Revivalist Fantasy
Schiff, Randy P.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Schiff, Randy P.
Revivalist Fantasy: Alliterative Verse and Nationalist Literary History.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24289.

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Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal

PRIMAL COURTLINESS IN GUILLAUME DE PALERNE AND WILLIAM OF PALERNE

No component of Alliterative Revivalist literary history has been more crucial—or more conflicted—than the view that the late-medieval assimilation of formerly hostile Saxons and Normans produced modern English ethnic identity. In his influential argument for the continuity of Anglo-Saxon prose and late-medieval alliterative prosody, R. W. Chambers offers a striking example of Revivalism’s racialized historiography. Adopting alarmist language incongruent with the long-pastness of the events that he describes, Chambers asserts that the “national disaster” of the Norman Conquest “robbed us” of possible prose developments in English, through a literary “strangling” that nearly “destroy[ed] the English nationality and the English language.”

Chambers’s Alliterative Revival emerges as a national rescue narrative, with a stable, Saxon Englishness surviving the Norman-French take-over of the channels of power and patronage: alliterative verse moves out of the conquered “Anglo-Saxon hall” and into the “highways,” holding out in the shadowy channels of orality until it can reappear in its “full vigour and correctness” in a Revival that takes its place among the “national triumphs” of the “English language.”

Chambers’s racialized narrative, which conflates language and national identity in its rehearsal of the Norman-Saxon dialectics central to Alliterative Revivalism, reveals the legacy of the nineteenth-century philologies that drove the professionalization of literary studies (see chapter 1). Chambers is exceptional among Revivalists in offering unqualified praise of late-medieval alliterative poets seen as neo-Saxons, and in not emphasizing the movement’s inevitable collapse before a Francophile, Chaucerian modernity. However, he reveals a conventional nationalism through his reductive ethno-linguistic historiography. As Anderson argues, the modern vernacular
standard, though produced by generations of print-capitalism preying on
the death of dialects and competing languages, nevertheless seems ancient.
Nineteenth-century European nationalists aggressively exploited such factitious antiquity, counting on the emotional power of one’s language seeming to “loom up imperceptibly out of a horizonless past,” thus linking individuals “affectively to the dead” of a fantastical antiquity. While Revivalist criticism at times appears to stem from an Anglophile, Francophile nationalism, its primary motivation actually involves a general, rather than partial, nationalism—a defense of the nation in the abstract. The Frenchman Hippolyte Taine, for example, shares Chambers’s basic view that language is a battle-ground for national, and indeed ethnic, identity: the “race remains Saxon [saxonne]” in part because the “old poetic genius” survives the Conquest, to “flow for a while underground” until the fourteenth-century revival of written alliterative verse. Taine, every bit as much as Chambers, engages in what Geary sees as central to nationalist historiography—the imagination of peoples as “distinct, stable and objectively identifiable social and cultural units” with equally stable linguistic identities.

The fourteenth-century English kingdom presents significant obstacles to nationalist critics straining to conceal the nation’s modernity by manufacturing a deeply rooted ethno-linguistic history. With its complex interplay of Latinate culture with English and French dialects, late-medieval English culture resists the post-Romantic conflation of language and national identity. Despite such sociolinguistic heterogeneity, Revivalist critics project a stable English linguistic identity into pre-modernity, isolating a thoroughly English national medium against which ethnic differences can be marked. Building upon the nationalist notion that a language is the private property of a people, Revivalist critics tell a story of attempted ethnic theft, with nativist alliterative poets struggling to preserve a poetics cognate with the English language. As we shall see, ethno-linguistic patriotism such as Chambers’s is noticeably absent from a site where Revivalist narrative implies that we should find it—in an alliterative translation of a French work. Rather than a nationalist zealously appropriating foreign material, the poet of William of Palerne participates with his French-speaking forebear in a class-based, rather than linguistic, idiom.

Habits of nation-based thinking inflect Revivalism’s ethno-linguistic historiography, which imagines Saxon–Norman conflict continuing in a uniformly English-speaking late-medieval culture. Nineteenth-century literary histories regularly present patriotic narratives of linguistic development. As if anticipating Gellner’s argument that post-industrial nationalism succeeds in forming nations only after general educational institutions produce the social homogeneity required for constant economic expan-
Thomas B. Shaw argues in his 1849 *History of English Literature* that William I sought to transform his subjects’ ethnic status through language policies. Shaw’s William enforces “employment of the Norman language in all public acts and pleadings” and “in the schools,” using state power to effect “the suppression of the language and nationality of his new kingdom.” The Englishman Shaw’s romantic vision of ethnic survival, in which Saxonness is kept alive through “the sacred flame of letters” inspiring “patriotic” monks under whose gowns “there often beat the stern Saxon heart,” clearly appealed to his linguistic-nationalist editor and re-writer, the American Truman J. Backus. Arguing that the “national life was not annihilated” at Hastings but survived with its “ineffaceable Teutonic stamp,” Backus links the “patriotic spirit of the common people” with resistance to “foreign poesy,” and argues that Langland’s alliterative tradition seeks to “revive” the prosody of “England” before the Norman Conquest.

Despite such visions of national self-preservation through linguistic resistance, Revivalist criticism installs foreign influence at English literary history’s foundation, juxtaposing the collapse of alliterative culture with Chaucer’s epochal Englishing of French culture. Warton’s seminal argument that Chaucer was not just “the first English versifier who wrote poetically,” but also the person who “first taught his countrymen to write English,” required the imagination of barbaric, nativist poets against whom Chaucer differentiated himself. Alliterative poets come to embody the nativist holdouts whom Chaucer had to outshine, with ethnic distinctions concealing the linguistic continuity among the competitors. For Warton, Chaucer is a civilizing force who improved “national manners” that still “retained a great degree of ferocity,” using his French-formed poetry to “polish” a rough-hewn England. Applying the supplement of Provençal poetics to his unsophisticated contemporaries, Warton’s Chaucer paves the way for the Revivalist view of a backward, neo-Saxon alliterative movement resistant to the Southern importation of French poetic goods. By isolating alliterative poets as a backward group who pale before an English-speaking but French-influenced Chaucer, Revivalist criticism obscures the transnational complexities of many alliterative works—particularly translations of French literary works. Such limitations follow from the assumption of Chaucer’s singular literary historical status as a revolutionary blender of native and Continental traditions who nevertheless remains thoroughly French. The ethno-linguistic incoherence of Revivalist discourse can be seen clearly in William Vaughn Moody and Robert Morss Lovett’s 1905 *A History of English Literature*. Moody and Lovett argue that “foreign wars and centuries of domestic intercourse” had “broken down the
distinction between men of Norman and men of Saxon blood,” producing a “new language” and a “new and vigorous national life.” Since Moody and Lovett depict this new culture as a “merging of Saxon and French,” we might expect them to present Chaucer, who is this brave new world’s “new poet,” as a hybrid figure. Quite to the contrary, this “new poet” Chaucer embodies the “Norman-French strain,” with his poetry modeled on “the French system,” while Langland represents the “other half of the English nature”—the “Germanic strain in the nation,” with its “mystical, sombre, spiritually strenuous” qualities expressed in the “old system of native versification.” Moody and Lovett stress the weakness of Langland’s “rapidly dying verse form,” while arguing that “from Chaucer flew the whole stream of later verse, as from a ‘well of English undefiled.’” Revivalist criticism again reveals its necessary avoidance of Anglo-Saxonist racism (see chapter 1), since its narrative requires demonstration of an inadequate neo-Saxon culture’s collapse before Chaucer’s French-hybridized verse. As we shall see, such structural isolation and denigration of the alliterative tradition leads to Revivalism’s inability to recover the transnational complexities of translations of French works such as William of Palerne.

Revivalism’s conflicted portrayal of Chaucer as simultaneously French and yet emblematic of Englishness reveals the literary-historical effect of what Deanne Williams calls the “French fetish.” Exploring a dialectics of English attraction and repulsion to Frenchness, Williams describes a late-medieval and early-modern processing of the Norman Conquest as uncannily foreign and yet constitutive of Englishness. Such anxious cultural negotiation of French influences is pronounced in Revivalist discourse. Considering their views of alliterative provinciality and French cultural sway, we might expect Revivalist critics to take a special interest in alliterative translations as acts of aggressive, nativist appropriation. However, this is not the case in the reception of William of Palerne, an alliterative translation of the twelfth-century Old French romance Guillaume de Palerne, which is often featured in Revivalist narratives due primarily to its date at the alleged dawn of the Alliterative Revival. As a seemingly provincial production appropriating exclusive French material for monolingual English speakers, William of Palerne might be expected to attract Revivalists’ nationalist attentions. As we shall see, the poem repels such readings, which obscure the cross-Channel ideology of aristocratic exceptionalism that links the Old French and Middle English romances. Nationalist readings conceal the poem’s fundamentally transnational motivations.

Rejecting the nation as our unit of analysis allows us to engage with both the European and the global contexts that override parochially “English” concerns. If Andrew Galloway is correct in stating that for a medi-
eval nationalism to “have meaning it must involve a sense of a territorially and culturally unified community exceeding the elite groups of the clergy or aristocracy,” then the poet William’s systematic efforts to join with his anonymous French predecessor reveal an emphatically non-nationalist alliance of aristocratic and clerical privilege. As we shall see, the primacy of late-medieval social status, which Gellner contends is the primary reason that centralizing states such as late-medieval England and France did not produce nationalism’s conjunction of polity and culture, renders Revivalism’s emphasis on national origin a critical liability. By setting translation and original in dialogue, I will show that William proves to be interested less in a rugged, neo-Saxon Englishness as an antidote to encroaching Gallic culture than in joining with his French predecessor in a transnational project of class consolidation.

Both Guillaume de Palerne and William of Palerne promote aristocratic exceptionalism through narratives built on the interrelation of animality with sovereign power. For Giorgio Agamben, the figure of the werewolf plays a vital role in instituting sovereignty: revealing the limits of jurisdiction, the banning (and return) of the hybrid demonstrates the continuity of aristocratic privilege between nature and the state. In Guillaume de Palerne and William of Palerne, narrative animal play functions as part of a ritual engagement with the natural world that extends and enhances the mystery of sovereign power, as noble identity survives submersion into its seeming opposite—the woodland animal’s body. Even as William joins his French forebearer in marking the integrity of sovereignty through movement across cultural and natural spheres, the translation process weaves linguistic difference into this romanticization of the stability of aristocratic identity. Negotiating passages both biological and social, William of Palerne provides pivotal evidence that late-medieval “chivalric comedy,” as Simpson argues, offers a “sophisticated model of human identity” in which the “civilized order survives only by entering into, and having commerce with, all that threatens it.”

My focus on becoming in these romances stems from recent interest in mapping the complex interplay of unstable agents within shifting environments. Through his study of “identity machines” as “ever-active conglomerations of animated parts that resist constitution” into “bounded” selves, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen steers criticism away from seeing bestial symbolism as merely static and instead tracks the use of animals (or parts thereof) in the active assemblage of social identity. My focus on ritual, informed by Bourdieu’s sociological analysis of rites of passage, aims to uncover the symbolic work performed by becoming-animal plots that institute class distinctions. Both Guillaume de Palerne and William of Palerne imagine
apparent movement beyond class, with such playful passage serving only to reinforce the social boundaries that the romance marks. Resisting Revivalism’s framing of *William of Palerne* as an early expression of alliterative nationalism, I will explore the poem’s animalized dialectics of identity and ritual, imagining not national but transnational circuits of power. As we shall see, William outdoes his original in the intensity of the violence and humiliation that he inflicts on lower-class bystanders to aristocratic rites of passage; he is driven by anxiety that his homely Middle English will inhibit his French source’s elitist conservatism. Both romances stage the violence required for class consolidation, as non-noble victims illuminate an aristocratic class that closes ranks around itself, emerging unscathed from the animalized games played out in the noble idioms of venery and courtly love.

While the conjunction of artificially disguised lovers and an actually transformed werewolf figures a bleeding together of biological and cultural worlds, gender also becomes a crucial element in these romances’ identity play. While one would not guess it from the all-male editorial titles *Guillaume de Palerne* and *William of Palerne*, female agency is pivotal to the becoming-animal plots through which aristocratic identity is first pressured and then reconstituted. The poet William works against Revivalist assumptions of a masculinist, neo-Saxon movement by intensifying gendered play, linking Alexandrine’s cross-dressing and class-crossing activity with the kitchen origins of the poem’s central, virtual metamorphosis. As we shall see, William’s fascination with Alexandrine’s sophistication and artifice, as well as his intensification of his source’s use of elite idioms to allegorize aristocratic privilege, belie Revivalist efforts to read alliterative poets as backward, unsophisticated neo-Saxons. William’s translation proves to be driven not by a populist nationalism content merely to make French texts available, but by a desire to collaborate in sustaining an aristocratic exceptionalism shared by its source. Such elitist partisanship and partnership prove decidedly non-global. By rejecting her Greek imperial fiancé, and coupling first with the bear, then the deer, all while being guided by a wolf, Melior chooses the animal over the Eastern other who is banned from the central stage upon which exclusively Western European aristocratic identity is performed.

**Telling the Fine from the Filth**

**Cross-Channel Class Solidarity**

If the rise of the nation requires the destruction of feudal class hierarchy in
in order to enable the socioeconomic mobility required for capitalist culture, then *William of Palerne* offers a uniquely anxious reaction against a dawning modernity. Joining his French predecessor in support of feudal social privileges threatened by economic diversification, William compensates for Middle English’s lower status and his socioeconomically mixed working environment by intensifying the ideological material that he recycles. Though the alliterative long lines and mixed Middle English dialect of *William of Palerne* may seem alien to the octosyllabic couplets of the Picard *Guillaume de Palerne*, the English poet often stays close to his French source, enabling critics to pay particular attention to additions, omissions, and transformations. No additions seem more significant than those linked to the poem’s patronage and immediate reception. In the first dedicatory passage, at the close of the first “pas” [section] (161), the narrator bids us offer our prayers to the “hend” [noble] Earl of Hereford, Humphrey de Bohun, nephew of King Edward III, “for he of Frensche þis fayre tale ferst dede translate, / in ese of Englysch men in Englysch speche” [for he first ordered the translation of this noble tale from French into English speech, for the pleasure of Englishmen] (161–69). This praise for the patron links access with pleasure, imagining an aristocrat who uses his wealth to make desirable works available to those who do not speak French. That the translation was aimed at making romantic material linguistically accessible to English speakers becomes even clearer in the second dedication, which informs us that the prayer-worthy Humphrey “let make þis mater in þis maner speche / for hem þat knowe no Frensche ne neuer understo[n]” [had this work produced in such speech for those who do not speak French, nor understand it at all] (5528–33).

There has been some dispute as to what this inability to read French suggests about the socioeconomic background to William’s translation. According to Turville-Petre, the dedicatory comments disclose Humphrey’s intention to patronize material for a non–French-speaking audience “humbler and less sophisticated than the higher nobility,” which excludes Humphrey himself from the work’s consumption. This “instructive guide” in “the virtues of ‘gentilesse’ and ‘cortaysie’” was intended for Humphrey’s “Gloucestershire dependents,” among whom, according to Turville-Petre, such elite virtues would surely have been “sadly lacking.” For Derek Pearsall, the “banal” quality of *William of Palerne* disqualifies it from being of interest to the Earl; he speculates that this “casual” production was possibly aimed at “some insistent household clerk” or a member of the “kitchen staff.” Whether or not we accept Pearsall’s dismissive judgment of the poem’s quality, as well as his linkage of banality with non-noble status, the very linguistic medium of Middle English may have exposed
the poem to similar, contemporary aesthetic bias. According to Williams, medieval England could never entirely escape the “nagging sense that the English language possessed certain barbarous qualities.” Bunt, however, asserts that the lack of ability to speak French is no clear marker of class, citing a comment from the narrator of Of Arthour and Merlin, that he has seen “mani noble” [many nobles] who “no Freynsche couþe seye” [cannot speak French] (25–26), as evidence that nobles such as Humphrey may have been more comfortable using English than French.

In the case of either the provincial court audience imagined by Turville-Petre or the even more socioeconomically diverse audience theorized by Bunt, anxieties about social class lie at the center of William of Palerne. If the “social function of courtly romance” is indeed fundamentally “instructive,” then William’s choices in translating Guillaume de Palerne make clear that he targets non–French-speaking consumers for literary lessons in the durability and violence of social hierarchy. William clearly separates himself from the class of speakers for whom his work is intended: despite his recourse to the modesty topos in stating that he has translated the “Frensche” [French] text as “fully” [completely] as his “febul” [feeble] wit has allowed (5522–23), his very ability to translate French material into English sets him apart from his imagined audience. Probably a clerk in Humphrey’s employ, William would have had a material investment in aristocratic dominance as the engine for the patronage of his literary and other clerkly labors. The class of courtiers in twelfth-century France and in fourteenth-century England included both knights and clerks, which suggests that William’s use of translation to defend aristocratic dominance was part of a self-interested defense of feudal privileges against socioeconomic pressures from below. The intensity with which William increases his source’s classist violence may stem from the very ambivalence of his clerical status, since such individuals might come as readily from noble families as from upwardly mobile mercantile or peasant families ascending through positions in estate, church, or government administration. Anxious about his own class position within a feudal hierarchy pressured by proto-capitalist forces seeking the socioeconomic mobility required for modern economic exchange, William ramps up his French original’s elitist energies in a rear-guard, romantic defense of feudal hierarchy.

The poet’s intensification of his source’s rhetorical campaign for the maintenance of feudal class boundaries is nowhere clearer than in William of Palerne’s treatment of working-class individuals. Exhausted from the rigors of ongoing flight from their seemingly numberless pursuers, the princess Melior reacts with terror at the sudden arrival of workmen. After hearing one of the “choliers” [colliers] (2520) mention the reward offered
for her and her lover’s capture, Melior quakes at hearing the laborer’s double desire—to gain an informant’s reward, and to imagine how much the fugitive lovers will “suffre” [suffer] (2528). Melior’s terror registers the general unease of the aristocratic and clerkly classes whose feudal privileges were under economic threat. The poet William performs ironic class warfare, reducing all laborers to filth, even as he imbues one collier with a purely ethical nobility:

\[\text{Þen was Meliors neiȝ mad almost for fere,} \\
\text{lest þat foule felþe schold have hem founde þere,} \\
\text{and darked stille in hire den for drede, boute noyse.} \\
\text{Wiȝtly another werkman þat was þerbeside} \\
\text{gan flite wiþ þat felþe þat formest hadde spoke,} \\
\text{seide, “Do þi deuer þat þow hast to done!} \\
\text{What were þe þe better nouȝ þeijh þe beris were here,} \\
\text{to do hem any duresse? Þei misdede þe never.} \\
\text{Mani hard hape han þei aschapet,} \\
\text{and so I hope þei schal ȝit, for al þi sori wille. (2541–50)}\]

[Then was Melior nearly crazed with fear, lest that foul filth should have found them there, so she lay hidden in her den, silent and afraid. Soon, another workman nearby began to argue with that filth who had just spoken, and said, “do the work that you were assigned. How would you be better off if the bears were here, and you did them harm? They never did you wrong. They have survived many hardships, and I hope that they will continue to do so, despite your ill will.”]

Both the vindictive worker, with his Schadenfreude at the noble fugitives’ plight and his unseemly informant’s zeal, and the clearly ethical worker, who sympathizes with the lovers’ cause and condemns his colleague’s meanness, are categorized as “felþe” [filth]. While the Middle English Dictionary registers this term’s use as an indicator of low social class, it is a rare use, with William of Palerne being only one of five instances reported for definition 3c’s conflation of the social and moral: “A sinful or worthless person; a base fellow; a wanton woman, strumpet.” The majority of uses simply bring some nuance to the primary meanings linked with the modern “filth”: “Anything material that is considered foul, unclean, impure, or defiling; filth, dirt, mud, rubbish, trash, refuse; putrid or decomposed matter, ordure; squalor, vermin” (1a); and “Natural discharges of the body of man or beast” (2a). The distinction between the low- and high-minded individual is invoked in William of Palerne only to be leveled, with moral
and amoral worker each filtered through a concept of “felþe” that links labor with dirt and discharge.

In categorizing moral and immoral stone-workers as examples of “felþe,” William outdoes his source in integrating class prejudice into a narrative endorsement of aristocratic hegemony. The very choice of animal allegory speaks to social conservatism in both romances, for medieval animal fable was frequently concerned with maintaining hierarchical relations. Through conventional stories of the preservation of noble identity despite the trauma of becoming orphaned, and of the heroic defense of the eldest son’s inheritance rights, the poets of Guillaume de Palerne and William of Palerne use animalized allegories to reinforce the aristocratic values and privileges of their respective noble patrons, Countess Yolande (daughter of Baldwin IV) and Humphrey de Bohun, 9th Earl of Hereford. As we shall see, these poets envision noble identity as sustained through violence, as members of the lower classes become subject to brutal rites of passage linked with the resolutely aristocratic process of becoming-animal.

A sketch of these romances’ shared story helps illuminate such animalized class conflicts. It all begins with a werewolf abducting the toddler Guillaume [William], heir to the throne of Apulia, in order to save him from nursemaid-assassins hired by his uncle. The werewolf is Alphonse, elder son of the king of Spain, and himself a victim of political intrigue, having been metamorphosed by his Portuguese stepmother, Queen Braunde, who sought to make her own son the heir. The werewolf watches over Guillaume in the woods until a kindly cowherd finds the boy and raises him as his own son. After a chance woodland encounter, the Emperor of Rome insists on removing the remarkable Guillaume to his court, where he becomes a fine warrior-courtier and falls in love with Melior, the Emperor’s daughter. Alexandrine, Melior’s aristocratic lady-in-waiting, helps Guillaume and Melior overcome their shyness and become lovers. After her father informs Melior that she must marry the Greek emperor’s son, Alexandrine convinces the lovers to sew on bearskins and flee. The werewolf re-emerges to assist the lovers, providing them with food and distracting their numerous pursuers throughout their woodland flight. After their bear disguises become too well known, they change into deerskins provided by the werewolf. They make their way to Apulia, the countryside of which has been destroyed by a siege designed to pressure Florence, Guillaume’s sister, to marry the Spanish prince. After dreaming that a knight and lady who are simultaneously bear and deer save her realm, the Apulian queen, Felice, approaches the lovers in her own deerskin outfit and recruits Guillaume into military service. No longer disguised, Guillaume leads a rout of the Spanish forces. After the captured Spanish king reveals Alphonse’s origins,
Queen Braunde is summoned and compelled to transform the werewolf back into human form. Guillaume knights Alphonse, who reveals Guillaume’s noble origins, and then requests and is granted Florence’s hand. Braunde sees her son married off to Alexandrine, while the Spanish king agrees to hold his land from Queen Felice and Guillaume. Alphonse eventually becomes king of Spain, while Guillaume and Melior attain first to Apulian and then to imperial Roman sovereignty.

Signs of entrenched attitudes about social hierarchy emerge with considerable clarity in *Guillaume de Palerne* in the forest meeting of the Emperor and Guillaume, then in the cowherd’s care. Beauty allows the Emperor to intuit the foundling’s nobility from his evidently unbeautiful peasant surroundings: he sees the boy, stops in his tracks, and

A grant merveille se seigna
De sa biauté, de sa samblance
Et de sa noble contenance:
Merveille soi qui il puet estre
Ne de quel gent ne de quel estre,
Cuide chose faëe soit,
Par ce que seul iluec le voit. (418–24)\(^{55}\)

[With great wonder he made the sign of the cross / Because of the child’s beauty, his appearance, / And because of his noble countenance. / He marvels who the boy might be, / Who his people are and what his situation is. / He believes that the child might be an enchanted creature / Because he sees him alone in that place.]

The Emperor’s expectation of rural decrepitude is so strong that the sight of beauty in such a rustic environment stupefies him: he sooner assumes a fairy lineage than that of a peasant. After intimidating the cowherd into revealing William’s mysterious woodland origins, the Emperor states that he will remove this beautiful child who had been found with tell-tale beautiful garments (516–29). After Guillaume hears the cowherd deliver a lesson on behavior at court, he says farewell to his companions (544–99). When the Emperor “ot les nons” [hears the names] Huet le nain [the dwarf], Hugenet, Aubelot, Martinet le fil Heugot [son of Hugo], Akarin, Crestiien, and Thumasin le fil Paien [son of the Pagan], “Forment s’en rit et fait grant joie” [He laughs heartily because of them and is very joyous] (600–601). As the majority of the names are standard,\(^{56}\) the Emperor evidently laughs at the grotesqueness of pretentions to individuality among members of a
class that he clearly sees as an undifferentiated (and presumably filthy) mass, alien to the foundling’s sublime nobility that shines through his peasant garments.\textsuperscript{57}

The English version intensifies the Emperor’s elitist behavior, picturing him as having “gaynliche god game” [pleasurable joy] (369) at hearing names linked with peasant faces, and as expressing bemusement concerning the cowherd’s heartfelt discussion of proper courtly behavior. The Emperor’s “god game” [pleasurable joy] (346) after the cowherd’s speech reveals a mocking glee at the grotesquerie of a sophisticated rural worker. It is as if the Emperor is watching what Michael Camille calls the “monkey-business” of manuscript grotesques, in which animals perform human tasks: like a manuscript reader seeing monkeys ape their social superiors, he finds it absurd that lower life forms can master human activities.\textsuperscript{58}

The origin of the cowherd’s knowledge of court—in \textit{Guillaume de Palerne}, the cowherd’s father was in a count’s “maison” [household] (577), while in \textit{William of Palerne} the father was simply a “kourteour” [courtier] (342)—reveals the threat to aristocratic privilege presented by the shared space of noble courts, which featured individuals of various social ranks, in aristocrats’ retinues and among the numerous workers maintaining an estate.\textsuperscript{59} The Emperor’s overdetermined amusement at the courtly cowherd discloses the aristocrat’s anxious awareness, triggered by the very conventionality of his advice, that courtly ethics might govern the behavior of nobles and non-nobles alike.\textsuperscript{60}

Such anxiety concerning the permeability of class lines proves crucial to both \textit{Guillaume de Palerne} and \textit{William of Palerne}, and it dictates both the trajectory of and the apparatus involved in the lovers’ flight. As we shall see, the animal-skin disguises in which the foundling-turned-warrior and the Emperor’s daughter eventually flee serve as paraphernalia in a ritual marking of aristocratic privileges, both social and territorial. The lovers’ costumed flight proves to be an allegory of aristocratic identity, with the layering of bestial skins on courtiers’ clothes invoking the “sexual restraint” that Crane reads as key to communicating the “superiority of courtly to common loving” in Maying poetry.\textsuperscript{61} Much as Maying narratives use ritual movement from the domestic to the natural world (and back again) to territorialize both spaces as aristocratic, so do the animalized lovers ritually enact the continuity of noble power between the natural and cultural worlds.\textsuperscript{62}

Doubling the story of the werewolf with that of an aristocratic couple donning animal skins, \textit{Guillaume de Palerne} and \textit{William of Palerne} meditate on the theatrics of medieval political power and in so doing reveal an emphatically pre-national world permeated by class distinctions. Animal-
ized plotlines come to mark an aristocratic exceptionalism that precludes anything resembling a populist alliterative nationalism. The fugitive lovers take on the status of what Agamben calls “bare life,” both by becoming the targets of a literal hunt in which animal disguises expose them to potential slaughter by anyone pursuing them, and by attaining “sacred” status as lovers transcending earthly and spiritual laws. Banned from the courtly world, the lovers choose to become animal, intuiting that by appropriating, indeed incorporating, the “state of nature” at the heart of sovereign power, they will survive the imperial hunt with their elite status intact. William and Melior, in wearing the bearskins above their everyday clothes (a detail emphasized in the English version’s refusal to imagine a nude Melior beneath the skin), fuse the worlds of nature and culture that they will eventually command as imperial Western rulers.

Animalized Rites of Passage
Siting Sovereignty in the Woodlands

While non-nobles are treated with such disdainful glee as displayed by the Emperor, wild animals receive profound respect, as transitions between humanity and animality ritually encode the interrelation of aristocracy and violence. According to Bourdieu, such rites of passage serve to “socially institut[e]” a “pre-existing difference,” by separating, not the zones traveled, but those social groups allowed to cross boundaries. The emphatically public performance of becomings-animal in Guillaume de Palerne and William of Palerne, in which the hunting party tracking the lovers expands as news travels of the reward for their capture, tells us less about differences in species than about the exclusively aristocratic participation in such games. The terror tactics employed by the werewolf in sustaining the lovers’ flight reveal the persistence of the nobility’s predatory habits in movement between the human and animal worlds. The lovers’ thrilling flight discloses the work needed to maintain aristocratic privilege, as well as the significant costs borne by non-nobles made to participate in this performance of exceptionalism.

Alexandrine singles out the procuring of food as her principal worry about the lovers’ journey beyond Roman and Greek territories: “De vo mengier ne sai que dire” [I don’t know what to say about what you will eat] (3027). Guillaume’s youthful idealism about their survivalist skills—“Bien viverons de nos amors, / D’erbes, de fuelles et de flors” [We will live well off our love, / From grass, from leaves and from flowers] (3033–34)—is echoed by Melior, who says, “Souffreron, / Mengerons glant et sauvechons
“Et de cest autre fruit boscage” [We will get by; / We will eat acorns and wild apples / And other woodland fruit] (3231–33). Far from proving to be excellent hunters and gatherers, as do Tristan and Iseult during their forest stay, Guillaume and Melior are virtually never even given a chance to fend for themselves. The werewolf follows them from the moment they depart and soon uses the threat of violence to bring them nourishment, by seizing a passing peasant by the teeth and throwing him to the ground, and then despoiling the hapless villein of his food (Guillaume, 3256–57; William, 1848–49). This seizure of goods sets up the pattern for sustaining the lovers’ flight, with the three aristocrats joined in an animalized circuit of predation on lower-classed individuals.

Aristocratic violence brings, not the nuts and flowers that the lovers naively thought would sustain them, but processed food, in the form of white bread [blanc pain] and boiled meat [char cuite] (3256–57; 1848–49). The werewolf thereby ensures that the fugitive lovers continue to participate in human culture throughout their woodland journey and also reveals the persistence of his own human sensibilities. Having become animal, Alphonse has not lost his aristocratic tastes. As if to make this clear, the werewolf in both versions threatens a passing clerk who is carrying a cask of good wine, apparently sensing that neither of the lovers is prepared to do without the proper beverage to accompany the meal that he so brutally procured (3334–47; 1884–1900). Class solidarity emerges in the differential treatment of peasant and clerk. While in each version the peasant is knocked violently to the ground, the clerk is allowed merely to flee from the menacing werewolf (3341–47; 1892–96). Even as the narratives figure the violence sustaining aristocratic hegemony, they portray the clergy as relatively privileged, insulated from the physical suffering inflicted on those lower on the social scale.

The werewolf’s furnishing of the lovers with cultural necessities both furthers the poem’s naturalization of aristocratic habits of consumption and demonstrates Alphonse’s status as a human–animal hybrid who has avoided total metamorphosis. The English poet emphasizes the werewolf’s hybrid nature by foregrounding his intelligence: he inserts a passage detailing Alphonse’s retention of human wit (141–44), as well as numerous references to the werewolf as “witty” (e.g., 145; 158). Critics have recently questioned whether Alphonse actually breaches species borderlines. Denying that the entirely wolf-like Alphonse is a hybrid, Caroline Walker Bynum interprets his change as virtual, arguing that when Braunde metamorphoses him with a ritual bath, she merely reveals the “human body” that had been “there under the wolf skin all along.” However, hybridity need not be limited to corporeality in romances negotiating humanity and
animality. Using gesture to transcend his state of non-linguistic animality and send messages to his human charges, Alphonse demonstrates the communication capacity that in some taxonomies marks the biological passage to humanity. The werewolf humbly delivers his goods to the lovers (3294–95; 1898–1900), and later bows respectfully before his father and the queen of Apulia (7215–17; 4014–16), naturalizing the human concepts of social status through his performance as an animal literally gesturing toward human status.

The lovers join the werewolf in straddling the human and animal worlds, making their way through the wilds by traveling on all fours during the day and on two legs at night, while Alphonse follows and provides goods for them through repeated assaults on peasants and clerks (3384–99; 1912–22). Both versions depict significant violence in the werewolf’s supporting actions, yet William of Palerne here isolates a particular threat to late-medieval feudal hierarchy. William adds to the description of one attack that the targeted peasant has just come “chepingward” [from the market] (1848), and he also substitutes a “burgeis” [merchant] (1889) for the priest to whom the clerk is bringing the wine in Guillaume de Palerne. The werewolf’s new targets figure agents involved in money-based exchange systems, suggesting that the aristocrat-animal’s violence is directed by the English poet against members of the mercantile class straining to displace feudal with capitalist culture. Class anxieties clearly drive William’s translation.

The devastation experienced by non-nobles in Guillaume de Palerne and William of Palerne is echoed in two other werewolf romances—the anonymous Old French lai Mélion, which dates from what Bynum has dubbed “the werewolf renaissance of the twelfth-century,” and the Latin prose tale Arthur and Gorlagon, which survives in a fourteenth-century manuscript but which seems to draw on older, Welsh material. In the Old French romance, after Mélion, a baron attached to King Arthur, decides to leave knightly society, he encounters a giant “cerf” [deer] while hunting in the forest (77–79) and soon after meets a splendidly dressed lady who identifies herself only by class and country, stating that she is “de haut parage / e nec de gentil lignage. / D’Yrlande sui a vos venue” [of high estate, and born of noble lineage. I have come from Ireland to you] (107–9). Three years after Mélion marries the lady, he takes a second fateful trip to the forest. After his wife insists that he procure her some meat from a particularly large deer, she transforms him into a wolf by means of his magic ring and then absconds to Ireland with the “escuier” [valet] who had accompanied them (133–72). As with Guillaume and Melior, Mélion and his lady are linked in an overdetermined way with the woods and with animal life,
suggesting the symbolic interrelation of the forest and aristocratic identity. Mélion, now become wolf, follows the lady to Ireland and vents his anger by attacking local sheep. He soon expands his reign of rural terror by convincing numerous wolves to join his raiding parties (189–280). That this devastation is absorbed by the lower classes is made clear by the figure of a “paisant” [peasant] who finally locates the wolves and uses this intelligence to pressure the king to assemble a force to end the wolves’ rages (281–304). One is left to wonder whether the agrarian underclass’s royally sanctioned respite from aristocratic predation is merely temporary.

In *Arthur and Gorlagon*, rural laborers are also made to pay the price for noble love-games. King Gorlagon becomes transformed into a wolf by his adulterous wife, to whom he had fatefuly revealed the shape-shifting properties of the branches from his garden’s “virgulta virga pulcra” [beautiful slender sapling], which was of his precise age and height. Having become animal, Gorlagon flees into the “interiores silvas” [recesses of the woods] and, after having “se lupe agresti coniunxit” [allied himself with a wild she-wolf], has two “catulos” [cubs] with his new wife (154; 240). Bringing his new wolf family along with him on raids, Gorlagon rampages through the realm, slaughtering his wife’s new young sons in one attack (154–55; 240). When his own cubs are killed, he intensifies his campaign of destruction, making “nocturnis excursibus in domesticas pecudes illius prouincie” [nightly forays against the flocks and herds of that province], performing these with “tanta cede” [such great slaughter] that the inhabitants of the countryside pool together resources to combat the rampaging wolves (155; 241). Once again, peasants pay for aristocrats’ feuds. The extension of predatory social identity into the forest world reveals these romances’ ritualized representation of protagonists being delivered over to their aristocratic selves: Mélion and Gorlagon each pass through a wolf identity and then re-assume their roles as baron (543–68) and king (175; 250), respectively. When nobles become animal in werewolf romances, non-nobles should evidently run for cover.

The lycanthropic and aristocratic violence committed against the lower classes in such medieval romances illuminates the werewolf’s special relation to sovereignty. Analyzing an ancient legal trope that figured banned individuals as werewolves, Agamben links both wolf and fugitive with the *homo sacer*, whose special status as one whom all may kill but none may sacrifice is the vital condition for sovereign rule. For Agamben, the “special proximity of werewolf and sovereign” informs Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*, in which a baron’s temporary but weekly transformation into a predatory werewolf figures the exceptional mode of Hobbes’s natural state of war of all against all, upon which violent disposition modern sover-
eighty is grounded. That the baron and the king are bound together is concretized, as Cohen observes, in Marie’s location of the werewolf’s return to manhood on his beloved lord’s bed. 

Agamben’s political theologization of sovereign animality helps map out the ritual allegory of aristocratic identity in *Guillaume de Palerne* and *William of Palerne*. Alphonse, temporarily a werewolf, and the lovers, banned from the City while they flee in defiance of imperial law, exist in a state of exception—a passionate passage that instantiates the “state of nature” in which “man is a wolf to men.”

*Guillaume de Palerne* and its English translation deploy the animal violence of a werewolf-noble to naturalize the aggression at the heart of feudal hierarchy, magnifying the endorsement of sovereign power by having the hybrid be not just a helpful agent toiling for the future sovereign couple, but also himself an heir ready to pounce upon the Spanish throne.

**Becoming-Bear, Becoming-Food**

*Aristocratic Play, from the Kitchen to the Wood*

Much as criticism has obscured female agency at the heart of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with critical resistance to Morgan le Fay’s centrality revealed in the poem’s all-male editorial title (see chapter 3), so has the standard critical title of *William of Palerne* restricted attention to only half of the fugitive pair. Frederic Madden’s title for his 1832 Roxburghe Edition, *William and the Werewolf*, goes even further in occluding female participation by pairing William with his male guide. Such editorial bias belies the powerful part played by women in both *Guillaume de Palerne* and *William of Palerne*. The werewolf’s role in rescuing William and guiding the fleeing lovers is, of course, crucial. It is two women, however, who initiate each of the becomings-animal: Queen Braunde, who metamorphoses Alphonse into a werewolf; and Alexandrine, who sets William and Melior on their path of becoming-bear. By highlighting Alexandrine’s anomalous status as a sorceress, William clarifies this crucial connection between two female characters who create a magic circle of becoming-animal, writing human destinies in distinctly animal ink. In so doing, as we shall see, William presents a romance that severely challenges Revivalism’s portrait of a masculinist, neo-Saxon alliterative movement.

Braunde’s magical skill is central to both romances, as her transformations of Alphonse into a wolf and back again reveal her supervisory role in the ritual passage instituting her stepson as both aristocrat and Spanish heir. Alexandrine’s magical abilities, however, are only evident in *William of Palerne*. In *Guillaume de Palerne*, Guillaume merely dreams by chance
of Melior while Alexandrine is deciding how to bring the awkward lovers together (1117–32). In *William of Palerne*, Alexandrine, who was “ful conyng” [very cunning] and “coynt, and couþe fele þinges, / of charmes and of chantemens” [skilled, able to do numerous things by means of charms and enchantments], is able to “set” [cause] a “ful selcouþe swevene” [a very curious dream] (649–60), demonstrating the skills of a sorceress like Morgan le Fay. According Alexandrine magical powers that match those of Braunde, the poet William forges a structural link between the stories of actual and virtual animalization and magnifies the exceptional status of the aristocratic class whose interests drive the romance.

The clear link between Braunde and Alexandrine in *William of Palerne* disallows any simple moral reading of metamorphosis. Not only are Alphonse and the lovers symbolically linked by undergoing human–animal passage; so, too, are the agents responsible for initiating these ritual actions. The conventionally malevolent stepmother and the stereotypically faithful lady-in-waiting become equally complicit in plots that move aristocratic youths into a state of temporary exception, as they pass out of the court and into the wild—ultimately to be delivered back to themselves as nobles with sovereign destinies. The English version’s insistence on Alexandrine’s magical skill emphasizes the artifice involved in such aristocratic identity maintenance. Clothing proves to be a crucial element in a poetics of aristocratic becoming, as Alexandrine’s magical skills call attention to the virtuality of the animal disguises. Noting that William translates with “gusto” the moment when the lovers inspect each other’s outfits, Lawrence Warner lingers over this moment of sartorial sleight-of-hand as evidence for the English poet’s preference for Alexandrine’s sophisticated, superficial design to Braunde’s absolute lycanthropic metamorphosis. Much as the *Wynner* -narrator’s sophistication was disclosed by dislodging Revivalist filters (see chapter 1), so does the poet William’s preference for virtual over actual transformation undermine Revivalism’s vision of a traditionalist, unimaginative, and literalist alliterative movement. Rather than assuming that the lovers’ animal skins are traces of an earlier version in which the fugitives were actually transformed into beasts, I will explore the English poet’s magnification of Alexandrine’s artistry and dwell on William’s clear delight in the lovers’ costumed enactment of aristocratic identity.

William’s intensification of magical agency highlights another element lying dormant in *Guillaume de Palerne*—the otherworldliness of the lovers’ initial disguises. The bearskins targeted by Alexandrine are not just of any sort—they are white bearskins. If we can safely discount Gaston Paris’s speculation that polar bears are intended, as remnants of a hypo-
theoretical antecedent Scandinavian version, a more likely conclusion is that these are, like the white deer who returns Guigemar’s arrow and sends him on his love-quest in Marie’s Guigemar, or like the white stag who sends Gawain on his fateful greyhound-killing journey in Malory, otherworldly animals. The bears’ conventionally otherworldly white skin signals that the lovers are being brought into a liminal space, crossing over into a purely symbolic world of allegorical instruction. The English poet’s fascination with Alexandrine’s magical skill thus adds an esoteric charge to the closed circuit of the lovers’ aristocratic becoming.

Identity is in play in Alexandrine’s plot, both the means and end of the ritual passage she prepares for William and Melior—a fact made clear by Alexandrine’s crossing of class and gender lines in procuring the animal skins. In both versions, Alexandrine foregrounds feudal class structure, arguing that the reach of the emperors’ hunters will be such that “noþer clerk nor kniȝt nor of cuntre cherle” [neither clerk nor knight nor rural churl] could pass undetected (1675–76; see Guillaume, 3003–6). Insisting that no disguise as a member of another social rank could allow them to escape the imperial hunt, Alexandrine prepares them for a passage beyond the classed world of humans into brute animal life. Even as Alexandrine readies the lovers for their ritual travel, she herself proceeds to negotiate socioeconomic boundaries. In order to acquire the animal-skin ingredients for her performative magic, the aristocrat disguises herself as a servant, blending in with the kitchen staff (3056–63; 1704–13). Much like William’s own period spent as a peasant youth until the Emperor’s aristocratic eye leads to his removal, Alexandrine’s becoming-servant is temporary. In each case, the crossing of class lines merely reinforces noble privilege: William’s inherent nobility and Alexandrine’s pure pragmatism trump the subversive potential of such socioeconomic moves.

Classed identity remains constant in both versions of Alexandrine’s plot, with both the werewolf and animal-skin metamorphoses linking aristocratic power with bare life. The lovers mark out the path of future sovereignty by each taking on the status of the homo sacer, as they clothe themselves in animality to become subject to a purely mercenary, and hence non-sacrificial, killing by the expanding and unruly search party. The lovers thus join the werewolf, who binds the natural and the political through its status as a “monstrous hybrid,” figuring the double existence of the sovereign as brute life in the “forest” and man in the “city.” Alexandrine uses her craft to fashion William and Melior into just such hybrids, directing them beyond class and, as bears, into the world of “bare life,” even as human culture remains attached to their bodies. Signs of social
identity never disappear from the lovers, with each poet keeping the fugitives from becoming truly bare: the skins are sewn, not onto naked bodies lacking traces of class distinction, but onto their “clothes, pat comly were and rich” [fine and beautiful clothes] (1737; see Guillaume 3091). While playing at bare life, the future sovereigns never really take leave of culture.

While both poems destabilize class boundaries by having Alexandrine play servant to obtain the lovers’ ritual costumes, William of Palerne expands the identity play of Alexandrine’s kitchen adventure to breach gender borders as well. When Alexandrine dresses up as a “serjans” [servant] in Guillaume de Palerne (3056), she makes a purely class-based descent in the feudal hierarchy. William ups the ante: Alexandrine puts on “boiȝes cloȝes” [boy’s clothes] (1705), revealing her as a trickster figure capable of coordinating class with gender play. Alexandrine’s conflation of sex and status is embedded within the history of the word “boie” itself. The first two definitions of “boie” in the MED signal lower-class status: “A servant, attendant, underling, churl” (1a); and “a person of low birth or rank, a commoner” (2a). Definition 3a, “a worthless or wicked fellow; rascal, ruffian, knave; urchin,” demonstrates the late-medieval equation of class status and moral character. The MED speculates that definition 4, “a male child,” may derive from “affectionate use” of the poor character assumed in definition 3a to inhere in the lower classes. Alexandrine discloses the force of such feudal hierarchival logic by simultaneously breaching gender and class boundaries, actions that saturate the lovers’ animal disguises with unstable socioeconomic identity.

Class considerations also inform Alexandrine’s choice of bear for the lovers’ first steps in ritual ascension to aristocratic pre-eminence through animalized self-debasement. Instituting the “pre-existing difference” of their elite social status,93 Alexandrine supervises the opening phase of a two-pronged process of becoming-animal in which the werewolf later collaborates. She advises the lovers to wear the skin of a fundamentally ambivalent beast: bears straddle the human and animal domains, as both fearsome hunters and, as is clear from their presence in the castle kitchen, as prey in the aristocratic hunt. As natural as such disguises might seem, the bearskins are saturated with culture, drawn from the very site where brute nature is butchered and dressed according to the art of cuisine. The kitchen fuses culture and nature, remaking the material of the bear according to aristocratic gustatory and sartorial use-values. In putting on the skins, the lovers do not just become bear—they become both food and clothing: as they traverse the woods, their stolen wares recall the emphatically cultured kitchen world. Just as the flaying of an animal according to proper procedures figures the transformation of the natural into a work of art, as in
oft-cited instances produced by Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan* and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, so does the kitchen activity that Alexandrine witnesses invoke the aristocratic art of reworking animal bodies.

While the bear’s status as both prey and product renders it useful for ritual aristocratic passage, the bear’s predatory status also serves a crucial role in Alexandrine’s design. Commenting on the similitude of bear and human, the English poet presents the lovers’ disguise as a first phase in the shedding of their humanity. Alexandrine here adds the striking detail that the bear’s ferocious appearance will scare away pursuers:

> Miȝt we be coyntise com bi tvo skynnes,  
> of þe breme beres and bisowe þou þerinne,  
> þer is no liuand lud iliue þou knowe schold.  
> But hold þou ouȝt of heie gates for happes, I rede.  
> rediliche no better red be resun I knowe,  
> þan to swiche a bold beste best to be disgised,  
> for þei be alle maners arn man likkest.  

[If we could come by two skins of the ferocious bears and sew you two within them, there is no living person who could identify you, but would keep away from you on the highways for fear of misfortune, I suppose. Truthfully, I could give you no wiser counsel than to tell you that it’s best to disguise yourselves as such bold beasts, for they are most like man in all forms of behavior.]

Alexandrine links two seemingly disjunct benefits to the bear-disguise: it will produce maximal terror in others, and bears are more proximate to humans than any other animal. Hunting manuals bear out this unsettling likeness: medieval illuminators reveal a sense of the bear’s “endearing and anthropomorphic quality,” with its quasi-human habit of occasionally walking on two legs.

William’s excision of the serpent and goats from the catalogue of kitchen animals in *Guillaume de Palerne*, which ensures that all of the creatures are “alle fair venorye þat falles to metes” [all noble prey of venery proper for the table] (1685), highlights the high status of hunting as courtly art. By restricting the animals to aristocratic prey, the poet ensures that the lovers’ flight invokes the noble discourse of courtly love. The animal world can thus serve here as material for an exclusively aristocratic poetics. Carefully selecting the animal costumes for the lovers’ initial becoming-animal, Alexandrine seems guided by a courtly conception of the sex life of bears. According to Gaston Phébus, ursine intercourse approximates
that of humans, for “when the bear has his way with the she-bear, they do it like man and woman, one stretched on top of the other” [quant l’ours fet sa besoigne aveques la ourse, ilz font a guise d’omme et de femme, touz estenduz l’un sur l’autre]. By fashioning such disguises, Alexandrine eases the lovers in their transition into aristocratic courtship, allowing them to begin their ritual passage on the surer footing of similitude: the lovers become bears, who are quasi-human as much in their bipedal as in their coital habits.

While Alexandrine begins the process of William and Melior’s aristocratic becoming-animal, Alphonse initiates the second stage, allowing them to plunge fully into the status of pure passivity—that state of passio [suffering] that Andreas Capellanus conceives as essential to the courtly lover’s subjectivity. In making the transition from bears, both active hunters and esteemed quarry, to pure prey, the fugitive lovers move to a state of courtly vulnerability, transcending to the passionate life of “amorous suffering” that is among the fundamental “techniques of living” of Western aristocrats. By becoming-deer, the lovers enter into the world of “befallenness” that, as Fradenburg argues, forges “group prestige” by “cultivating” the “sufferings” of embodied life. The lovers leave the dried, otherworldly pelts drawn from the kitchen to take on new warm skins, hot and bloody from the fresh kill that the watchful werewolf performed before their eyes. The werewolf handles the skinning duties in Guillaume de Palerne (4393); the English version intensifies the lovers’ participation in their ritual passage, as they themselves slice off the skins (2589–90). In leaving the bearskins, the lovers also leave behind the kitchen: dressing themselves in creatures drawn from the very woods in which they move, they now travel on all fours, a signal of their fuller animality. Now become deer, the lovers of Guillaume de Palerne and William of Palerne ironically ascend in status in the animalized, aristocratic allegory, attaining the summit of Western European venery’s symbolic hierarchy.

The English poet’s intensification of the lovers’ ritual human–animal passage becomes clear in two scenes demonstrating the fugitives’ commitment to melding with their borrowed animal identities. Expressing his desire for weapons to defend himself against approaching workmen, Guillaume states that with such war-gear he would make his attackers know “quel beste ceste piax acueuvre” [what beast this skin covers] (4050–54). The English translator removes Guillaume’s qualification, eliminating all appeal to a human other beneath the disguise: William is a bear who wishes to take up human arms, with “horse and alle harneys þat behoves to were” [horse and all appropriate war-equipment] (2348–52). Melior in William of Palerne signals even more clearly that she is disappearing into her dis-
guise, with her dedication to becoming-bear having transcended mere pragmatism, to become ritual. Guillaume, worried that there is only one way to save his lover from the approaching workers, asks his sweetheart to save her life by revealing the bare body beneath the bearskin: “Car vos metés de la pel fors / Et vos metés em pur le cors” [Please take off the bearskin / And put nothing on your naked body] (4060–64). The English version complicates the simple dichotomy of bearskin and human body in its “pure,” nude state, by having William refer to the clothing—and therefore culture—beneath Melior’s disguise. William requests that she “dof blive þis bere-skyn and be stille in þi cloþes” [do quickly take off the bearskin and remain motionless in your clothes], after which her attackers will recognize not just her humanity, but her nobility, and will save her “for love of þi fader” [out of respect for her father] (2342–45). After William reiterates his request that she strip (2353), Melior, “wepande wonder sore” [weeping bitterly], makes clear through her vehement refusal that her animal skin has become more than just a convenient disguise and is now part of her identity: “Nay, bi him þat wiþ his blod bouȝt us on þe rode, / þe beres fel schal never fro my bac, siker be þerfore” [No, by him who redeemed us with his blood on the cross, the bear’s skin will never leave my back] (2358–61). Melior’s emotional excess, with hot tears and a dramatic Christian oath, speaks less to self-preservation than to a passionate commitment to her borrowed bear-identity. Threatened by the assault of laborers, she retreats into the bearskin, the shell in which she has been pursuing the ritual aristocratic passage that will keep her and her lover aloof from those filthy workers’ hands.

If the elite idioms of courtly love and venery reveal the lovers’ becomings-animal as part of the nobility’s ritual self-writing—a symbolic movement charged with the “power of delivering something over to itself”104—then a third aristocratic art of self-differentiation, heraldry, is invoked to seal the socializing process. After having shed his deerskin and joined his mother’s besieged army, William, still unaware of his noble lineage, is asked to choose his arms. He adopts the “werwolf” (3217), identifying himself via his anomalous animal-world contact, thereby intuitively linking human–animal hybridity with his knightly status. William also links the werewolf’s capacity for violence with aristocratic identity, stating that the werewolf is “hidous and huge, to have alle his riȝtes” [huge and menacing, in order to maintain his privileges] (3218). On the battlefield, the Spanish king bemoans that “non miȝt þe werwolf conquere” [no one could defeat the werewolf] (3911), rendering William interchangeable with his heraldic sign. The interrelation of becoming-animal and aristocratic passage is made complete. The former werewolf Alphonse, soon
to be sovereign of Spain, forges permanent ties with William, knighting him and binding himself to him by becoming his brother-in-law (8290–96; 4740–47), in an overdetermined display of the “special proximity of werewolf and sovereign.” As we shall see, the legal institution of marriage complicates the use of violence in each romance, moving the consolidation of class interests to a transnational frame.

Transnationalizing William of Palerne

Romance and Western Exceptionalism

If Williams is correct in assuming a widespread medieval English “sense of linguistic and cultural inferiority” vis-à-vis French culture, then the poet William compensates for his anxiety about Middle English’s low status by intensifying both the elitist narrative of ritualized becoming-animal and the classist violence sustaining aristocratic hegemony. Far from acting on nativist impulses sometimes ascribed to late-medieval alliterative poets, William reveals cross-Channel sensibilities in which identity is a function of feudal class rather than nation. Late-medieval French culture, as Michael J. Bennett has shown, was not geographically limited: England in the late 1350s and early 1360s was the virtual “center of the francophone world,” with France both militarily and economically depressed. Englishing Guillaume de Palerne, William painstakingly preserves the elitist ideology of the French narrative set within a new linguistic skin. His translation is motivated not by a retreat into nationalism, but rather by a desire to collaborate in the maintenance of transnational, Western power.

With its terminus ad quem of 1361, William of Palerne is often accorded a privileged place as possibly the earliest datable poem of the Alliterative Revival. Such literary historical context places the poem on the margins of an already marginalized movement. According to Hanna, “Old Histori­cists” fantasizing a Revival render alliterative verse “particularly Other” by imagining a regionalist movement opposed to the Chaucerian South’s Francophile culture. William of Palerne holds an awkward place in such accounts, insofar as its appropriation of French linguistic and cultural material undermines critical portraits of alliterative poets as resolutely nativist neo-Saxons. Moreover, its poet’s passion for sophistication belies the Revivalist refusal to admit gamesmanship and irony in alliterative poems, such as we have seen in the case of ethno-nostalgic readings of Wynnere and Wastoure (chapter 1). With its sustained and subtle treatment of courtly love, William of Palerne joins Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in frus-
trating critical efforts to restrict alliterative poems to such stern subjects as warfare or penance (see chapter 3).\textsuperscript{109}

Faced with the love-saturated \textit{William of Palerne} at the Revival’s alleged beginning,\textsuperscript{110} critics have held that William deals ineptly with matter alien to an “alliterative” poet. Claiming that William’s efforts to reproduce his source’s courtly essence are negated by his metrical “medium,” Dorothy Everett claims that \textit{William of Palerne} confirms, through its very exceptionality, the correctness of most alliterative poets’ “instinct” to eschew “love-romances” in favor of war-related subjects.\textsuperscript{111} For Everett, such deficiency in matters of love is linked with alliterative prosody itself: though the English translator follows his French tale closely enough to reproduce its “niceness” and “attractive” characters, the imitator is ultimately “defeated by the essential unsuitability of his medium.”\textsuperscript{112} Why, precisely, alliterative prosody is “unsuitable” is left unsaid, inviting readers to inject their own regional and literary historical biases. From as early as the sixteenth-century age of antiquarianism, critics have linked alliterative verse with an Anglo-Saxon culture read as fundamentally warlike. William Camden, for example, asserts that the “English tongue” and “nation” are both extracted “from the Germans,” whose supreme “moral and martial vertues” were spread throughout England by the Anglo-Saxons’ “happy victories.”\textsuperscript{113} Revivalism inherits such ethno-historical attitudes and routinely assumes that alliterative poets worked not just in the meter but in the spirit of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. According to Walter S. Hinchman, “our old meter inclines, like our ancestors themselves, to violence”;\textsuperscript{114} Oakden claims that alliterative poets “inherited” a “heroic spirit” alien to French refinement;\textsuperscript{115} and Moorman lists “violence” and “vendetta” as fundamental to “Western alliterative poetry.”\textsuperscript{116} Such statements make clear why literary critics inured to Alliterative Revivalism might be unprepared for the identity play of a \textit{William of Palerne} that belies, through its extended reflections on love-matters, the fantasy of a uniformly martial, anti-romantic literary school.\textsuperscript{117}

Far from being limited by nationalist zeal, \textit{William of Palerne} contributes its narrative of violent identity-formation to a transnational, self-protective aristocratic project. Aligning his work with the elitist values of \textit{Guillaume de Palerne}, William deploys his translation precisely against proto-capitalist values and institutions that would eventually lead to nation-formation: William’s becoming-animal narratives thereby reinforce a resolutely pre-capitalist feudal hierarchy.\textsuperscript{118} Faced with encroaching proto-capitalism, Humphrey de Bohun patronized the translation of French material not out of national pride, but in the interest of using its violent lessons in aristocratic exceptionalism to stamp out pretensions to socioeco-
nomic mobility on English estates where class distinctions were becoming blurred.

The estates of a magnate such as Humphrey de Bohun consisted of shared space, with non-nobles and nobles occupying a single social world. However much the nobility saw itself as exclusive, the material maintenance of courtly culture required the presence of a diverse range of individuals, from kitchen staff to grooms, notaries to priests. Such diversity-generated fears about class-mixing registered in moments such as the Emperor’s disdainful glee at the cowherd’s courtesy. Anxiety about such codes produced the need to police them: sumptuary laws reinforced bonds between clothing and class, while poaching laws restricted hunting privileges. While I would agree with Turville-Petre’s speculation that Humphrey had “educational motives” in patronizing a William of Palerne that featured aristocratic values for an audience significantly below the “higher nobility,” I would argue that such instruction was designed to communicate not the values themselves, but rather the sense of absolute distinction between nobles and non-nobles. William of Palerne performs this cultural work through its debasement of non-nobles, demonstrating the violence that sustains the privileges and differences of an aristocracy threatened by socioeconomic mobility. William presents these pre-nationalist values as privileges zealously maintained by a violent elite.

As we have seen, the narratives of becoming-animal in each romance saturate elite youths’ stories with the mysteries of courtly love and sovereign violence, in a ritual delivery of aristocrats over to their noble selves. Such aristocratic exceptionalism, alien to the Revivalist vision of a popular nationalism, is made plain in both the translation and the original. The fugitives’ re-entry into the aristocratic court is marked as ritual by Queen Felice’s decision, unexplained in either version, to approach the lovers while herself sewn up in deerskins (5157–5343; 3059–3201). A representative of the older generation evidently recognizes the completion of an animalized circuit of aristocratic becoming and comes appropriately dressed to welcome them into the noble fold. After the deer-disguised Felice ritually escorts William and Melior back into courtly society, the lovers shed their animal skins and almost immediately pursue the quintessentially aristocratic activities of conducting war and contracting marriages. William takes on the role of elite knight, breaking the Spanish siege, while paving the way for a number of weddings. These marriages come at a significant cost to non-nobles, as is clear not only from those robbed to sustain the lovers’ flight, but also from the ravaged towns and fields caught in the crossfire of the Spanish and Sicilian armies warring over William’s sister (4400–4437; 2618–61).
Class alone does not determine the magic circle of privilege in the closing marriage series. There is ultimately a limit to which nobles benefit from the aristocratic rites of passage, with Melior’s rejection of her Greek fiancé disclosing a transnational, Western solidarity. Though the intended groom who initiates Melior’s flight is Christian and had been selected by both the Western and Eastern emperors, he is, as a Byzantine prince, part of a different empire: the ethnic outsider is made to disappear quietly from each romance after the lovers take flight, standing significantly aloof from the central becoming-animal narratives. Much as Western Crusaders during the 1204 sack of Constantinople treated Byzantine Christians as monstrously as they did Saracens during other crusades, so does the Easterner, despite his nobility, come to be abjected. William deliberately intensifies Guillaume de Palerne’s exclusionist ethos, removing the very name of the Greek prince and fashioning him into a faceless Eastern other doomed to watch the collapse of his planned marriage to the Western imperial princess. In noting that the prince has heard “how fair, how fetis” [how attractive, how gorgeous] and “how freli schapen” [how nobly shaped] is the “semely” [beautiful] Melior (1446–47), the messenger in William of Palerne conveys an Eastern desire for the Western other here aggressively and spectacularly denied.

By excluding Eastern nobles from the productive play of becoming-animal, Guillaume de Palerne and William of Palerne each link their identity-play narratives to the larger cultural project of Western consolidation. The Greek Other is banned from the closed circuit of reconciliations, as former opponents become bound through the institution of marriage (8763–8942; 4990–5140). Queen Braunde, the seemingly wicked stepmother who metamorphosed Alphonse, is not only forgiven, but sees her son, who had laid waste to Apulia, married off to Alexandrine; Alphonse returns from the animal world to join Florence, William’s sister, in wedded life. Melior’s flight from marriage to the imperial Greek prince does not come at any personal cost in status, for she ultimately attains the height of Western power, as Roman empress (9352–56; 5341–43). Far from restricting himself to Englishing a text from across the Channel, the poet William both preserves and intensifies the ideological work performed by his French predecessor, deploying the pair of becoming-animal plots to support a transnational ideology of exclusively Western aristocratic hegemony.