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Skin and sovereignty in *Guillaume de Palerne*

Abstract : Guillaume de Palerne uses skin to interrogate animal-human difference and to demonstrate the affinity between the animal and the sovereign. The romance links human hand and animal foot, sovereign protection and exile, and animal gestures and sovereign speech, in order to uncover not just the sovereign in the skin of an animal, but also the sovereign in the beast.

Résumé : Guillaume de Palerne se sert de la peau pour interroger la différence entre l'animal et l'être humain, et pour démontrer l'affinité entre l'animal et le souverain. Le roman met en rapport la main humaine et le pied animal, la protection souveraine et l'exil, le geste animal et la parole du souverain pour révéler non seulement le souverain sous la peau d'un animal, mais aussi le souverain dans la bête.

The Old French *Guillaume de Palerne* demonstrates a curious interest in skins and the bodies they cover. This strange story of young lovers who travel across the countryside disguised in animal skins and helped along the way by a werewolf features two examples of the human inhabitation of an animal's skin. In its representation of animal skins not just as garments, but as skins the characters live in, the romance imagines a bodily surface that can be put on, adopted, inhabited, and abandoned. The humans who wear animal skins experience an exclusion from human society and its hierarchies and privileges, but their humanity remains visible in the gestures they make from within the animal hides. Skin covers, but it also makes visible, as Steven Connor explains:

If there were one function of the skin that might seem to unite or underlie all the others, it would be that of providing a background....One of the commonest and most spontaneous ways of thinking of the skin is as a surface, something stretched on top of things; but its more fundamental condition is to be that on top of which things occur, develop or are disclosed. The skin is the ground for every figure.¹

Skin is then a surface, a ground against which things are perceived, and I will trace the ways in which *Guillaume de Palerne* uses animal skins to make human distinctiveness visible by foregrounding the human hand against animal skin. But the romance also suggests that skins themselves may be foregrounded as that which “occur, develop or are disclosed”.² I will argue that the mobility of skins in this story

¹ Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 37-38.

² The understanding of skin as surface has a long history. For Aristotle the formation of the skin is brought about “by the drying of the flesh, like the scum upon boiled substances; it is so formed not only because it is on the outside, but also because what is glutinous, being unable to evaporate, remains on the surface”. This understanding of skin as surface was followed as late as 1497 in Paduan anatomist Alessandro Benedetti's rather tasty description of skin as

disrupts any secure identification of surface, and the human may also serve as a ground against which the animal is made visible. Changing skins and changing surfaces put animal and human into relation: a human hand reaches out from a ground of animal skin, recalling the touch of a scribe's pen on an animal hide; a speaking deer suggests unsuspected affinities between the animal and the human; a mute wolf communicates through gestures. Secret plots and hidden identities structure a story in which second skins foreground an alliance of the beast and the sovereign.

Hand and Hide

Guillaume de Palerne is best known as a werewolf story and as such, it may be modeled on stories like Marie de France's *Bisclavret* or the anonymous *lai, Melion*.³ Like the protagonists of the *lais*, Alfonso, the son of the King of Spain, is a man trapped in a wolf skin, though he is transformed by his stepmother, who wishes to secure the throne for her own son, and not tricked by a wife who wishes to escape her marriage. Critics have long noted that the lost son in the skin of a wolf is doubled in the story by Guillaume, the lost son of the King of Apulia who travels across southern Europe with his lover, disguised in animal skins. Yet, taking a cue from Connor's positing of skin as a ground, we might ask what the two representations of skin make visible about each other. The parallel representations of sons in skins are not just a narrative doubling; they ground each other, by which I mean that each is background to the other and each makes visible the representational claims of the other.

On the most obvious level, the wolf's inability to leave his skin foregrounds the mobility of the skins Guillaume and Melior put on. The animal skin disguise is the idea of Alexandrine, Melior's cousin and confidante. When the lovers decide they must flee the court to avoid being separated by Melior's impending marriage, Alexandrine remembers that there are many wild animal skins in the kitchen, and she tells the lovers that these are the skins of animals that people fear:

Nus ne les voit qui ne s'esloigne
 Ains que vers eus ost aprismer,
 Tant sont cruel et fort et fier;
 N'i puis autre conseil veoir,
 Mais se poiés des piax avoir
 Et dedens fuissies encousu,
 Ja n'estriés reconneü;
 Ensi porrés, je cuit, garir

"formed by the drying flesh as (according to Aristotle) the crust is formed in polenta". See Connor, *The Book of Skin*, p. 11-12.

³ C. W. Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, New York, Zone, 2001, p. 97-111; L. A. Scoduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Jefferson, N.C., McFarland, 2008, p. 90-126; and L. Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 41-56.

Et de la terre departir;
N'i voi nule autre garison. (l. 3016-25)⁴

Why Alexandrine chooses white bear skins for the disguise remains puzzling. Although she gets the skins from the kitchen, bear was not commonly consumed in the Middle Ages. Bear was an exotic meat, and eating or serving bear may have been a marker of status as well as wealth, implicitly recalling a dangerous hunt and the feat of overpowering and killing a ferocious wild beast.⁵ That would certainly reinforce Alexandrine's claim that the bear skins would inspire fear, but it doesn't explain why they are white. It may be that the white skins suggest a magical quality of some kind, as do representations of white animals, especially deer, in other medieval literary contexts.⁶ Alexandrine's choice may imply that people would stay away from the white bears because they fear magical or marvelous creatures. We can only speculate, because the text does not state the reason for Alexandrine's choice of bear skins, though we can assume she takes skins large enough to cover the lovers, and there is no explanation for why there are white bear skins in a southern Italian kitchen.

Alexandrine sews the lovers inside the skins. She wants them to be well-disguised, but she is worried, she says, about how the disguised lovers will eat during their flight ("Mais, si me face Diex pardon, / De vo mengier ne sai que dire", l. 3026-27). Guillaume doesn't share her concern. The lovers will live from their love, he says, and from herbs, flowers, and plants – they need nothing more. Actually, they do, it turns out, and although Guillaume initially dismisses Alexandrine's concern, her question about how the lovers will obtain food anticipates their need for the wolf's help.

Again, the lovers' encounter with the werewolf underscores the difference between becoming a wolf and wearing a disguise: the wolf hunts like an animal, Guillaume and Melior are helpless in their skins.⁷ The lovers fear discovery too much to seek (or steal) food from a passerby on the road. The wolf has no such fear, and he attacks a peasant, knocks him down, takes the food he carries and brings the meal to Guillaume and Melior at the end of their first night of travel. The lovers hear the werewolf approaching and they are afraid they have been discovered by the emperor's men, so when they see the wolf they are puzzled but not afraid. The wolf lays the meal before them and Guillaume and Melior marvel that God sends them sustenance through a mute beast (*une beste mue*, l. 3310). The identification of the wolf as a *beste mue* underscores the difference between the mute beast, the man who

⁴ *Guillaume de Palerne; Roman du XIII^e siècle*, ed. A. Micha, Geneva, Droz, 1990. All citations are from this edition.

⁵ P. Palma, "Banquets and Power: Boiardo's *Innamorato* and the Politics of Gastronomy", *Quaderni d'italianistica* 27, 1, 2006, p. 21-29.

⁶ Later in the story, Queen Felise's dream of being saved by "uns blans leus et dui blanc ors" (l. 4731) refers to the white bear skins but also suggests a marvelous quality for the white wolf.

⁷ See B. Behrmann, "'Quel beste ceste piax acuevre'. Idyll and the Animal in *Guillaume de Palerne*", in this volume.

has become a wolf, and beasts that speak – humans, like Guillaume and Melior inside their animal disguises.⁸

The short scene that follows further emphasizes the distinction between the human and the animal. First, the wolf brings the lovers bread and cooked meat – Guillaume and Melior eat human food, not the raw meat that wolves (or even white bears) would eat. Second, the lovers eat like people, not like bears. They bring their hands out of the skins to eat the food the wolf has brought them.

Cascuns a traite sa main nue
 Fors de la pel c'avoit vestue,
 Car cele qui es piax les mist
 A l'enkeudrē ensi le fist
 Que chascun puet sa main avoir
 Si com lui plaist, a son voloir.
 Par les geules qui sont es piax
 S'entrepaissoient des morssiax,
 Mais il n'i ont sausse ne sel
 N'il n'i boivent ne vin ne el;
 Mais se li leus puet espoitier,
 Ançois que laissent le mengier
 Aront il, se il puet, a boire. (l. 3321-33)

The description of the lovers' meal draws attention to the humanity of the hand drawn out of the animal skins, it emphasizes the utility of the hands that the lovers use to feed each other, and it gestures implicitly toward the skillful hand that sewed the lovers in the skins, leaving an opening through which they might reach out and reach toward each other. Up to this point in the story, the lovers have used their hands as animal feet – these people disguised as bears go on all fours like hounds, the narrator tells in a curious animal comparison (“A .IIII. piés vont comme viautre”, l. 3147). Although the enterprising Melior had tried to gather berries and nuts before the wolf brought food, and presumably she had used her hands to pick up the fruit, the narrator does not say so explicitly. He saves the description of the lovers' ability to reach out through the openings in the skins for the scene of eating and for an emphasis on the lovers' use of their hands to feed each other.

What I am identifying as an insistence on the human hand and on the humanity of the hand that reaches out to eat is echoed in other medieval medical and scientific understandings of the hand. For some ancient and medieval philosophers, the hand demonstrates human distinction from other animals, particularly in relation to eating. Aristotle notes that the joints of human arms bend in the opposite direction to those of quadrupeds “to facilitate the bringing of food to the mouth, and other uses to which they are put”.⁹ Isidore of Seville writes that “the hand, *manus*, is so named because it is of service, *munus*, to the whole body. It gives food to the mouth,

⁸ Scoduto's translation of *beste mue* as “transformed beast” is wrong; see her discussion in *Metamorphoses*, p. 98, 104.

⁹ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, trans. A.L. Peck, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1961, IV.x, p. 375.

does all work and carries out all things; by it, we give and receive".¹⁰ William of St. Thierry describes the physiological distinction of humans as dependent on the hand which allows man to eat without taking his food directly from the ground: the hand serves the mouth, it serves food to the mouth and, as a result of this service, the human mouth may cultivate an "articulated and modulated" voice with which to speak reason.¹¹ In William's view, humans speak because they have hands. And hands and mouths together serve reason through writing: "it is a great gift to reason that we can speak through our hands through writing, that the sound of letters can in some way be compressed into characters made by our hands".¹² For William, speaking with hands means writing. He does not recognize that hands might also speak, through gesture, although some medieval thinkers recognized gesture as a kind of animal language. (I will come back to this point below.)

For Guillaume and Melior, the hand gestures against a ground of animal skin: "Cascuns a traite sa main nue / Fors de la pel c'avoit vestue". The verb *vestir* (*avoit vestue*) suggests that the disguise is like clothing, that it is a fur as much as a skin. However, *pel* may recall the skin prepared for the page, and the reach of human hand against animal hide may figure the inscription of texts on skins through the faculty of the human hand – the story may recall the making of the book that records it.¹³ S. Kay has called this kind of recall a suture, "a short-circuiting between the usually distinct levels of text and book which might entirely escape conscious perception, but which nevertheless obtrudes on the reader."¹⁴ Kay asks, "to what extent do texts written on parchment give readers the sense of having an animal skin?"¹⁵ Such a question is especially pertinent for *Guillaume de Palerne*, a romance that represents characters who inhabit animal skins. If the hand that reaches out from

¹⁰ W. D. Sharpe, trans., "Isidore of Seville: The Medical Writings", *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s. 54, 2, 1964, p. 43.

¹¹ "All the beasts have feet where men have hands. Although nature has given man hands for many life functions in war and in peace, yet above all it is for this: if man had no hands, his mouth would have to be fashioned like those of quadrupeds so he could take food from the ground. The length of his neck would have to be increased, his nose shaped like that of a brute animal. He would have to have heavy lips, thick, coarse and projecting, suited to cutting fodder. The fleshy part around the teeth would have to be solid and rough, as in dogs and other animals that eat meat. Thus if hands had not been provided for the body, an articulated and modulated voice could not exist. Man would have to bleat or bark or make some other kinds of animal noise. But now, with the hand serving the mouth, the mouth serves reason and through it the intellectual soul which is spiritual and incorporeal. This is something not shared with irrational animals". B. McGinn, ed., *Three Treatises on Man: A Cistercian Anthropology*, Kalamazoo, Mich., Cistercian Publications, 1977, II.2, p. 131. Thanks to Scott Hiley and Karl Steel for the reference. See discussion in K. Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2011, p. 48-49.

¹² *Three Treatises*, p. 132.

¹³ Thanks to Sarah Kay for this insight.

¹⁴ S. Kay, "Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading", *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2, 1, 2011, p. 13-32, at p. 15. See also S. Kay, "Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works", *JMEMS* 36, 1, 2006, p. 35-73.

¹⁵ S. Kay, "Legible Skins", p. 17.

the animal skin may recall a scribal hand on a writing surface, it also calls attention to surface – to the skin. Not only then is the skin a ground against which the human hand becomes newly visible in its possible relation to animal skin, but the reaching hand may also foreground the skin as a surface – the hand also makes the skin newly visible.

Although only humans wear the skin of other species as clothing, and although Alexandrine sews the lovers into the skins as though into clothing, the text always describes these coverings as skins (*piax*).¹⁶ In fact, we are told that the lovers wear clothes under the skins. The skins are a disguise to be put on or taken off at will, and when the disguise is discovered, the lovers remove the white bear skins and put on deer skins to continue their journey. The story describes the lovers' adaptation to the animal skins: they walk on all fours during the day, the narrator tells us, and they look more realistic when they go on all four feet than when they walk on two (l. 3385-90). Even after the lovers reach the relative safety of Palermo and the garden of Queen Felise, they hesitate to abandon their skins.

Guilliaumes est avec sa drue
 Sor l'erbe verde, fresche et drue,
 Iluec ensamble s'esbanient,
 Jouent et parolent et rient
 Et devisent de lor affaire,
 Comment a chief en porront traire,
 Se plus es piax se maintenront.
 Mais en la fin devisé ont
 Que ja des piax n'isteront fors,
 Ja ne descouverront lors cors,
 Se de lor beste n'ont congié;
 De ce se sont entrafichié. (l. 4909-20)

Guillaume and Melior imagine an end to their flight as the freedom to leave the skins, and they defer such an end by deferring to the judgment of the beast who has protected them on their journey.

This passage marks a transition in the narrative. The narrator's use of the possessive article points to a relationship or alliance between the lovers and "their beast", the werewolf Alfonso, and that relationship is described in terms of obedience. Although Guillaume and Melior have depended on the wolf for food and guidance, this is the first time they have explicitly expressed their obedience to his directions. Moreover, their deferral to their beast's permission ("se de lor beste n'ont congié", l. 4919) may suggest the relationship between protection and obedience that is constitutive of sovereignty, according to Derrida's reading of Carl Schmitt in *La bête et le souverain*.¹⁷ The implicit identification of the beast as sovereign corresponds to a shift of narrative focus from the lovers' flight to the wolf's exile –

¹⁶ We do find descriptions of the characters wearing furs elsewhere in the romance. For example, when Alfonso is transformed into a man, he sheds his wolfskin and puts on "un blanc hermine tot forré", l. 7836.

¹⁷ J. Derrida, *La bête et le souverain*, vol. 1, ed. M. Lisse, M-L. Mallet, and G. Michaud, Paris, Galilée, 2008, p. 72-73.

as the lovers are reintegrated into human society, the wolf's exclusion from court becomes a central concern of the narrative and, I will suggest, a figure for the affinity between the animal and the sovereign, as Agamben's definition of the *homo sacer* may help to elucidate. This moment in the narrative also prepares the werewolf's move from the forest, where he is the beast who is also sovereign, to the court, where he is the beast who underlines the paradox of the sovereign. Guillaume, too, is implicated in the romance's representation of the sovereign in the skin of an animal, and a reading of story of the young man in animal disguise and alongside the story of the prince imprisoned in the wolf suggests that *Guillaume de Palerne* uses animal skins to think about sovereignty.

Second Skins

After the lovers, led by their wolf, have found the safety of Queen Felise's garden, the queen looks out, sees the two lovers in their deerskins and marvels at the love these two animals demonstrate for each other. Then she notices that the skins have begun to dry and shrink. She sees the clothing underneath them and understands that these are people wearing deer skins. The queen's councilor Moysans has heard of the lovers' escape from Rome and he identifies Guillaume and Melior. He further identifies Guillaume as the champion whose arrival was foretold in the queen's earlier dream of being saved from wild animals by a white wolf accompanied by two white bears who then transform into stags marked with portraits of her son and a beautiful maiden. In the queen's dream the lovers have become the animals whose skins they inhabit. Even though Queen Felise understands that the animals of her dream were a symbolic representation and that the deer in her garden are disguised people, when she decides to approach Guillaume and Melior, Felise apparently thinks that she should put on an animal skin.¹⁸ The queen's adoption of the deerskin introduces another scene in which the human hand is foregrounded against animal skin. Here though, the human hand reaches out to communicate through gesture, and speech issues from the animal skin.

The disguised queen comes into the garden on all fours and lies down close to the lovers. When Guillaume and Melior see her, they use their fingers to point the deer out to each other: "Chascuns le moustre l'autre au doit" (l. 5194). They marvel that the animal is not afraid of them – if she knew what they really were, she would not stay with them, Guillaume says to Melior (l. 5199-202). Then the queen speaks to the lovers from inside the deerskin. Guillaume and Melior are frightened and they cross themselves with their right hands ("Seignié se sont de lor mains destres, / Quant il entendent la roïne. / De paor tramble la meschine / Car ele n'ert pas a sseür", l. 5210-13). Guillaume, himself also speaking from inside an animal's skin, demands to know if the deer speaks through the power of God or if she is some other, more dangerous kind of spirit. The queen replies that she is a beast like Guillaume; she shares his appearance and his nature ("Si sui tex beste comme vos, / D'autel samblant, d'autel nature", l. 5224-25). Queen Felise names herself as a beast and as a human, like the disguised young man, but in claiming to be a beast like

¹⁸ A lacuna in the manuscript has eliminated any explanation of the queen's decision to put on a deerskin.

Guillaume, she also claims that he is like her – a beast and a sovereign, though Guillaume’s sovereignty has yet to be revealed to any of the characters present. The first step toward that revelation seems to be the uncovering of his human body. When the lovers understand that the speaking deer is a woman wearing an animal skin, they agree to abandon their own deerskins in exchange for Queen Felise’s protection.

The lovers’ curious failure to recognize the queen’s deerskin disguise adds yet another example of misrecognition to the encounter.¹⁹ Although the queen knows the identity of the disguised lovers, and although she unwittingly suggests that she and Guillaume share a “natural” likeness, she does not know that Guillaume is the son she lost. Nor does Guillaume recognize his mother, and none of the three characters disguised in deer skins knows that the wolf, too, is a man in the skin of an animal. Only the werewolf Alfonso knows the hidden relationships among the characters and the intrigues that have separated mother and son, exiled Guillaume from his rightful throne, and denied Alfonso himself his birthright. But this mute beast, this *beste mue*, cannot speak to reveal them. If the lovers’ decision to obey their beast identifies the sovereign position of the guardian wolf, the subsequent restoration of both the wolf and Guillaume himself to their proper places in noble lineage depends on the wolf’s ability to communicate the secrets he keeps.

Throughout their flight from the Emperor of Rome’s men, the wolf guides, feeds, and protects Guillaume and Melior, and he wins their trust through his actions. As he leads them, he communicates with the lovers through gesture: “Samblant lor fait, cline sa teste, / C’après lui voisent, il si font” (l. 4570-71). Guillaume perceives the benevolent intentions of the wolf and believes that he has reason and intelligence: “Bien pens et croi que entendés / Et que raison et sens avés” (l. 4377-78).²⁰ Yet the wolf’s reason seems to be limited to intelligent reaction: in Guillaume’s view, the wolf has nothing to communicate outside of the forest.

After Guillaume defeats the army of the King of Spain who besieged Felise, demanding her lands and her daughter in marriage, the wolf appears in the queen’s garden and gestures to those who observe him from the window.

Gardent aval, el vergier voient
 Ou li garox i ert venus;
 Mais tel merveille ne vit nus:
 Les piés ot joins et sor la teste
 Les avoit mis la fiere beste;
 Se se drece sor ceus derriere.
 A simple vis, a simpe chiere
 Encline la chambre et la tor
 Et les dames et le signor,
 Puis se refiert en la gaudine. (l. 5838-47)

¹⁹ On recognition in relation to interpellation, see H. R. Miller, ““Hey, you look like a prince!” Ideology and Mutual Subject Recognition in *Guillaume de Palerne*”, in this volume.

²⁰ The following lines may indicate that Guillaume recognizes that the wolf is something other than he appears (Je ne sai que ce est de vous, / Quë en nule riens ne fus lous..., l. 4379-80), but a lacuna in the text suggests that Guillaume’s sentence is incomplete and his claim that “if you were not a wolf...” would have been qualified.

The queen thinks that the mute beast has made a sign to them (“...ceste beste mue, / Com fait samblent nos a ci fait?”, l. 5854-55). She asks Guillaume what the wolf wants to communicate, and he answers that animal’s gestures signal the honor and good that will come to them. Guillaume reads the wolf’s gestures as a portent rather than as a language. Whereas the queen thinks the wolf makes a sign, Guillaume thinks he is a sign: the wolf is a premonition, like the animals in the queen’s dream, and Guillaume provides an interpretation.²¹

Later, after Guillaume defeats the King of Spain’s younger son in another battle, the wolf appears again.²² The queen again questions what this beast is and what it wants from them (“Ceste beste qu’a et que velt, / Qui nos requert?”, l. 6387-88). The day before he bowed once and this time he bows twice – these gestures must have some meaning, she claims (“N’est pas doutance / Que ce ne soit senefiance”, l. 6391-92). In the queen’s view, the wolf asks for a response, but Guillaume again reads the wolf’s gestures as a symbol to be interpreted, rather than a language to be understood: “...ainc si france beste ne vi. / Si croi qu’ele nos senefie / Honor et joie et signorie / Qui nos vendra par tans, je cuit” (l. 6396-99). Although he earlier recognized that the wolf understood him and claimed that the wolf had reason and intelligence (l. 4378), Guillaume’s reaction casts the wolf’s gesture as a sign rather than as a communication. He fails to understand that the wolf’s gesture may invite a response, and Guillaume himself reacts rather than responding.

When the defeated King of Spain comes with his men to surrender to Felise, the wolf appears a third time. He enters the castle and comes into the room where the king and his entourage have assembled along with Queen Felise’s court. Then he approaches the King of Spain.

Atant es vos que li garox
 Par mi la sale, voiant tous,
 Tres devant le roi s’agenoille,
 De lermes tot les piés li moille.
 A ses .II. poes prent son pié,
 Estroitement l’a embracié;
 Ensement par samblant l’opose
 C’on l’aprovast d’aucune chose.
 Atant s’en part et puis l’encline

²¹ See discussion in J.-D. Gollut, “Songes de la littérature épique et romanesque en ancien français. Aspects de la narration”, in A. Corbellari and J.-Y. Tilliette, ed., *Le rêve médiéval*, Geneva, Droz, 2007, p. 37-52, at p. 45-48.

²² Gardent aval, el vergier voient
 Ou revenus ert li garox;
 A terre ot mis les .II. genous
 Devant Guillaume et la roïne
 Et les puceles, ses encline
 Molt simplement .II. fois la beste,
 Puis tient sa voie, ne s’arreste. (l. 6374-80)

Et puis Guillaume et la roïne
Et les puceles ensement. (l. 7207-17)

The description of the wolf's supplication before the king recalls Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, where the apparently savage werewolf kisses a king's foot to demonstrate submission in a feudal gesture of homage.²³ Here too the expressive animal feet communicate through gesture, "par semblant". And finally Guillaume understands that the beast wants to communicate something:

Guillaumes, quant voit l'acointance
Qu'a fait li leus par demoustrance
Le roi d'Espaigne et son samblant,
Ne laira pas ne li demant...
S'il set por voir, que il li die
Que cele beste senefie. (l. 7259-62, 7269-70)

Guillaume's question, "Que cele beste senefie", could be a question about what this beast represents. As in his earlier readings of the wolf's gestures, such a question would cast the wolf as an abstract animal-as-sign. The first time the wolf gestures to Guillaume and the queen, he joins his front feet, puts them on his head ("Les piés ot joins et sor la teste", l. 5841), and rises up on *ceus derriere* (l. 5843) to bow toward the tower. The text describes the wolf's front feet (*piés*) as though they were arms or hands, and it uses the word for human feet to describe the wolf's gesture. Guillaume does not recognize that the wolf might respond to his disguised charge's return to human form with an indication of feudal homage, nor does Guillaume recognize that the wolf might ask him for a response.

Here, however, he seems to recognize that the wolf is an agent of meaning who communicates something in his demonstration of familiar fealty to the king, and his question addresses the meaning conveyed by the beast's gesture ("Que cele beste senefie"). The wolf's gestures are finally read as a communication when he takes the king's feet in his own, and the description of this gesture emphasizes the wolf's animal anatomy: "A ses .II. poes prent son pié" (l. 7211). The narrator distinguishes between the wolf's animal feet, *poes*, and the king's feet, his *piés*, mentioned twice in the passage, but the wolf uses his *poes* as though they were hands, to take, to hold, to reach out. The wolf makes a gesture of homage, but also of entreaty: "Ensement par samblant l'opose / C'on l'aprovast d'aucune chose" (l. 7212-14). The verb *oposer* in this context may suggest a feudal obligation, or even a filial obligation, and the king begins to recognize it as the latter. The wolf's eloquent gesture, the entreaty he communicates "par samblant" (l. 7213), causes the Spanish king to remember stories he had heard about his wife's transformation of his elder

²³ Des que il a le rei choisi,
vers lui curut querre merci.
Il l'aveit pris par sun estrié,
la jambe li baise e le pié. (*Bisclavret*, l. 145-49)
Lais de Marie de France, ed. K. Warnke, trans. L. Harf-Lancner, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1990.

son into a wolf. Although he didn't believe the rumors before, he now understands that they were true.

The wolf's ability to access human understanding is not surprising, of course, since the wolf is not merely a wolf, but a man in a wolf's skin, and the gestural literacy of the wolf may simply serve to identify the humanity that inhabits the wolf's body. But the emphasis on the wolf's feet suggests that something more is at stake. In contrast to the description of human hands reaching out against animal skin, here the animality of the wolf's feet is made visible in contrast to the king's human feet and the wolf's human-like gestures with his paws. Whereas the white bear skins served as an animal ground on which human hands could appear, here the human is the ground for the animal.

The wolf gestures because he cannot speak, a characteristic of his animality recalled in the lovers' repeated naming of the *beste mue*, since the ability to speak, like the ability to reason, is a way of figuring human difference from other animals. In medieval literary texts, speaking animals are magic or marvelous beings, as in Marie de France's *Guigemar*, or they are anthropomorphized figures of human behavior, as in fables or the *Roman de Renart*. Medieval literature also contains examples of animals whose gestures convey meaning – I have already mentioned *Bisclavret*, and *Guillaume de Palerne* offers another example when the Count of Apulia's fierce warhorse recognizes his master's son, Guillaume: "Vers lui s'en vait humeliant, / De grant amor li fait samblant" (l. 5503-4). Both the werewolf's gesture of homage and the horse's gesture of recognition are examples of submission, so accordingly, the wolf's ability to communicate submission through gestures could locate him more securely in animality, as taking his place under the human dominance that defines animal-human relations, rather than as revealing his hidden humanity.²⁴ But in *Guillaume de Palerne*, the human domination of animals has already been put into question by the lovers' obedience to the sovereign wolf who protects them.

This wolf is neither domesticated nor hunted, and his anomalous relation to humans makes him something of a liminal being. Agamben has identified the werewolf as a figure of the *homo sacer*, one who lives in a state of exception, the outlaw who is like the sovereign in that they are both outside the law: the *homo sacer* because he is banned, and the sovereign because he has the power to suspend the law.²⁵ In *Guillaume de Palerne*, the wolf's state of exception is sanctioned by Guillaume himself. As the wolf leaves the King of Spain after making his supplication, the men in the court jump up to chase after him, but Guillaume forbids them to kill the wolf:

De totes pars saillent la gent;
As lances corent et as dars,
Prendent guisarmes et faussars;

²⁴ On animal submission, see K. Steel, *How to Make a Human*.

²⁵ *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 107. For another reading of the romance that uses Agamben to argue for the persistence of aristocratic privilege and the violence on which it is based, see R. P. Schiff, "Cross-channel becomings animal: Primal courtliness in *Guillaume de Palerne* and *William of Palerne*", *Exemplaria*, 21, 4, 2009, p. 418-38.

Après le leu est grans li cris.
 Ja fust de totes pars ocis,
 Quant li bers Guillaumes saut sus
 Et jure Dieu et ses vertus,
 Se nul i a qui mal li face,
 Ja n'iert tex hom, tres bien le sache,
 N'en prenge de son cors venjance. (l. 7218-27)

Here Guillaume assumes the position of sovereign protector formerly held by the wolf. But Agamben's definition of the relationship between sovereignty and bare life may suggest another, less restorative reading of sovereignty in this passage. Agamben defines "bare life" as life excluded from the law, but at the same time, included under the rule of law in the form of its exclusion. Bare life then names a space in which the law is both suspended and established.²⁶ Guillaume's order of protection defines a similar space for the wolf. It functions like a ban and reveals the formal structure of sovereignty in the two poles of the sovereign exception. It outlaws the wolf, exiles him to the forest, even as it declares the exemption of the wolf from the armed men's *venjance*.

Bare life and sovereign power meet in Guillaume's sovereign exile of the werewolf Alfonso. But the outlaw and the sovereign also converge in the figures of the sovereign werewolf and the young man who dons an animal skin to flee Rome and the emperor's law.²⁷ Moreover, Guillaume's ban, spoken with sovereign authority from outside the authorizing structure of sovereignty, opens the question of the nature of sovereign speech and, as elsewhere in this romance, poses that question in terms of animal/human difference.

The animal gestures foregrounded by the contrast of *poes* against *piés* focuses the debate about what the wolf's gestures signify: can animals communicate? Such a question may be related to a renewed interest in animal gestures and their communicative possibilities in the 12th century, when, Jean-Claude Schmitt tells us, "le geste est redevenu bon à penser".²⁸ Animal gestures came to be understood as a kind of language and, it was thought, if animals used language, then language could not be a sign of human distinction. For example, Guibert de Nogent writes that beasts communicate among themselves with gestures and with voice almost as well as men do. Man's superiority over animals is not then located in his ability to speak, but in his ability to reason and in his proximity to the divine.²⁹ Implicit in Guibert's description is the conviction that animal communication does not include reason, because only humans have the ability to reason. Since reason belongs only to men, animals may communicate through gesture and even through sound, but for medieval philosophers the inability to reason makes such communication utilitarian

²⁶ For a probing and important reading of Agamben in relation to medieval literature, see E. Campbell, "Homo sacer: Power, life, and the sexual body in Old French saints' lives", *Exemplaria*, 18, 2, 2006, p. 233-73.

²⁷ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 110-11.

²⁸ J.-C. Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'occident médiéval*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 135.

²⁹ Guibert de Nogent, *Moralium in Genesim*, I, 31, *PL* 156, col. 59D (secundum suum modum gestu ac vocibus). Cited by Schmitt, *La raison*, p. 139.

and instinctual. Animal language is a code, a speech without reason; in modern terms, we might describe it as reactive rather than responsive.

The opposition between response and reaction has been taken as a defining difference between humans and other animals, most notably by Lacan, and it is critiqued by Derrida in his work on animals, both in *L'animal que donc je suis* and in *La bête et le souverain*: “le préjugé le plus puissant, le plus impassible, le plus dogmatique au sujet de l’animal ne consistait pas à dire qu’il ne communique pas, qu’il ne signifie pas et n’a pas de signe à sa disposition, mais qu’il ne répond pas. Il réagit mais il ne répond pas”.³⁰ Elaborating on the implications of a distinction that opposes human language and animal code, and human response and animal reaction, Derrida notes the alignment of freedom, responsibility, and decision with human response, while the hard-wired, coded reaction implies the fixity of the programmed animal.³¹ Derrida refuses the broad distinction between reaction and response which does not hold, he claims, even within the human.³²

Guillaume de Palerne recounts a similar questioning of the distinction between animal reaction and human response in the werewolf’s care and protection of Guillaume and Melior, and in the lovers’ dependence on and obedience to the wolf. A pointed instance of such questioning is represented in the wolf’s communication to the court, and especially to the king, where the verb *oposer* indicates that his gestures solicit a response. The romance describes the wolf’s interactions in terms of a question: is the beast a sign or does he make a sign? This is a question about how to read animal gestures, but it is also a question about how to read the animal, and the story’s resolution offers a lesson about a particular wolf’s responsiveness.

In the skin

Once the Spanish king suspects that his own son appears before him in the skin of a wolf, he sends for his wife and she admits that she used magic to disinherit Alfonso. She takes out her charms to reverse the spell. “Let us see”, she says, “what kind of beast this skin covers” (“Mais or verrons... Quel beste ceste piax acuevre”, l. 7690-92). She uses a magic ring to transform the wolf back into a man and to liberate him, she says, from the prison of the wolf’s skin that has covered him for so long: “Ci sui por toi garir venue / Et toi geter de ceste mue / Qui tant longement t’a covert” (l. 7687-88).³³ The king’s son is thus freed from the prison, the *mue*, the animal skin of the mute beast, the *beste mue*.

The animal skin mutes not just voice, but identity, and not just human, but chivalric identity.³⁴ The phrase that the queen used to describe Alfonso, “Let us see what kind of beast this skin covers” (“Mais or verrons... Quel beste ceste piax

³⁰ J. Derrida, *La bête et le souverain*, p. 90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³² “Ma réserve porte seulement sur la pureté, la rigueur et l’indivisibilité de la frontière qui sépare, déjà chez ‘nous-les-hommes’, la réaction de la réponse: et par conséquent la pureté, la rigueur, l’indivisibilité surtout du concept de responsabilité – et par conséquent du concept de souveraineté qui s’y tient.” *Ibid.*, p. 167-68.

³³ The use of the stone to reverse the spell recalls the anonymous *Melion*.

³⁴ See discussion in Miller, “Hey, you look like a prince!”.

acuevre”, l. 7690-92), recalls the disguised queen’s claim to share Guillaume’s “nature” as a human sovereign in an animal skin (“Si sui tex beste comme vos / D’autel samblant, d’autel nature”, l. 5224-25). It is also this very phrase that Guillaume used to describe himself earlier in the romance. As the lovers fled from the emperor’s men, he lamented that he did not have his arms so that he could do battle against them to protect Melior:

Se j’avoie mes garnemens,
Cheval, escu, espee et lance,
Par tans verroient ma puissance,
Saroient au commencier l’uevre
Quel beste ceste piax acuevre. (l. 4050-54).³⁵

In *Guillaume de Palerne* the “beast” under the skin is always a human. Moreover, for Guillaume and Alfonso, the “skinning” of the animal reveals not just a man, but a sovereign – Guillaume receives the rule of Apulia, and Alfonso is reinstated as the King of Spain’s heir. It is as though *Guillaume de Palerne* were a fable, *avant la lettre*, of some of Derrida’s claims about the shared being of the beast and the sovereign³⁶:

la bête étant le souverain, le souverain étant la bête, l’un et l’autre se trouvant l’un et l’autre engagés, en vérité changés, voire échangés dans un devenir-bête du souverain ou dans un devenir-souverain de la bête, le passage de l’un à l’autre, l’analogie, la ressemblance, l’alliance, l’hymen tenant à ce qu’ils partagent tous deux cette très singulière position d’être hors-la-loi, au-dessus ou à l’écart du droit, la bête ignorant le droit et le souverain ayant le droit de suspendre le droit, de se placer au-dessus de la loi qu’il est, qu’il fait, qu’il institue, dont il décide souverainement.³⁷

As a fable about sovereignty, *Guillaume de Palerne* represents the beast-sovereign as an outlaw, and it recounts the preservation of proper sovereign succession as the result of a becoming-beast: the wolf that saves Guillaume and communicates the secrets that restore Guillaume and Alfonso to their respective thrones, and Guillaume himself, the beast in the queen’s prophetic dream, who will come to save her. But the romance is not just a literal representation of the conflation of the beast and the sovereign. It is a story that turns on the beast’s gestures and on the wolf’s request for a response from his father the king, a response that allows the animal to regain his sovereign humanity. In its overlapping plots about becoming-beast and becoming-sovereign, in its debates about how to read a beast’s gestures, and in its revelations of what lies under the skin, *Guillaume de Palerne* is a fable about fables, a story about the fictional gesture of “making known” that Derrida describes as *faire savoir*.

³⁵ Behrmann, “‘Quel beste ceste piax acuevre’”, explores the characterization more broadly.

³⁶ Derrida describes his demonstration as “performative avant la lettre, en quelque sorte, et pragmatique avant d’être juridique et rationnelle et philosophique”, *La bête et le souverain*, p. 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59-60.

Le fabuleux de la fable ne tient pas seulement à sa nature langagière, au fait que la fable est constituée de mots. Le fabuleux engage aussi l'acte, le geste, l'action, ne serait-ce que l'opération qui consiste à produire du récit, à organiser, à disposer le discours de façon à raconter, à mettre en scène des vivants, à accréditer l'interprétation d'un récit, à "faire savoir", à faire le savoir, à faire performativement, à opérer le savoir.³⁸

Guillaume de Palerne is not a fable like, for example, the classic story of the wolf and the lamb that Derrida discusses.³⁹ Like other fables, "The Wolf and the Lamb" uses animals to illustrate human behavior or customs. By contrast, *Guillaume de Palerne* works against the notion that animal behavior is to be read as a lesson or sign about humans, or at least that is what the debates about the wolf's meaning would seem to suggest, particularly when the King of Spain finally understands that the wolf asks him for a response. In place of a moral, the romance offers the revelation of secrets that are known to the reader but not to the protagonists. This is why the story seems to be a fable about fables – it is a story about making known: not just the making known of meaning in an animal's actions, but of communication in an animal's gestures; not just of secret identities hidden in skins, but of narrative inscribed on skin; not just of the human in the skin of an animal, but of the sovereign in the beast.⁴⁰

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³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁹ Derrida takes "The Reason of the Strongest" as the title for the first section of *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005.

⁴⁰ Many thanks to Kathryn Babayan, Artemis Leontis, Yopie Prins, and Elizabeth Wingrove for challenging readings and suggestions.