“Quel beste ceste piax acuevre” : Idyll and the Animal in Guillaume de Palerne’s Family Romance

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Abstract: In Guillaume de Palerne, a curious interval finds a werewolf taking on the role of father figure to the hero, himself dressed as a bear. This animalized iteration of the Freudian family romance creates an idyll: a time and space in which, through Guillaume’s regression, the categories of his human identity are subject to experimentation.

Résumé : Au sein de Guillaume de Palerne se trouve un intervalle curieux où un loup-garou assume le rôle de père pour le héros, lui-même vêtu en ours. Cette mise en scène animalise le roman familial et donne lieu à une idylle où, grâce à la régression que son temps et son espace à part favorisent, Guillaume peut expérimenter les catégories de son identité humaine.

For nearly a century, Guillaume de Palerne has found a place in the genre of the roman idyllique. M. Lot-Borodine includes it in her 1913 study of five examples of Le Roman idyllique au moyen âge, because she sees at its heart a depiction of innocent, childish love:

C’est la peinture d’un amour ingénue qui naît et se développe dans deux jeunes cœurs, l’histoire des fiançailles d’enfants qui se sourient et se tendent les mains dès l’âge le plus tendre. C’est donc là un thème idyllique qui évoque en nous le rêve de l’âge d’or, la nostalgie du paradis perdu, où règne l’innocence que le désir lui-même ne flétrit pas.¹

Lot-Borodine discovers this âge d’or represented in only a small section of Guillaume de Palerne, however. Focusing on the passages that describe the budding love between Melior, the Holy Roman Emperor Nathaniel’s young daughter, and Guillaume, a valet of mysterious parentage at Nathaniel’s court, Lot-Borodine is uninterested by the rest of the text’s expansive and strange canvas.

The romance tells in 9600 lines the tale of its hero’s dislocation from and eventual restoration to his proper place as heir to the throne of Palermo. This plot is fleshed out with courtships and marriages, sorcery and shape-changing, court intrigues, and many battles; it requires of Guillaume a long, perilous journey.² Guillaume and Melior exchange declarations of love in the first quarter of the text. The hero has already been separated at the age of four from his royal parents, King Embron and Queen Felise, through the intervention of a werewolf; discovered and raised by a good-hearted cowherd; then brought to Rome by Nathaniel, where the


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lad demonstrates redoubtable skill on the field of war. When the hero and Melior leave Rome together disguised as bears, the werewolf guides them to Palermo. There, many more events must unfold before the protagonist comes into his true, mature identity as King of Palermo then Holy Roman Emperor, with Melior at his side.

Even cropping out from this picture such a small sliver as Guillaume and Melior’s time spent in Nathaniel’s gardens, Lot-Borodine acknowledges that it deviates from her idyllic model. The children do not truly grow up together; and “Guillaume étant un enfant trouvé, l’empereur de Rome ne peut songer à l’unir à sa fille unique”. She considers these imperfections minor, though, compared to the mess surrounding “la peinture d’un amour ingénu”. As soon as the young lovers leave Rome, the idyll of this roman idyllique is over, “et avec elle la meilleure partie du roman. Ce qui suit n’est qu’un mélange incohérent d’aventures et de merveilles”.

Lot-Borodine displays particular dismay at the author’s introduction of the werewolf:

Le plus grave reproche que nous puissions lui adresser est celui d’avoir, en introduisant le personnage du loup-garou, dispersé notre attention et dédouble l’action elle-même. Dès le début, deux histoires, étrangères l’une à l’autre, s’entrecroisent et se partagent notre intérêt, bien que d’une façon inégale. L’unité d’action en souffre et les amours de Guillaume et de Melior, qui devraient être le ressort du roman, ne forme plus à la fin qu’un épisode perdu dans un fouillis d’aventures extraordinaires.

For her, the representation of Guillaume and Melior’s innocent courtship in the Roman garden is an isolated achievement within an unsettled and unsettling whole.

Recent studies of idyllic romance have read Guillaume de Palerne through an interest in the genre’s representation of a young couple’s relationship to parental figures. Such an approach firmly anchors the roman idyllique in familial, social, and political concerns, and has generated valuable insight into the genre’s experimentation with established gender and sexual norms. M. Vuagnoux-Uhlig begins Le Couple en herbe, published in 2008, by rejecting Lot-Borodine’s limited definition of the roman idyllique as heavily reliant upon generic disqualifications (“Le roman idyllique ne se laisserait donc définir qu’en creux, exception faite de la perspective surannée selon laquelle il décrirait l’amour candide de deux bambins”). Examining instead “la succession de deux couples, le couple parental et le couple héroïque”, Vuagnoux-Uhlig finds that idyllic romance proposes “un idéal lignager, sentimental et politique qui renouvelle la conception du roman nuptial”. The conflict between generations resolves in favor of the young couple, whose “équilibre” is marked by the “complémentarité parfaite entre ressemblance et différence” echoed

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3 Lot-Borodine, p. 240.
4 Ibid., p. 263.
5 Ibid., p. 239-240.
in the two-couple structure. Similarly, R. Brown-Grant’s 2008 French Romance of the Later Middle Ages: Gender, Morality, and Desire explores the subversive implications of the young lovers’ resolve to marry despite parental disapproval. Both scholars conclude, however, that in Guillaume de Palerne social conventions are ultimately upheld. For Brown-Grant, Guillaume de Palerne, like other romances whose endings reveal the lovers to be an appropriate social match, wants “to ‘have it both ways’”, questioning and preserving “the social order”. But for Vuagnoux-Uhlig, idyll and the drama of Guillaume’s lost and found identity cannot coexist. The text serves Vuagnoux-Uhlig as a negative example of the roman idyllique, one that only borrows the genre’s specific “renewed” ideal in order to refashion an orthodox, male-dominated “idéal de perfection matrimoniale et politique”. Vuagnoux-Uhlig argues persuasively that the stakes of Guillaume de Palerne are indeed those of the protagonist’s conventional “accomplissement social”.

This narrative dominance of the hero’s “roman familial” upsets an idyllique ideal of reciprocity within the “couple héroïque”, and affirms a traditional masculine social and political authority.

Although the lovers’ flight from Rome has not garnered much attention from these critics, I will argue that it forms an idyll within the story of Guillaume’s “accomplissement social”, in which the nature and limits of the norms defining the hero’s identity as a young man are tested. This portion of the text, a marvelous interval apart, finds Guillaume and Melior both covered head to toe in white bear skins as the werewolf Alfonso leads them to Palermo. It is significant not so much as a portrait of the idyllic couple, but rather as a key element in discovering Guillaume’s true identity. The flight, and the unique opportunity for experimentation it offers the protagonist, brings him to the threshold of his rightful place. A phase of Guillaume de Palerne’s family romance with an remarkable animal dimension, this different kind of idyll constitutes a time and space on the road to a conventional conclusion in which conventions are subject to experimentation. Clad as a bear and cared for by a wolf, Guillaume experiences his identity as at once both youth and infant, human and animal. If the romance’s larger plot deals with the hero’s loss and recovery of his identity, here, this confrontation of categories explores the very bases of the social role later to be fully assumed. To investigate the nature of this idyll in Guillaume de Palerne, I will begin with a discussion of its family romance

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9 Ibid., p. 29.
10 Ibid., 93.
11 Vuagnoux-Uhlig, p. 173. Vuagnoux-Uhlig gives special attention to the role of women in the roman idyllique, which affords boy and girl equal space in the couple héroïque and often emphasizes the mother-daughter relationship. Guillaume de Palerne, she rightly points out, represents a clear interest in Guillaume over Melior, while in the most important tie between the heroic and parental couples, Felise stands in for Guillaume’s father.
12 Ibid., p. 171-172, 176, 179.
13 The animal element falls clearly for Lot-Borodine under the heading of “un mélange incohérent d’aventures et de merveilles”, and she describes this “moyen excentrique” as part of the unaccountable, supernatural distraction that terminates the idyll. Brown-Grant and Vuagnoux-Uhlig simply note the means of the lovers’ escape without comment. See Lot-Borodine, p. 265; Brown-Grant, p. 91; Vuagnoux-Uhlig, p. 177.
and the appearance of animality there; I will then turn to the episode of the flight to examine how its animalized iteration of a Freudian family romance opens for Guillaume a temporary, experimental period of regression.

*Family Romance and the Anthropological Machine*

The final movement of *Guillaume de Palerme*, which sees its hero’s accession to kingship and the taking-up of his proper social role, begins with the telling of a secret history. Alfonso reveals Guillaume’s parentage:

… [C]is vassax aidier vos vint,
Mais nus ne set dont il vos vint
Ne qui il est ne de quelle terre;
S’a maintenue vostre guerre,
L’est desconfite et pris le roi.
Je vous dirai en boine foi
Ne s’en doit nus esmerveillier:
Bien doit li fix la mere aidier.
...
Dame, sachiés certainement
La terre est soie et tu sa mere.
Li rois Embrons il fu ses peres,
Ses peres fu li vaillans rois.
Dame, tu le portas .IX. mois,
Tu le portas, de toi nasqui… (l. 8083-8090, 8096-8101)

Alfonso goes on to explain that he was the werewolf who snatched away the four-year-old Guillaume. He did so to prevent Guillaume’s power-hungry uncle from poisoning the child, and was inspired to act because his own lycanthropy resulted directly from his stepmother’s political ambitions. Just restored by Brande to his human form, Alfonso can finally give voice to what happened, and these revelations allow Guillaume to claim his place on the throne.

This passage can be described, following D. Maddox, as a “specular narrative”. Alfonso’s analeptic speech summarizes events contained previously within the story but presents information new to Guillaume and Felise, and so causes the protagonist “[to encounter] aspects of the self as represented in the narration of another character”.14 And like other “specular encounters” cited by Maddox, the revelations concern Guillaume’s filial identity. The exaggerated biological emphasis we detect in Alfonso’s stark, repeated assertion of Embron’s paternity – “fu ses peres, / ses peres fu” – and corresponding insistence on the physical fact of Felise’s pregnancy suggest a desire to distinguish the real father and mother from the substitutes that have appeared throughout the story. Confronting Guillaume with his

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true lineage, Alfonso’s specular narrative brings a close to the hero’s family romance.

Freud first used the term “family romance” in a short essay describing the propensity of children to fantasize that their parents are in fact not their real parents. Freud delineates two phases of the fantasy. Initially, the child rejects his biological father and mother and imagines that he is the son of more important parents, often noble or royal.15 This primary phase originates in the resentment accompanying the child’s realization that his parents’ love is not directed entirely at him. A second phase sees the sexually aware child accepting his mother as his own while continuing to repudiate the father, since he believes himself the product of his mother’s adultery.16 Across both phases of the family romance, the child proposes substitute or alternate fathers for himself, a measure that Freud casts in terms of “the liberation of the individual” and “the opposition between successive generations”.17

Where Freud locates the unfolding of this dynamic in an individual’s interior, subjective life, Maddox argues that the medieval text “places [readers] at the vortex of subjective desire” in the family romance, such that the substitution of fathers is carried out not in daydreams but rather in the protagonist’s objective reality. For Maddox, the family romances he observes in medieval literature dramatize the protagonist’s confrontation with and accession to power, subjectivation, and passage from the Lacanian Imaginary to the Symbolic.18 The specular encounter represents a turning point in terms of narrative and the protagonist’s self-knowledge, and “enable[s] the hero to reassess his individuality in terms of its conformity with an ideal of a model embodied in the beliefs or actions of his ascendants as they are revealed in the specular account”.19 Maddox focuses on the specular encounter as the “fulcrum mediating two self-images … effecting a major shift away from the inchoative end of the narrative spectrum and toward its ultimate synthesis”.

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16 Freud gestures toward Oedipal desires in this essay without fully elaborating their relationship to the family romance. He notes of the first resentment precipitating the suppression of the father, “among other factors, the most intense impulses of sexual rivalry contribute to this result”, p. 237; about the second phase, he writes that “the motive force behind this being his desire to bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense curiosity) into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love affairs”, p. 239. Interestingly in regard to the young idyllic couple, Freud indicates that the family romance fantasy permits the child to maintain incestuous feelings toward a sister, p. 240.


19 Ibid., p. 319. “…[The] revelation of these origins invariably assists him in his election of a role in keeping with his paternal or avuncular ascendant.”

20 Maddox, Fictions of Identity, p. 12.
bringing a recognition of and end to the confusion created by the presence of an alternative father, the specular encounter is a point of articulation for the family romance’s resolution, concretized in the assumption of the real father’s crown.

However, Maddox’s study does not consider texts that present more than one substitute father figure, as S. Kay points out à propos the proliferation of father figures in several *chansons de geste*. Whereas Maddox’s concern lies principally with the family romance’s conclusion, Kay examines how in epics the configuration and reconfigurations of a father-son dynamic produce a destabilizing effect. Proposing that “multiplication of father-figures also allows for more rupture and conflict than are admitted by romance”, Kay writes that the play of substitute fathers stages the carving-up and distribution of “the paternal function”.21 Given that “the whole text is complicitous with the fantasy, the hero’s true (i.e. elevated) birth being admitted as ‘fact’”, this splitting disturbs the location of patriarchal authority in a single father.22 Once the paternal function’s supposedly coherent convention has been divested across a diverse series of fathers, even the final revelation and retrieval of the protagonist’s lost true father cannot restore its unity.

There is a paternal boom evident in *Guillaume de Palerne* before Alfonso’s ultimate specular narrative provokes the family romance’s resolution, and Kay’s analysis helps us to understand how the hero’s first two substitute fathers embody a division of the paternal function. Kay outlines two major fatherly roles, both of which can be seen here:23 The *vachiers* fulfills the “nurturing” paternal role, adopting the four-year-old Guillaume,24 who spends seven happy years a cowherd’s son. The hero’s new parents make him their heir, planning to bequeath him “lor terre et lor manoir” (l. 226), which underscores the noticeable gap between Guillaume’s rightful inheritance (the land of Palermo) and his present one (the land for a herd of cows). This first substitute father is followed by Nathaniel, the Holy Roman Emperor and a “politically-effective” paternal figure. Nathaniel discovers Guillaume in the woods.

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22 Kay, p. 85.

23 Ibid.: “The paternal function is thereby divided into a number of different figures. From the viewpoint of the child in the ‘family romance’, such division marks the son’s ambivalence toward the father: he eliminates the biological one, then apportions his attributes to various symbolic surrogates. Typically, the nurturing role is assigned to a lower-born figure, the politically effective one to a higher-ranking one.”

24 It could perhaps be argued that Alfonso becomes a first substitute father in stealing the enfant Guillaume and bringing him to the woods to be adopted. I instead construe his action at this juncture as essentially brotherly, in light of the parallelism the narrator has just established between Guillaume and Alfonso: “Ne pot souffrir la grant dolor, / Ne le buffoi au traîtor / Por ce l’enfant ansi ravi” (l. 337-339). In human form, Alfonso has an obviously fraternal relationship with Guillaume, with whom he shares similar noble qualities and position in *Guillaume de Palerne*’s generational spread; Alfonso even marries Guillaume’s sister and becomes his brother-in-law. The werewolf plays the paternal role during the episode of the lovers’ flight – during the idyll.
while out on a hunt. Instantly taken with the boy and his radiant nobility,²⁷ the king demands to know who his father is, and thus occasions a first, though incomplete, specular narrative. The cowherd explains:

… Biau sire, s’il vos plaist,
La verité vos en dirai.
En ceste forest le trouvai
Assés pres dont nos somes ore.
Bien a .VII. ans ou plus encore
Qu’en ma maison l’en aportai,
Car tot sans garde le trovai;
Si l’avons gardé et norri
C’onques noveles puis n’oï
A bourc n’a vile n’a chastel
Qui demandast le damoisel. (l. 492-502)

Until this moment, Guillaume had had an unshaken faith in his origins (“cuidoit qu’il fust ses pere / Et la vachiere fust sa mere” [l. 355-356]); reacting to the specular account, he betrays deep surprise. “Molt s’esmerveille durement / L’enfes quant ot qu’il n’estoit mie / Fix le vachier; des iex larmie” (l. 530-532), but he does not have long to dwell on the loss of this father. Nathaniel carries him off to the Roman court, where Guillaume shows exceptional promise, is knighted the emperor’s vassal, and soon proves himself in battle.

The hero’s unknown family history is now recognized as a lack, however, which sets off the events leading to the last, highly unconventional alternate father’s appearance. Musing about Guillaume, Melior explicitly formulates his family problem:

Bien me devroit li mons despire,
Quant j’ai laissié dus et contors
Et rois et fix d’empereors
Et ceux dont je fuisse honeree
Pour J. valet d’autre contree,
Que nus ne set, n’il ensement
De quelle terre est ne de quelle gent;
Ainc ne connut qui le porta
N’onques ne vit que l’engendra. (l. 1578-1587)

Ignorant of his parentage, Guillaume cannot be certain as can Melior’s other, royal suitors of fully assuming his correct social identity. Melior decides to love the fine and brave young *vallet*, but the acknowledgment of his parental lack conditions a new father’s arrival. The couple runs away into the countryside together, and Guillaume there finds a third paternal figure in the werewolf Alfonso. Rather than specular narratives that force a confrontation of the self with a human paternal

²⁷ See H. Miller, “‘Hey, you look like a prince!’ Ideology and Mutual Subject Recognition” in this volume.
model, the donning and shedding of animal hides circumscribe a period in which Guillaume’s social identity – his human identity – comes up against experience of another category. Under this other skin, the self is tested: the limits of a new animality and humanity explored, and a gap between them made visible.

Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the anthropological machine illuminates how the figuration of animalized humans engages such concerns about identity, and here creates the idyll’s space. As elaborated in The Open, the anthropological machine works to produce humanity through the partition and repartition of animality within the human:

The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a mobile border within living man, and without this intimate caesura the very decision of what is human and what is not would probably not be possible. It is possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the complex – and not always edifying – economy of relations between men and animals, only because something like an animal life has been separated within man, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been measured and recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place.26

Agamben shows that from Aristotle to Heidegger, rather than opposing the category of the human to a wholly exterior animal life, the thinking-through of what is human and what is animal defines a frontier internal to “living man”. The properties assigned to each change over time, but the assigning of properties itself remains constant. There is something animal in the human, which can and must be distinguished from it. It is at this site of distinction, Agamben insists, that the human is articulated. “In our culture”, he writes,  man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a logos, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation. What is man, if he is always the place – and at the same time, the result – of ceaseless divisions and caesurae?27

Prompted by Agamben “to work on these divisions, to ask in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man, and the animal, from the human”,28 we see that Alfonso’s lycanthropy exposes one clear site of this gesture of separation. Alfonso is human, and baldly, unavoidably animal, even as he retains the human-coded qualities of nobility and reason. To isolate (and evaluate) his animal features against his human ones is to affirm Alfonso’s humanity and to give it shape. But this operation that re-produces the human is not restricted to the werewolf.

27 Ibid., p. 16.
28 Ibid., p. 16.
Entering the woods, Guillaume, too, will experience a new division of human and animal, an identity defined by and at the point of caesura. The anthropological machine is hard at work in the interval I am calling Guillaume de Palerne’s idyll. There, this border between human and animal is redrawn with the constitution of an animalized substitute family for the protagonist. Alfonso, taking on the role of the father, plays a crucial part. Melior’s attendant and sisterly friend Alexandrine acts as a mother; she creates the plan for the young lovers’ escape and brings it to fruition. Disguised as a servant, she steals animal skins – “De .II. blans ors et d’un serpent” (l. 3061) – from the kitchens and then sews the hero and his beloved up in the bear hides. Because the snake skin is never mentioned again, its otherwise superfluous appearance at this juncture suggests an identification of Alexandrine with a serpent. This menagerie of bears, snake and wolf forms a strange family. A last reconfiguration of Guillaume’s family romance before its resolution in the final specular encounter, the repartition of animal and human re-produces Guillaume’s human identity, in relation to the animalized father figure, as a site of experimentation.

**Idyll as regression and experimentation**

As Guillaume leaves Rome with Melior, he is fourteen years old and recently knighted by Nathaniel. He exhibits unmistakably strong leadership qualities, on the battlefield and off, and an apparent sexual awareness. Yet once animalized by his bear skin disguise, Guillaume becomes defined by his incapacity: he regresses to the state of an infant, a regression that only draws to a close when the lovers’ hides are removed at Guillaume’s rightful court of Palermo. An architecture of maturation for the story’s hero may be traced by attending to changes in the terms used to describe him. Until the age of eleven, during the period from birth to his arrival at Rome with the politically effective father Nathaniel, Guillaume is designated an *enfant*. Thereafter *damaisel* appears most frequently, as life at court educates the boy, who is also called a *vallet* before his dubbing there and a *vassal* after. *Chevaliers* and *bers*, then *rois* and finally *empereres* dominate in the text’s second half, in which Guillaume leads the defense of Queen Felise’s Palermo, discovers his true identity, takes up his rule and marries Melior.

These changes chart Guillaume’s steady and orderly progression from young child to adult with children of his own, and correlate with passage through a series of distinct stages. Investigating the concept of the “ages of man” and its importance for medieval ideas about childhood, maturation, and the life cycle, J. Burrow and D. Youngs highlight systems that consider life divided into set age intervals defined by specific characteristics. In his 1988 *The Ages of Man*, Burrow discusses the medieval “the seven ages of man” theory’s roots in Ptolemaic and Hippocratic models. Where the former distinguished infancy (age 0-4) from childhood (4-14) and childhood from youth (14-22), ascribing each stage appropriate qualities, the latter apportioned seven years each to the little boy, the boy, and the lad. In both

29 The people of Rome acclaim the vassal Guillaume before he leaves the city (l. 2718-2740), and the hero has a particularly erotic dream of Melior (l. 1118-1168).

ancient schemas, as well as in medieval thought, age fourteen marks the advent of a certain maturity. Youngs emphasizes medieval attention to physical and sexual development over these years, which also see vocational training and practice.\textsuperscript{31} But for an individual, each life phase’s actual duration, as opposed to abstract numerical ideal, could be elastic. The adulthood supposed to follow on the heels of adolescent youth, “the full integration of an individual into society”\textsuperscript{32} linked above all to marriage and shouldering of one’s social role, might begin at fourteen, when marriage – and for males, inheritance – generally became possible.\textsuperscript{33} Youngs writes of a “transition to maturity”; the milestones of adulthood might be reached earlier or later, and adult wisdom and competence might emerge more or less slowly.\textsuperscript{34} Thus eloping from Rome with his douce amie and already renowned for leading a charge against the Saxons, the fourteen-year-old Guillaume, though youthful, seems well advanced toward that adulthood signifying his “accomplissement social”.

Strikingly, however, the text reverts to the term \textit{enfant} for Guillaume, alongside Melior, three separate times during the idyll in the skins. While precisely the elasticity of age categories means that \textit{enfant} may, as D. Berkvam notes in \textit{Enfance et maternité dans la littérature française des XIIe et XIIIe siècles}, designate those in their thirties and not yet adult,\textsuperscript{35} the patterns of its use in \textit{Guillaume de Palerne} suggest a narrower meaning is operative here. First, excepting these three late instances and rare appearances in retrospective discourse about the hero’s early years, Guillaume is only referred to as an \textit{enfant} through line 737 and the beginning of a socializing, structured education in Rome.\textsuperscript{36} Second, within this period, \textit{enfant} is preponderantly employed to recount Guillaume’s abduction at age four. The text continues to call its young hero an \textit{enfant} during his carefree, isolated life with the nuturing vachers father, but also begins noticeably to use damoisel. The usage

\begin{quote}
31 D. Youngs, \textit{The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c. 1300–c. 1500}, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006, p. 97-103. Examining adolescence in the context of the roman idyllique, Brown-Grant affirms the “universal agreement that adolescence started at 12 for girls and 14 for boys”, p. 82.

32 Youngs, p. 126.

33 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 156, 127.

34 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 96-97.


36 Berkvam stresses the harm an isolated education can do to the male child’s eventual social integration. Youngs situates the education in (later) childhood, where it replaces the young child or infant’s play. See Berkvam, p. 74; Youngs, p. 76-79. The term \textit{enfant} continues to appear throughout the text in reference to other characters, such as the prevos’s young son, who Alfonso briefly kidnaps to create a diversion during a dangerous moment for the lovers.
\end{quote}
Berkvam describes—“‘Enfant’ est d’abord et surtout employé dans le sens moderne d’un garçon ou d’une fille en bas âge, et de progéniture, par rapport aux parents, quel que soit son âge”—can be observed in *Guillaume de Palerne*, established by its confinement to the earliest stages in the hero’s story and life. *Enfant’s* remarkable reappearance several thousand lines later in the text, after Guillaume has demonstrated achieving a successful education and the qualities of adolescence, suggests not the extension of childishness, but rather its return. The term re-enters the story through the mouth of Alexandrine, who prays to God as Guillaume and Melior set off into the countryside wearing the bear skins she has stitched over their human bodies:

Si voir, sire, par ta merci
Ces .II. enfans gart et deffent
D’anui, de mal et de torment
Et remet en prosperité,
Sire, par ta sainte bonté. (l. 3129-3144)

The next, and final, two such uses both occur in the narration on occasions when the werewolf Alfonso brings the lovers sustenance. At first this gesture of aid is a surprise:

Mais ja s’estoit mise a la voie,
As .II. enfans porte sa proie.
Grant piece va par mi le bois;
Quant cil entendent les effrois,
Enfin quident que traï soient,
Mais quant la beste venir voient
Qui la viande lor aporte,
Chascuns s’asseüre et conforte,
Mais ne sevrent que ce peut estre. (l. 3281-3289)

Reiterated later, to be *enfant* receiving the werewolf’s care is become routine; Alfonso “C’as .II. enfans est repairiés, / De vin de viandes chargiés; / Devant lor met et puis s’enfuit” (l. 4261-4263). In his relationship to the serpentine Alexandrine and wolfish Alfonso, the hero is a child again.

That category reversion to *enfant* happens in the context of being protected and especially fed indicates the curious incapacitation Guillaume undergoes when in the animal skin. If, as Youngs explains, physical helplessness, weakness and lack of control as well as the inability to feed oneself are defining characteristics of infancy, then Guillaume is here infantilized. For the werewolf’s attentions are necessary to the lovers’ survival; Guillaume is utterly unable to provide for Melior or for himself. He had shown a brash though romantic unconcern for the problem of food when consulting with Alexandrine, responding to her worry, “Bien viverons de nos amors, / D’erbes de fuelles, et de flors” (l. 3033-3034). The very real hunger

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37 Berkvam, p. 58.
38 Youngs, p. 40-41.
they discover in the woods is not so easily dismissed. Melior proposes they scavenge fruits and nuts (l. 3206-3208), but Guillaume, uncomprehending, seems only able to hope in vain for a passing pilgrim to ambush and relieve of bread and meat. The hero’s passivity is all the more confounding when we recall that he spent seven years of his childhood learning to live in the woods. With the cowherd, Guillaume knew how to handle animals and hunt: “De l’arc savoit plus que nus hom / Berser et archoier et traire” (l. 367-368). His mastery is still in evidence at Nathaniel’s court, where he knows more “D’oisias, de bois, de chacerie / Que nus qui soit en Lombardie, / N’en tout la terre de Rome…” (l. 759-761). These descriptions, like those of the young vassal Guillaume’s consummate physical prowess, emphasize the use of bows, arrows, and other weapons – perhaps impractical tools for anyone disguised as a bear. Nevertheless, they underscore a more general competence that Guillaume, under the skin, has lost. This incapacity means that Guillaume’s infantilization does not fit the medieval model of a “transcendence ideal”, which Burrow invokes to explore instances of transgressively not acting one’s age. Either “upward” or “downward”, the transcendence ideal privileges the manifestation of the qualities proper to an age already lived, such as with aged warriors whose vigor should rightly belong to youth, or an age yet to be experienced, such as with infants and children who display the wisdom of the old. Rather, in the flight from Rome, Guillaume regresses.

This regression differs from the incapacitations common to roman idyllique heroes in several crucial ways, most importantly through its close link to the animal. Discussing the “spectrum of alienation” the young idyllic couple may face as a result of their determination to love against parental opposition," R. Brown-Grant actually discounts Guillaume. Typically, the young idyllic couple is kept apart for a time, and in most eleventh- and twelfth-century romances, the alienated male cannot “perform his allotted social role of knight and seigneur until he is reunited with his beloved and so proves incapable of any acts of chivalry”. Brown-Grant and Berkvam both point to female resourcefulness balancing male passivity during such estrangement. But if there is scant evidence for this balancing in Guillaume de Palerne – Vuagnoux-Uhlig declares that Melior “se distingue par sa passivité et son inertie lors des aventures” – neither does Brown-Grant’s conclusion that Guillaume is “inspired by [his] love to demonstrate his prowess” account for this regressive period. Guillaume is never separated from Melior, who displays the same animalized appearance and dependence on the werewolf; yet in the animal skin, protected by the animal father, neither is he capable as a knight, unable to defend, attack, or even find a route and food.

39 Burrow, p. 95-96.
40 Ibid., p. 105-107. Burrow reports that examples of the downward transcendence implied by “infantia spiritualis” are rare, even in hagiography.
41 Brown-Grant, p. 113.
42 Ibid., p. 114.
43 Berkvam, p. 87-80; Brown-Grant, p. 115-118.
44 Vuagnoux-Uhlig, p. 179. For instance, Melior neither convinces the bewildered Guillaume to scavenge nor actually does so herself.
45 Brown-Grant, p. 114. An additional exception she cites is Galeran de Bretagne.
The source of incapacity, and meaning of Guillaume’s “alienation”, must be sought elsewhere. Under threat of capture, Guillaume himself acknowledges and articulates his own powerlessness to Melior in terms of his ursine outsides:

Dist Guilliaumes: ‘Suer, douce amie,
Flors de biauté, rose espanie,
…
Si j’avoie mes garinemens,
Cheval, escu, espee et lance,
Par tans verroient ma puissance,
Saroient au commencer l’uevre
Quel beste ceste piax acuevre.
Ançois que fuisse mors ne pris,
En I avroit II.C d’ocis.
Mais ensi est, ne puet autre estre. (l. 4301-4032, 4050-4057)

It is Guillaume’s animalization that results in his regression. The idyllic repartition of human and animal produces Guillaume as a child even as he is also a young man, just as it produces Alexandrine, Melior, and Alfonso as the members of this strange family. Indeed, the idyll opens by yoking together animality, regression, and alternate family, with the snake-identified Alexandrine’s appeal to Jesus for the enfans’ protection. Her prayer is couched in a reference to the virgin birth whose evident religious signification might also be seen to evoke her own mysterious maternity: Alexandrine is at the origin of the lovers’ existence in their animalized forms, conceiving the idea for their disguise and physically realizing their new bodies.

But most significantly, throughout the time in the skins, Alfonso takes on a paternal role toward Guillaume, an “animal” father figure joining the “nuturing” and “politically effective” predecessors in Guillaume de Palerne’s family romance. His care resembles that of a “nuturing” father, since he nourishes, guides, and protects Guillaume and Melior. However, the werewolf father’s specific importance lies in the operation of the anthropological machine: the relocation of its mobile border between human and animal is an experience shared by, and different for, both Alfonso and Guillaume, which throws into relief the importance of exploring and testing that border. Although both bears and wolves would have a number of different connotations in medieval culture, the text seems to script a particular meaning for the skins.46 L. Sconduto points out that the two characters are roughly the same age, the lost Spanish prince “only a child at the time of his metamorphosis”.47 Guillaume regresses in the play of identity that animalization

47 L. Sconduto, Metamorphoses of the Werewolf, Jefferson, N.C., MacFarland, 2008, p. 91. At the time of Guillaume’s kidnapping, Alfonso has been in Apulia for two years (l. 331). It is
permits; Alfonso becomes an eminently able paternal protector. Despite Sconduto’s assertion that “Alphonse’s age and vulnerability accentuate his humanity”,” even more striking is the unimportance of age and any putative vulnerability once Alfonso is transformed. The werewolf is capable of complex reasoning, seems always to know what to do and how to accomplish it. “No one”, writes Sconduto, “is strong enough or smart enough to withstand or overcome the werewolf’s combined prowess and ingenuity”. His competence as a provider is matched only by the reliability of his wisdom and tendency to noble self-sacrifice, consistently in evidence throughout the text yet remarkable here for its paternal cast. Excepting an animal lack of speech, Alfonso’s capabilities are not only conserved – “Une fois métamorphosé, il reste doux comme un mouton, raisonnable, bienveillant”, writes P. Ménard of this “faux loup-garou” – but actually increased by his experience of animality. Able in his wolf form to act as a father to the bearish Guillaume, Alfonso has much of the human and little of the youth about him.

Guillaume’s infantilization and the care of this animal father represent a period in which the hero’s identity, soon to be recognized and confirmed in adulthood, can be tested. In this, the idyll serves the purpose Freud delineates for the “regressive tendency”: “a turning-away from the tasks of the present” that makes possible a “symbolic representation of real wishes and interests”. What Guillaume’s séjour as an animalized, childishly incapable son allows him to bracket is his “accomplissement social”, the duty to assume his true father’s crown and adult role. What it allows him to experience is being at once both himself – a human adolescent youth, most often qualified with Melior as jovencix – and seemingly not himself – an animal enfant. A hallucinatory mise en scène of this simultaneity reveals the idyll’s experimental quality. When Alfonso first brings the hungry couple meat and bread, Guillaume and Melior feed each other: unclear exactly how old he was at metamorphosis, but his age category is specified to be enfens (l. 304).

Sconduto, p. 91.

Ibid., p. 111.


Neither can eat without aid, so each receives food passed into the mouth through bear jaws. This nourishment “par les geules” signals the regressed, infantile need for care and protection. But the hands feeding Guillaume belong to his lover, adding to the scene an erotic charge; the animal disguise that constitutes for Guillaume and Melior a sibling relationship limits them to touching just hands to mouths. Guillaume is lover and brother, young man and infant, human and animal, and thanks to the mirroring effect of paired hungry mouths and feeding hands, he experiences a self-reflexive vision that defines the frontier between these categories. Because the two white bears appear identical, across Melior’s movements Guillaume can see himself, test the categories that are distinguished in the sight of human hands set against animal pelts and jaws. Ultimately, through the experience of animalization and regression, here made potently specular, Guillaume’s identity – the limits of the young man, of the human – is exposed as a site of caesura.

Idyll and the animal

In his reading of Tydorel, Maddox examines “a nightmare of regression”. Tydorel fails to be inducted into the Symbolic by means of a specular narrative confronting the protagonist’s self-knowledge with the true name of the father. Contrasting Tydorel with the more successful process represented by Yonec, Maddox writes, “While for Yonec the paternal signifier in the locus of the Other subjects the narratee into the institution of his law, for Tydorel it merely signifies a void, a hole, an abyss, into which the soluble father eventually draws an insolvent son”. This disastrous end to the family romance results from a “defective” paternal metaphor, which opens up a destabilizing space in the Symbolic. Guillaume de Palerne offers its hero’s regression alongside the advent of a werewolf father, and indeed, this animalized paternal function embodies a unique “defect”. Derrida tells us in L’Animal que donc je suis that for Lacan, the animal has no access to the Symbolic’s language, law, and “human order”; the animal can only exist in the Imaginary, identified with images, appearances, doubling, and counterfeiting. Thus Alfonso’s occupation of the paternal role in Guillaume de Palerne means that in the

52 See P. McCracken, “Skin and sovereignty in Guillaume de Palerne” in this volume.
53 Maddox, p. 324.
54 Ibid., p. 325.
place of the Symbolic (the signifier), there is an animal element, whose very
definition dictates that it be excluded from that place. The “void” this creates in the
Symbolic gives onto the Imaginary, where the animalized, infantilized self can enter
a play of mirrors with a virtually identical lover/twin. But this regression precisely
does not become a nightmare. In Guillaume’s experimental idyll, the simultaneous
experience of dual categories makes visible the boundary separating each from each.
It is at this boundary – the space between helpless infant and able young man,
between animal and human – that Guillaume’s identity is tested, at this boundary
that Guillaume’s identity is produced.

As it must, the idyll ends. Once the wolfish protector and his charges, now
dressed in deer skins, reach Palermo, Queen Felise dresses herself as a doe. She
consciously enters the space of this alternative family – in order to deliver a rappel à
l’ordre. To the happy Guillaume and Melior idling in her garden, Felise speaks and
reinaugurates the order of time and estres: “La roîne respont briement: / ‘Bien sai tot
vostre convent / … / Et si vos di que je sai bien / Vos errements tos et vos estres’”
(l. 5203-5204, 5207-5208). The gap in the Symbolic closes, and the anthropological
machine changes gear. Guillaume and Melior are relieved of their animal skins,
uncovered, bathed, clothed anew. Human and animal are reapportioned in them, and
their prior, proper human identities are re-produced; Guillaume is once again and
from now on a capable youth. When the de-lycanthropized Alfonso’s specular
narrative of Guillaume’s birth provokes the articulation of identity in relation to the
revealed true father, the family romance is resolved. Taking up his correct social and
political place, King Guillaume marries Queen Melior. Guillaume de Palerne’s end
represents, as Vuagnoux-Uhlig writes, a consummately conventional “idéal de
perfection matrimoniale et politique”.

If the concerns of the roman idyllique according to Lot-Borodine, Vuagnoux-
Uhlig, or Brown-Grant are an often awkward fit for Guillaume de Palerne’s
material, the family romance is better able to describe how the text’s central
preoccupation of Guillaume’s journey to his rightful crown unfolds, and how this
unfolding forms an experimental counterpoint to the conventional conclusion. But
here again, that journey demands a special attention to its nature: the animalization,
infantilization, and experimentation that take place during the strange and oneiric
episode of the flight from Rome. An animal father joins the “nurturing” and
“politically effective” fathers identified by Kay, and opens the paternal function onto
the Imaginary. This idyll is a time and space apart, a bracketing, in which the hero’s
nature is explored and from which he emerges able to affirm a human identity soon
to be confirmed in the social order. In Guillaume de Palerne’s family romance, the
idyll represents, to borrow Maddox’s phrase, “the vortex of subjective desire”: it
opens out from the caesura of the anthropological machine produced between
Guillaume’s human face and animal exterior, an emptiness between skin and skin.

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