens when society is able to welcome the werewolf back. In this incorporation of the exception, these narratives offer the figure of the werewolf as a “limit-figure of life, a threshold in which life is both inside and outside the juridical order, and this threshold is the place of sovereignty” (Agamben 27). In other words, the reincorporation of the werewolf – and simultaneous expulsion of the monstrous woman – forms the basis for these fluctuating societies to move forward. As Agamben says, “Law is made of nothing but what it manages to capture inside itself through the inclusive exclusion of the *exceptio*: it nourishes itself on this exception” (27). By reincorporating the werewolf at the center and epitome of the court, these narratives highlight the ever-shifting paradigms of sovereign power in the Middle Ages. “Bisclavret,” “Melion,” and *William of Palerne* all craft a place in which sovereign power can be investigated and reworked – the forest of the werewolf – and in doing so, they highlight the ways medieval societies worked to comprehend and codify their own relationships with the wild nature beyond their control (both of the landscape and the human experience). Just as these societies begin to understand the dynamism of man and his relationship to the powers of sovereignty, they also find in turning back upon themselves that the dangers to such power and structure multiply and shift. When the werewolf is reincorporated as a fellow brother in the comitatus of the court, the woman and the cultural other are distinguished as new and equally powerful threats to the social order.

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