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# Monstrous transformations: Loyalty and community in four medieval poems

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Monstrous Transformations:

Loyalty and Community in Four Medieval Poems

(TITLE)

BY

Mary Lieske

THESIS

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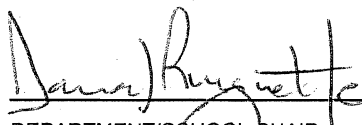
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## Abstract

The thesis focuses on loyalty as performed by individuals within a social community and on how loyalty is a necessity for knights. The four poems I examined, *Bisclavret*, *Guillaume of Palerne*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, include a transformation that enhances the acts of loyalty either by forcing characters and readers to focus on the acts themselves or by complicating the acts with the addition of social expectations and additional promises. The thesis is separated into two chapters categorized by transformation type. The human-to-animal transformation focuses on the acts of loyalty and their ties to identity and rationality; the monstrous human transformation focuses on honesty and the spoken word. Each section also focuses on a specific character in each tale – Bisclavret in *Bisclavret*, Alphonse in *Guillaume of Palerne*, the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The thesis concludes with establishing two ideals of chivalric knights determined from the examination of these tales and from the observations of how certain characters fail to uphold these ideals. Loyalty is established as essential to knightly nobility and knightly ideals, and is established as including acts in service to a sovereign and the fulfillment of agreements.

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## Introduction

That shapechangers have survived in literary fiction for hundreds of years is no surprise. As tricksters, monsters, or monstrous tricksters, they often enter texts with traits that readers can understand are present simply because of how a character transforms. I will examine two forms of transformation, the werewolf transformation and the monstrous human transformation, both of which feature shapeshifters who presumably cannot be trusted. The werewolf in particular is a vicious animal that takes on the traits of a wolf and, in some cases, surpasses the animal counterpart in its implied viciousness and strength. As I will show, however, alongside their wolf appearance, the characters in these medieval tales have the loyalty more modern audiences might associate with a wolf pack. They obey their chosen lord and, in doing so, display humanity and trustworthiness that run counter to the assumption of behavior their form elicits.

The werewolf is not the only “monster” in shapechanging literature; the monstrous human transformation exists as well, which is the reverse of the werewolf when considering trust and rationality. Instead of displaying himself or herself as loyal and trustworthy despite appearances, the monstrous human is neither assumed to be untrustworthy immediately nor hindered by an inability to communicate. The knights in both poems must trust the shapeshifter despite circumstances. The transformers themselves work from outside the court to test and to prove the loyalty and trustworthiness of knights in the court, and it is only after a challenged knight passes the transformer’s test that a non-monstrous human form is revealed. Taken together, the four stories that I consider show contrasts and complications of how loyalty works in society and how transformation can either force a knight into exile or draw him somewhat



willingly from court, with the transformation making each challenge of loyalty more difficult. The end of the tale typically corresponds with a return to a social community, though there are notable changes, typically improvements, to the situation of either the werewolf or the tested knight.

Before considering how the aspect of transformation affects loyal characters and loyalty itself, there needs to be a clear idea of what loyalty is. The Oxford English Dictionary's first definition of *loyal* is "true to obligations of duty, love, etc.; faithful to plighted troth." To be *loyal* by this definition is to fulfill "obligations" that may or may not be voiced aloud, but imply an unspoken oath to uphold. To be loyal is also to fulfill a sworn oath and honor agreements, as all the complexities of *troth* come into question. The primary definition provided for *loyalty* is similar: "Faithful adherence to one's promise, oath, word of honour, etc.; conjugal faithfulness, fidelity." This, however, is specific to the spoken word – "promise," "word of honour" – along with the continual fulfillment of vows – "fidelity." While it may be impossible to be loyal without having loyalty (or the reverse), what matters is that both are needed by the characters in these texts, who are challenged by how they will be "true" to the "obligations" of their promises. A rash promise made to an old woman in secret becomes an oath that must be fulfilled, and it cannot be rescinded once it is discovered that the price is higher than expected. Disloyalty in breaking the promise made in a game when an unforeseen gift is suddenly offered becomes a personal sin that must be carried. In both *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I will be examining promises that seem foolish and rash. Both the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Gawain make hasty promises, the former because he does not know what will be asked of him and the latter

because he does not know what he will receive. While the werewolf tales, too, include hasty or rash promises made by non-transforming characters, the characters in those tales see little challenge in upholding their oaths; the challenge of the transformed in these poems is overcoming their appearance and proving themselves loyal without the ability to voice such oaths or promises.

These hasty agreements, oral promises made with little thought, are what Richard Firth Green calls “naked” promises that were not legally binding because the agreement “had been made with none of the necessary formalities” (307). Green goes on, however, to say that “To show that informal, gratuitous promises were not actionable in the secular courts is quite different from suggesting that medieval people were under no social pressure to honor them” (308). Such promises were, in fact, quite serious, so despite the fact that rash promises were not *legally* binding, it was still expected that a promise be upheld on “the principle of noblesse oblige” (308). While these hasty, rash promises may seem foolish they were meant to be upheld because of the idea that “a broken promise makes one a liar” (309). Green displays the seriousness of such promises through a fictional tale, where once again the person making the promise is challenged to fulfill an undesirable agreement.

The ability to keep a promise, agreement, or oath is only one form of loyalty. An additional usage is revealed by the second definition of *loyal* and *loyalty*: “faithful in allegiance to the sovereign or constituted government” (*loyal*, A2, OED; see also *loyalty*, 2a, OED). This definition does not include any requirement to fulfill a promise, but instead draws upon the idea of service to a higher power or higher rank. At first glance, this may seem the easier of the two to fulfill because of the added aspect of the law; it is,

after all, easier to obey a law when there is a fear of punishment. But what happens when the higher power fails to recognize a knight as a legitimate member of the community? What happens when a knight is exiled from the community because of a betrayal, so that he is no longer punished for breaking laws but might be killed for his monstrous appearance alone? The struggle to be recognized by a lord who cannot see the human form is a challenge specific to the animal transformation, where the knights lose the ability to make oaths and promises.

The four poems examined in the following chapters – *Bisclavret*, *Guillaume of Palerne*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – are both loyalty tales and transformation tales, and I will show how loyalty in these tales can be a redeeming force, withstanding the trials of even the monstrous. In the world of these tales, rash promises, agreements, and hasty words are as binding as sworn oaths because, as Green points out, they were taken seriously as a part of noble obligation, and the realm of fiction offered a fertile ground for exploring the consequences of rash action. The werewolf tales show that loyalty to a king can do more than prevent death; it can restore the life that has been taken and bring happiness. The monstrous human tales show, unsurprisingly, how difficult it can be to keep an unpleasant agreement once it has been made, and also display the complications that arise when attempting to honor multiple promises.

The two transformation types present two sides of loyalty, promising rewards for allegiance and stating that upholding promises is not as easy as it may seem. The characters of *Bisclavret*, Alphonse, the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and Gawain are tested by the deliberate actions of others, and must struggle through betrayal, fear, and

temptation in order to show their nobility, or lack thereof. They also have faults. These are not Galahad-like knights who, without flaw, achieve the Holy Grail; each character has a moment of shame or imperfection that hinders his journey. As they each struggle outside of the court to be worthy of a presence in the court, they undergo personal transformations that are not visible. Bisclavret changes from a lone wolf in the woods to a loved wolf at his lord's side, Alphonse changes from a werewolf secretly helping Gulliaume to a visible presence bowing to his lord, the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* changes from a condemned rapist into a dutiful husband, and Gawain changes from a knight praised for his reputation to one who visibly wears the token of his sins. These personal changes are enhanced by the transformations in each tale and by the parallelism found in the characters transformation tales use.

## Chapter One: Human-Animal Transformations

Stories with werewolves are not uncommon in our modern society, and the image of the werewolf that these stories display is not often drastically different from what older stories have established. While a werewolf might be gentle in human form (particularly in modern tales), the wolf form is not to be trusted; he is vicious and monstrous. In the late nineteenth century, Kirby Flower Smith described a werewolf as

a person who, either from a gift inborn or from the use of certain magic arts of which he has learned the secret is in the habit of changing himself into a wolf from time to time. In this shape he is generally larger and stronger than the ordinary wolf; he retains the intelligence and cunning of his human form, more or less clouded or modified by the bestial ferocity which takes possession of him at the moment of transformation, and in which he “outwolves” the very wolves themselves. It is this wolfish instinct in the man which is the motive of transformation. (4)

Since this 1894 definition, the idea of what a werewolf is seems to have become more general, to the point that only the ability of transformation remains constant. There continue to be stories of werewolves who are violent, vicious creatures who kill men and destroy lives, but there are also stories of werewolves who are misunderstood, gentle, and victimized. Modern stories even present werewolves of the vicious variety alongside those of the gentle type.<sup>1</sup> This kind of definition and redefinition of werewolves is not new. Smith himself noted several transformation tales of the thirteenth and fourteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these characters can be found in series such as *Harry Potter*, *The Dresden Files*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

centuries in which the werewolf is not the ferocious beast that has been constantly associated with the transformation from man to wolf. What sets these “noble” werewolves apart from their savage and bestial counterparts is their ability to reason and, more specifically, their ability to separate friend from foe. This ability gives the werewolf the opportunity to return from exile, be loyal to others, and regain his former status in the social community as a reward for his loyalty.

In this chapter I will look at two examples of werewolf tales from the twelfth century – Marie de France’s *Bisclavret* and the anonymous *Guillaume of Palerne* – and examine how trust leads to loyalty and loyalty leads to a restoration of the social community. The tales begin with a breakdown in the social structure, either in marriage or in family situations, and ends with the werewolf’s return to his position as knight or as prince. Each tale questions the loyalty of the werewolf character, and after the tests of being in wolf form, the restored man returns to the community with a status equal to or improved over his previous place. Each tale also implies doubts about the trustworthiness of family members and serves as a caution for readers against fear and greed.

### **Part One: Marie de France’s *Bisclavret* and Fear**

Marie de France’s *Bisclavret* has often been looked at by scholars and students in terms of symbolism and metaphor, usually with a focus on Bisclavret’s clothes or his wolf form. Not often has the *lai* been looked at in terms of trust, nor has the significance of Bisclavret’s suggested loyalty been fully explored. While this is unsurprising, there is more to the *lai* than the transformation from man to beast. Within Marie’s text there is a silence that serves to emphasize acts of trust and loyalty. This silence displays rationality

and highlights what the betrayal took from Bisclavret. Although this betrayal occurs very early in the *lai*, Bisclavret is never shown as truly ferocious against others as might be considered typical of a werewolf. By the end of the tale Bisclavret's devotion to and trust in his king has given back what the werewolf-knight has lost. In contrast, his wife is punished for her betrayal – doubly punished, in fact, by both Bisclavret and the king, revealing a concern for community ties that the wife has denied her husband. *Bisclavret* displays a social community that is frightening because of the risks in trusting others, made clear by the betrayal by the wife, yet also is reassuring, because of the benefits of absolute trust shown through the welcoming behavior of the king.

It is important to clarify what is being discussed when *Bisclavret* is considered in terms of loyalty and trust. *Bisclavret* is not blatantly about what one should do in terms of loyalty; it is more obviously a tale about disloyalty and betrayal. In linking these two themes, I will equate the wife's turn against her husband (her betrayal) with the disloyalty to her marriage vows that follows. The wife betrays Bisclavret's trust by telling his secret to another knight and breaks her wedding oaths to Bisclavret by marrying that knight. While trying to learn his secret, she promises Bisclavret that she loves him and that he has no reason to fear her (ll. 80-83), yet as it turns out he does have reason to fear her: she does not follow her own definition of love.

The wife's wedding oaths are the first of three oaths made apparent in the text, though only one is mentioned outright. The oath mentioned explicitly occurs between the wife and the knight who adores her; it is a private oath between them, with no witnesses and no public acknowledgment. It is also the only oath in the text that hinges upon a betrayal. The wife will become the second knight's mistress (and, not long after, his wife)

if he uses the information she has given him to trap her husband in wolf form. The other two oaths are implied in the text by the terms with which Marie initially identifies the wife and the suitor-knight. Bisclavret's wife is his *wife*, and their marriage would have necessitated mutual oaths (of fidelity, among other things) and public acknowledgement of these oaths. Bisclavret is also identified by a title; he is called a *knight* several times. As a knight he would have sworn an oath of fealty to his king, most likely involving public witnessing and community involvement, at the very least the presence of other knights to acknowledge the oaths between lord and vassal. Of the three oaths, Bisclavret honors the two that were presumably made publicly to his wife and his king. The wife betrays her publicly made marriage vows and honors a second, private oath instead.

Because readers are not given any explicit examples of Bisclavret's loyalty, faithfulness, or adherence to his oaths, to say that he is a loyal character is to take his actions and measure them against the term, making his loyalty implicit and not overt. Marie indicates that Bisclavret follows his king closely in wolf form and that he attacks those who have disrupted the court by taking from the king a well-liked knight. Bisclavret himself states to his wife that he has not gone off to see a lover. These actions might be considered self-serving, since he gains from following his king, punishing those who have hurt him, and telling his wife that he's been faithful. While they are self-serving to an extent, there remains an element of risk. Bisclavret must believe in the loyalty of others, particularly his wife and his lord. He must trust that he will receive the benefits of a faithful wife and a king who will protect him, and trust that his actions will be understood, but as the *lai* continues it is made clear that his trust is not always justified. In terms of loyalty, the *lai* is about actions that betray loyalty, reactions to



Bisclavret's outward appearance,<sup>2</sup> and actions that include trust. There is a clear arrangement of loyalties that becomes evident when the *lai* is read this way: knights should trust kings, kings should trust wise council, wives should trust husbands, and husbands should trust wives. Where the *lai* becomes troublesome is when the question arises: can they do this safely? More particularly, does Bisclavret show the first mistrust by not telling his wife about his transformations, or does she show the first mistrust by questioning him about them and accusing him of infidelity? Is the mutual trust between Bisclavret and his king severed entirely by her betrayal? The root of the problem from the beginning of the *lai* is mistrust and the question arises of what happens when a betrayal occurs.

The first time readers actually see Bisclavret, his wife is demanding to know where he's been because she fears that she will lose him to another woman. She thinks when Bisclavret leaves for three days he is "doing wrong" (l. 52) by seeing a lover. In this way, the narrative portion of the *lai* begins with a fear of betrayal that cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of either character. Bisclavret is unwilling to tell his wife the truth of his transformations, and his wife will not be satisfied without a full explanation of his disappearances. She does not trust him, so she accuses him of not trusting her, which he doesn't. Bisclavret can only tell his wife he has not betrayed her, and she can only demand more answers. Because readers are aware of the lack of trust in the marriage, lines 29-96 (where readers learn the details of the transformation at the same

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Pappa suggests that Bisclavret's transition from man to wolf is actually a transformation from "knight" to "outlaw" (i.e., putting on the clothes of a "wolf," a common old English term for outlaws). Either way, Bisclavret's outward appearance, beastly or criminal, is not immediately trustworthy. Ironically, Pappa states that these outlaws (he references the Fian) "were considered outlaws until they could be reintegrated into 'proper' propertied social positions" (124), or "married property-owners" (123). Bisclavret is a member of society until his wife exiles him from it.

time as the wife) read more like an interrogation than a wife simply questioning her husband. His reluctance to answer completely only adds to this feeling. Like the wife, readers eager for an explanation are willing to “bedevil” (l. 87) Bisclavret for explanations until they are satisfactory, and his reluctance to answer his wife’s questions directly makes it clear he is hiding something. Unlike the wife, however, readers have already been given a hint about the truth.

*Bisclavret* opens with an objective statement about werewolves in the narrator’s voice. This description serves the dual purpose of supplying a key introduction to a werewolf’s brutality and indicating that the tale that follows the introduction will be about a werewolf. With this device, Marie tells readers what to look for in the *lai* without interfering directly with the action that follows. Only after this opening does she switch to the perspective of the wife, with whom the audience can (presumably) relate, and present readers with a knight who disappears for several days. Readers would likely suspect the same type of betrayal as the wife (infidelity) had the brief introduction not occurred. As Leslie A. Scundoto points out, however, as readers “we have privileged information that the knight’s wife does not have” (*Metamorphoses*, 41). We know that this is a story about transformation to a “savage beast” (l. 9).

Bisclavret has, in fact, spent the time away from his wife as a wolf, and the suspicion of infidelity is left behind when this is discovered. There is no indication he is “doing wrong” by transforming, aside from the first few lines of the *lai*, nor does he seem to be in any other way unfaithful to his marriage vows. David Leshock argues that Bisclavret himself is at the very least accustomed to his werewolf duality, even if his wife is not:

Never do we learn that Bisclavret is “condemned” to such a plight. The text merely states that he becomes a werewolf for a few days a week. Bisclavret in fact states that he hides his clothes until he himself is “revienc a meisun” (line 96). More important, there is not even a hint in the text that Bisclavret is “unhappy.” He is in fact described in positive terms. (para. 5)

Bisclavret may be “happy” to be a wolf for three days, or he may not. Just as the ultimate state of his transformative tendency will be hidden at the end of the tale, here readers are left in the dark. It is clear that he is a good knight and husband while he is human, but his time as a wolf is left outside of the text. He returns home “happy and delighted” (l. 30), but Marie does not indicate why he is this way – is he happy to be human and home, or still happy because of the time he spent away as a wolf? Marie does not tell us because it does not matter if he is happy as a wolf or not. The transformations happen, and the tale is based not only on the fact that they occur but more importantly on reactions to knowing that fact. Readers are given two reactions: the wife’s and the king’s.

Scundoto points out that, during the wife’s questioning, it seems “this knight is either a prophet or knows his wife very well” (*Metamorphoses*, 41) because Bisclavret anticipates not only his wife’s betrayal but his own downfall. She states further that Bisclavret’s wife “gains power over him only through his own misplaced trust and that she supposedly uses this power only because she is frightened of him” (*Metamorphoses*, 44). Here is where Bisclavret’s issue truly lies: he does not trust his wife, and, as it turns out, she is not a trustworthy person. She is the one person Bisclavret *should* be able most to trust, as she is his wife, yet because of her fear she betrays him. I would not question

that her motive is fear; the narrator tells us that the wife is “terrified” (l. 99). Her reactive desire to rid herself of her husband is primarily a desire to rid herself of the cause of her fear, and though it may seem irrational and disproportional, so is fear. It is an emotional reaction to learning her husband’s secret.

Seen in this context, Bisclavret is right to be reluctant in telling his wife everything, because in doing so he scares her. Her primary response is not anger or shock; instead readers are told she is “scarlet from fear” (l. 98). The wife continues to question Bisclavret in order to extract details of her husband’s transformation, and it is not until the end of this interrogation that Marie reveals her fearful reaction; Scuduto states that “instead of reacting with fear or surprise, the wife does not react at all, but continues her interrogation” (*Metamorphoses*, 42) with “a great deal of interest in the details of his transformation” (*Metamorphoses*, 42). While Scuduto does admit that “one could even argue that her lack of affect earlier was due to shock” (*Metamorphoses*, 43), she seems to give very little credit to the emotion the wife shows. Marie’s language implies that this reaction is important, however, because it is in her terror that the wife plots to rid herself of her husband. Here Marie includes the intimate detail that the wife “never [wants] to sleep with him again” (l. 102). She no longer feels safe with her husband and no longer trusts him even to the limited extent she did before he revealed his secret. Before finding out that her husband transformed, she was accusing him of having a lover and likely questioning his men to find out if this were true, as suggested in line 28: “nor did any of his men know anything about it.” Her interrogation of Bisclavret reveals how doubtful she is of his trustworthiness, despite the fact that Bisclavret seems to have a very good life as a knight who is “liked so much” (l. 252) by the king. Her

desire never to sleep with him again must stem from a continuation of her fear and her lack of trust: what else hasn't he told her? what might he do to her when they are unclothed? what effect would his double nature have on her future?

The inclusion of the detail about her fear at night might serve as a reminder about Bisclavret's suspected infidelity, or as a foreshadowing of the wife's own behavior with her suitor. Joseph Pappa concludes that "It is her desire *not* to sleep with Bisclavret that sets the plot in motion" (134). I would argue, though, that the plot is set in motion not by the wife's refusal to sleep with Bisclavret, but as a result of her clearly stated desire to "get rid of him" (l. 101). What causes her fear of him – fear of his transformation into a wolf or fear of the fact that he roams the forest without clothes – is not clear. Nor does it matter. What matters is that she is "terrified of the whole adventure" (l. 99), including sleeping with him, so much so that she is willing to betray Bisclavret by telling his secret to another, is willing to trap him in wolf form away from his fellow knights and king, and is willing to betray her marriage vows and marry another once she has succeeded.

All of these fears lead to the betrayal of Bisclavret and his exile from the public community, though only the wife has exiled Bisclavret with the help of her suitor. These two are also the only characters still in human form who are aware of Bisclavret's involuntary exile. Bisclavret is no longer able to join the other knights at court and the court thinks that he has "gone away forever" (l. 129). Bisclavret's wife has taken away his status as a knight, and so an entire year of Bisclavret's life "passes in silence" (Sconduto, *Metamorphoses*, 44). Sconduto proposes that

This silence, filled as it must be with the unspoken sadness of the  
werewolf who has had his life and his identity stolen from him, who has

lost his wife and no longer enjoys a happy homecoming, stands in stark contrast to the presumed happiness of the knight who at long last has finally married the woman he loves. (*Metamorphoses*, 44)

While it is clearly true that the silence stands as a contrast and displays Bisclavret's sadness, this does not account for the fact that his silence continues beyond the one year of isolation. As we will see, Bisclavret's silence emphasizes his separation from his king and society. After telling his secrets to his wife, Bisclavret never speaks in the *lai*. He spends a great deal of time incapable of human speech because of his wolf form, but Bisclavret seems to refrain from even animal forms of verbal communication.

Bisclavret remains silent always. Even when chased or attacking in anger, he does not bark, howl, or otherwise actively make noises. While these noises might be assumed because he is an animal (animals make noise, after all), Bisclavret is not just an animal – he is an animal with the mind of a man. He is neither completely “human” nor completely “wolf” and so while incapable of producing human speech, he also never resorts to beast-like noises. A voiceless exile, he must live on the edge of society. Bisclavret's wife's betrayal has, in effect, taken away both his status and his voice. These losses force Bisclavret to depend on others to speak for him and to trust that they will recognize his humanity. This recognition does not happen immediately; only after a year has passed is Bisclavret found by the king who is out on a hunt.

Even while “pleading” (l. 146), Bisclavret acts without any sound. After seeing those displays the king states: “the beast has the mind of a man, and it's begging me for mercy” (l. 154). Though the king is “terrified” (l. 149) just as the wife was, he shows mercy and ends his hunt, demanding that Bisclavret be left unharmed. Unlike the wife,

the king responds to his initial fear not with an attempt to rid himself of Bisclavret, but instead with actions that end his fear. This is accomplished through knowledge gained through observation. The king sees the wolf act unusually, recognizes the behavior as man-like, and reaches a conclusion different from the wife's. The king has seen past the outer appearance of the wolf, whose speechlessness now renders him incapable of explaining the situation as he did with his wife, and recognizes that Bisclavret has a rational mind beneath the wolf exterior. Though the wife saw her husband in human form, once she knew he changed forms she could recognize him only as a werewolf. Her fear controlled her actions. The king sees Bisclavret as a wolf, but recognizes his rational mind as well. The king's recognition of Bisclavret's rational capabilities is what stops the hunt, a reaction very different from the wife's. Because he can see that the king recognizes him as a rational creature, the werewolf has a reason to be loyal to the king and to trust the king to protect him in the future.

Bisclavret's choice to stay with the king when he is a wolf follows logically. Bisclavret has found someone who is both capable of speaking for him and is trustworthy – someone worthy of his loyalty – even if that someone doesn't understand the situation fully. The king protects Bisclavret from further danger by allowing Bisclavret to follow him without harm. Paralleling his treatment of Bisclavret in his prior condition as human knight, the king “[holds] him very dear” (l. 169), and it follows as a consequence that the other knights in the community are “fond of him” (l. 178). Bisclavret is protected from harm by the king and the knights and cared for with food, water, and shelter (ll. 170-75). In return, Bisclavret is “noble and well behaved” (l. 179), lines that echo his description

as a knight. He also “never wished to do anything wrong” (l. 180) and goes everywhere with the king (ll. 181-83), actions which help to position Bisclavret in the community.

As well liked as he is, however, Bisclavret’s place in the court is still uncertain, as he is still not recognized as a knight and still has a secret he is incapable of telling his king. *Bisclavret* presents a world where individuals are defined by their place in the community,<sup>3</sup> but Bisclavret is still the werewolf. All of the characters in the text are referred to exclusively according to their place in the community (wife, knight, king, etc.) except Bisclavret, who is called both *knight* and “Bisclavret.” In *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf*, Scunduto points out that “the exact meaning of *bisclavret*... has been the subject of debate for over one hundred years, with scholars proposing various possibilities: ‘speaking wolf,’ ‘wearing short pants,’ ‘dear little speaking wolf,’ ‘rational wolf,’ and ‘wolf-sick’ or ‘leprous wolf’” (40). These various translations (only one of which does not refer to a “wolf” in some way) suggest that, regardless of the understandable tendency to use the word *bisclavret* only as a name, it also serves in some way as a signifier of his place within the social community. Understanding this word to mean some variation of *werewolf* introduces more questions: where does he fit in the community? can his place be defined? He is a knight, but his wife’s betrayal takes that position from him. He cannot return to human form unless his wife first reveals the secret of his transformation to the king and the knights. She must also reveal where Bisclavret’s clothes are hidden. Without his clothes, Bisclavret cannot take on human form again, and will have no choice but to remain in the form of a wolf. The wife must once again break the implicit oath of secrecy and trust between herself and Bisclavret. This time, however,

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<sup>3</sup> Scunduto argues that, “as a construct of medieval romance, the individual has no autonomy and is totally dependent on others” (“Blurred” 121).



Bisclavret needs her to do so; she has taken away his voice which means he cannot tell his secret himself. Bisclavret must rely on his wife, just as he still relies on the king for protection and the wise man to explain his situation.

Bisclavret's continual love of the king and presence at the king's side (indicators of loyalty) accompany a subtle transformation of Bisclavret, though this transformation is not physical. This transformation is apparent only when considering the *lai*'s opening, which, as Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante point out, features "a word picture of the werewolf, stressing his man-eating brutality" (101). Marie indicates that a werewolf – a "garwolf," and presumably a "bisclavret" as well<sup>4</sup> – "is a savage beast" (l. 9) and that when "his fury is on him / he eats men, does much harm, / and goes deep in the forest to live" (10-12). It is only in these opening lines (which might be taken as a summary or description and not an example) that the audience sees a werewolf in "his fury" (l. 10) and thus understands what Bisclavret might be like in that state. When the knight who married his wife comes to court, it is clear that Bisclavret is angry, perhaps even furious, and he is described as desiring "revenge" (l. 210) and "hat[ing]" the knight (l. 218). The first "fury" readers see is, however, an act against the knight that does not exactly parallel what Marie described in the opening lines. There are two differences: his attack is interrupted by the king, who keeps Bisclavret in check, and his actions have reason. With the help of the king and the supportive court, Bisclavret retains his status as a rational

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<sup>4</sup> Sconduto argues that Marie works against this image, distinguishing Bisclavret as a "noble werewolf" (39) who is "perhaps the only Bisclavret" (41). Though this may be true, it is implied in the wolf/beast imagery that Bisclavret has at least similar urges to the werewolf; Bisclavret states that he becomes a Bisclavret (l. 63), and that he goes into the woods and lives off of prey and plunder. This, along with his name, links him with the "savage beast" (l. 9); they both live in the woods, kill, and cause harm (plunder). While the description Bisclavret gives is less severe than the opening lines, it does not rule out the possibility that his "prey" is men or even give any significant hint that his actions are different from the werewolf, paralleling the text itself where Bisclavret's time as a wolf is still a mystery.

creature and is not judged to be a “savage beast” by the knights or the king. The court, in fact, “humanizes” him by giving his violent actions a voiced reason – revenge.

Bisclavret’s attack reminds readers not only of his past and the betrayal of his wife, but also that he is in a court that does not understand his situation. The betrayal is not known to others (the oath between the wife and the second knight was private), so the court can only guess that he wants revenge and cannot say why. Bisclavret still does not have a voice with which to articulate his position, and so he teeters on the edge of human and bestial, remaining on the edges of the community. Pappa reads the scene as suggesting that “Bisclavret is part of the group, yet cannot be identified as an individual. It is precisely the werewolf’s liminality as ‘noble beast’ that prompts the household to support the wolf and suspect the knight. Bisclavret’s actions serve to maintain the social hegemony as dictated by a specific ideal of courtly chivalry” (131). Here there is a conflict. The *lai* identifies Bisclavret as separate from the group because he is the attacker and the group must keep him from doing harm. Yet even as his separateness from the group allows him to attack the knight as a wolf, his inclusion in the group allows the group to turn on itself and protect him by suspecting a fellow knight. He is at once both an individual and a part of the group, both independent in his actions and dependent upon others to remain civil.

The second time Bisclavret goes into something resembling a “fury,” he manages to bite off the nose of his wife, and at this point – when the king has failed to hold his vassal in check and does not understand the reasoning behind the attack – Bisclavret’s life, once again, is in danger. Without a voice, he is reduced to actions and the king cannot approve of those actions without knowing the reasoning behind them. At this

juncture, Marie supplies Bisclavret with a voice in the form of a wise man who recognizes the wife and suspects that she knows why Bisclavret “hates her” (l. 257). Interestingly enough, Bisclavret *is* described as a “beast” (though not as “savage”) three times (l. 241, 257, 284) by the wise man, which stands in contrast to how he describes Bisclavret’s transformation, “turns into a man” (l. 292). The wise man seems to be speaking only about Bisclavret’s physical form, even going so far as to call it an “animal form” (l. 285) which Bisclavret must “get rid of” (l. 285) in private, an act that his wife denied him and that the king and his knights can now enable.

Pappa comments on the way the entire *lai* reinforces the male “homosocial fantasy” (136) and the violence it shows against women in the final scenes, stating that, “at its worst, chivalric culture is sterile and bestial, characterized by a revulsion and repression of the female body” (136). While the *lai* does show a good deal of violence against the only female character, to say that it does so as a “revulsion and repression of the female body” is excessive. The *lai* does not so much reject the wife as female as it rejects what she and her second husband represent (she is, after all, not exiled alone): fear, irrationality, and betrayal. She is rejected because of what she has done to Bisclavret, that is, removed him from the entire social community. Her confession of her actions leads to her exile from the community.

The king’s rejection of the wife parallels the wife’s rejection of Bisclavret at the beginning of the *lai*. She exiles Bisclavret from the community he was a part of and forces him to live without a voice; the king in turn exiles her and her new husband from their place in court, and Bisclavret’s bite forces her to live without a nose and to have nose-less children. The betrayal against Bisclavret, the trust he shows after that betrayal,

the transformation he undergoes because of that betrayal, and the punishment of those who betrayed him are all central to the narrative. The audience cannot forget at the end that the wife was the one who wanted to “get rid of [Bisclavret]” (l. 101) in the beginning, and that she conspired with another knight to do just that. She marries her co-conspirator knight knowing that her husband is likely still roaming the forest as a wolf, or that she (at the very least) has denied him a proper funeral by locking him in the form of a wolf so that none may recognize him. Once she has been punished for these crimes against him, Bisclavret can return to human form without fear because the rest of the community – the king and his knights – has already accepted Bisclavret in both wolf form and human form.

Hanning and Ferrante argue that the *lai* is “concerned with the human capacity to manifest nobility even under the most trying conditions, and thus to transcend the animal part of our nature and garner the hard-won benefits of civilization” (101). *Bisclavret* is a story about disloyalty, trust, and gaining the “benefits of civilization” from the community, but I find little in the story about the ability to “transcend the animal part of our nature;” the “animal” is veiled throughout the text, and any full savagery Bisclavret commits is concealed by this lack of presence. Because he is never seen as purely animal and because he is always shown as having reason, there is no animal nature to “transcend.” The anger he does show is held in check not by himself, but by his king. He is “ashamed” (l. 288) at the end to put his clothes on in the presence of others, but readers aren’t told the reason for his shame or if this is a continuation of a previous behavior that Bisclavret did not tell his wife. Again, Marie has hidden something from us, and we must proceed from what she does tell us: that Bisclavret wakes up in the king’s chamber as a

man, and that he is given back all he lost and more. As David Leshock states, “from what the text provides, he has been neither ‘cured’ nor reformed of his werewolf attributes, and we must assume that his capacity for eating humans and creating much harm has not ended with the completion of the narrative” (para. 8). I do not agree that it *must* be assumed that Bisclavret continues to be a “savage beast” (l. 9) after the completion of the *lai*, but I do think that Marie leaves his status as a werewolf open to interpretation and imagination. Bisclavret has returned to his position at the beginning of the tale with only a few key differences: he has no wife, and the king and knights know of his transformation. Readers do not know if Bisclavret continues to transform into a werewolf or if he stays in human form for the rest of his life – if he has “transcended” any part of his “animal nature” – and Marie creates this ambiguity for a reason: it does not matter. Bisclavret has proven himself to be a trustworthy vassal to his king as both wolf and knight, and his king now knows of his two different appearances and can both protect him and correct his actions if necessary. Bisclavret’s transformation is no longer an issue.

It may not be a conscious choice for Bisclavret to transform into a wolf; Marie doesn’t provide any details. If it is not a conscious choice, then he may still need to transform three days a week. Readers don’t know. What is clear is that it is a conscious choice to change back into a human, it is a choice to make that transformation in private, and it is a choice to rejoin the community in both forms. What gives Bisclavret a voice in this tale, what allows him to reenter society, what provides him with choices, and what allows his fellow knights and king to view him as rational as both knight and wolf are his loyalty and his trust.

## Part Two: *Guillaume of Palerne* and Greed

*Bisclavret* shows a very simple social structure that gives readers the basics of a story while leaving much that would complicate the situation – the source of *Bisclavret*'s transformative ability, for example – outside of the text. *Guillaume de Palerne*, in comparison, presents many of the same social structures and anxieties as *Bisclavret* in a more complex storyline made possible by a considerably longer poem with detailed battle scenes and long travel sequences. While the focus of the text remains on Guillaume, a majority of the scenes include or allude to another crucial character in the tale: the transformed Alphonse. Whether he is leading the Emperor to Guillaume while chasing a stag, providing Guillaume with food, or symbolized by the wolf on Guillaume's shield, Alphonse is never far from the action in the text. When readers learn that Alphonse is trapped in wolf form, they also discover he was transformed by a magic ointment applied at a young age by his stepmother Brande, who wished for her own son to be Alphonse's father's heir. Later, the audience sees the ritual Alphonse's stepmother uses to restore his human body and, more shocking when compared with *Bisclavret*, see the human Alphonse naked and ashamed.

Alphonse is not simply a knight who goes off several days a week to be a wolf as *Bisclavret* does. He is a prince. Moreover, there is no indication that he was wolf-like before his stepmother's betrayal. Brande's actions trigger a series of events where Alphonse and his chosen lord, Guillaume, travel in various countries including Sicily, Spain, and Rome; and in each location a new set of characters is introduced. In Sicily (or Apulia), the noble Guillaume, his mother Queen Felise, his father King Embron, his sister Florence, his uncle, and many others begin the romance. The poet jumps then to Spain,

where the werewolf Alphonse, his stepmother Brande, his half-brother Brandin, and his father King Alphonse have their story explained. In Rome, Emperor Nathanial, his daughter Melinor, and the Lady Alixandrine find a place in the tale. Unlike in *Bisclavret*, nearly all of the main characters (and a few minor characters) are named, forcing readers to keep track of family relations, status, and interactions. The story's greater length also allows characters to develop more fully and grants the audience a fuller understanding of their motivations through multiple perspectives. This feature becomes accentuated when the narrator or another character repeats or summarizes actions that have already happened. Alphonse is seen first as a wild, savage wolf before he is presented as Guillaume's rescuer and provider, then as a victim of Brande's form-changing ointment, and finally as Brande's attacker. Guillaume is viewed first as a victim of a savage beast's attack, then as a noble child, and next as a lover and a knight. These multiple views cause him to be labeled dishonorable (l. 3631) by the emperor before he can finally redeem himself and be seen as noble once again.

As in *Bisclavret*, trust and loyalty play key roles even as the story is more directly about something else: love. Greed and ambition take the place of fear as motivation for Queen Brande, and the story becomes both darker with more detailed violence and more reassuring as true nobility remains virtuous despite betrayal, alternate form, or upbringing. The poet hides from readers what Marie terms a "fury"; however it skirts closer to revealing this violent werewolf nature in several scenes. Alphonse is first seen with his mouth gaping open, a feature of attacking animals in other scenes and a description later used during Alphonse's second attack on Brande. In a second, almost violent occurrence, he is seen frightening a peasant for food with his mouth open. In

another scene, the bear-disguised Guillaume and Melinor are discovered by countrymen who would return them to Rome, so Alphonse kidnaps the son of the leader of the band in a method similar to how he kidnapped Guillaume. Alphonse carries the twelve-year-old child in his mouth to lead the men away from Guillaume and Melinor. Because he looks like a savage animal who has taken the child off to eat him,<sup>5</sup> Alphonse is putting himself in danger as he did years before. In one scene, the only scene where readers see Alphonse succeed in doing harm, Alphonse drags two deer – a stag and a doe – before Guillaume and Melinor and kills the two animals in their presence. Still, this bestial behavior is controlled and with a clear purpose: to provide Guillaume and Melinor with the skins they need to disguise themselves. He must be careful in the execution of the deer so that the two humans will be able to pass as animals. Alphonse never explicitly attacks other humans as a wolf without reason, and readers never see him actually harm other humans. He is described as being courteous and gentle with the child he kidnaps, and there is an emphasis on the fact that he does not harm the boy. His attack on the peasant to provide food for Guillaume and Melinor is more frightening than threatening. He does not cause the deer to suffer savage attacks. His attack on Brande is frightening, but Guillaume prevents Alphonse from harming her.

While these violent actions are mostly motivated by a need to protect and provide for Guillaume – with the notable exception of the attacks on Brande – the author has

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<sup>5</sup> In Kirby Smith's study, he mentions a legend of the werewolf in Armenia concerned with the eating of children. A woman who has committed "grievous sins" is given "a wolfskin which he [a spirit] forces her to put on. The wolfish instinct at once seizes her; she fights against it for a time but at last yields, devouring first her own children, then those of her relatives, beginning with the nearest, and finally, anyone's children. Every door opens before her of itself; locks and bolts are quite useless. At daylight she returns to her own form and hides the skin" (29). While Alphonse is not female, the fear that the werewolf will eat children remains the same.



shown something Marie did not: a wolf closer to the furious beasts of old tales. This violence is tempered, though, by the violence shown by others in the poem. Compared to the gentleness of Alphonse, Guillaume and other humans fight brutally in wars that are described in great detail, for example:

There you would have seen blows flying,  
 Severing and slicing napes and necks,  
 Chests and clavicles and torsos,  
 Ribs, entrails, and spines;  
 And intestines falling from bodies,  
 Heads flying and people dying  
 And red blood spilling on the field. (ll. 2077-83)

The damage that humans do to other humans is much more violent than that from the “furious” werewolf who has succeeded only in killing deer. Moreover, it is clear that Alphonse’s actions are honorable because he is serving Guillaume; Guillaume himself is the character with more questions.

Guillaume and Melinor have caused Emperor Nathanial shame and have left behind the loyalty they should have shown as vassal and daughter to run away from the marriage he has arranged for Melinor. They do this so that they can be together, but in doing so they have left the Emperor unable to fulfill his promise to Melinor’s Greek suitor. This betrayal disappears into the tale as Guillaume and Melinor prepare to wed. They send notice to her father, the Emperor, who hears the story and rides to see his daughter marry, asking for more details on how Guillaume was restored to his throne and for the story to be retold on his way to Spain. Because of Guillaume’s renewed status as a

prince, the love between himself and Melinor is no longer shameful, her father no longer disapproves, and the Greek she was promised to is only briefly mentioned as made unhappy by the loss as she prepares to marry Guillaume.

Guillaume and Alphonse are both princes, are both removed from their families, and are both betrayed by members of their families (Guillaume by his uncle and Alphonse by his stepmother). Also, both transform: Alphonse literally becomes a wolf; Guillaume puts on the skin first of a white bear and then of a stag in order to disguise himself; and on the battlefield Guillaume is described as “transformed” (l. 2040) so that “his gentle appearance has totally changed” (ll. 2042). Unlike the transformed Alphonse, Guillaume looks like a furious creature when “His eyes are red like those of a dragon, / his face is fierce like that of a lion / inflamed with anger and rage” (ll. 2037-39), and he also acts like a furious creature when on the battlefield as he strikes brutally with his sword. His actions are closer to the “fury” Marie described in *Bisclavret* than the actions of either Alphonse or *Bisclavret*. Where as Alphonse appears on the outside to be a beast but has the mind of a man, Guillaume appears on the outside to be a man but has the ferocity of an animal. Another difference in their transformations is that Guillaume is never trapped in his animal skins or in his battle rage while Alphonse is incapable of transforming back into human form without his stepmother’s magic. He is a victim of her greed much as *Bisclavret* is a victim of fear.

As readers discover, the victim does not always get his revenge in this tale. Unlike in *Bisclavret*, the betrayer – Brande – is not explicitly punished for her greed. Alphonse attacks her twice in order to achieve revenge, and both attempts fail. In the end, Brande voluntarily releases the magic she previously forced on Alphonse. When she sees him

naked and ashamed, she tells him, “do not be ashamed because of me, / if I see you naked, without clothing” (ll. 7765-66), and immediately begins serving him by showing him to the bath, retrieving his clothes, and seeking the people he asks for. Nonetheless, though she is not exiled or harmed in any physical way as punishment, her desire has not been fulfilled. By restoring Alphonse, she has taken away her son’s chance at being King of Spain and his hope of marrying Florence. He has little chance of achieving a higher status than he was born into, and the poet tells us that he and his new wife “have enough” (l. 8911). In contrast, Alphonse, whom Brande attempted to exile, is both future king and husband of the beautiful Florence, and his service to Guillaume gives him back his place in society and even strengthens his status as he becomes Guillaume’s brother-in-law. The audience can feel happy for Alphonse because his continual loyalty and service are rewarded when he reenters society, marries, and later assumes the throne when his father dies.

It is clear from the way the narrator describes Alphonse and seems even to pray for him at times, asking that he not suffer, that the narrator is sympathetic to his plight and supports the actions Alphonse takes. This parallels what Kirby Flower Smith found to be “exceptional” about *Bisclavret*: “the author takes the part of the werewolf” who is “to be pitied as an innocent victim” (13). Smith mentions that this is also true of two other werewolf tales, the *Histoire de Biclarel* and the *Lai de Melion*, which he finds very similar to *Bisclavret*. Smith does not mention *Guillaume* in this list, though he does footnote the English version *William of Palerne* in an earlier section as an example of the “class” of werewolves where the afflicted is “the innocent victim of a malignant power” (5). For Smith, these victim-werewolves are rare and the more violent counterpart is more

common.<sup>6</sup> In *Guillaume*, one of these victim-werewolves becomes not only an active hero of the tale, but also one of the most loyal characters. Alphonse is the innocent victim of his stepmother's greed: his stepmother forces him into wolf form so her own son might be king. Despite her actions Alphonse proves himself loyal to Guillaume, the young prince Alphonse kidnaps to save from a deadly betrayal. Alphonse's subsequent violent actions are motivated by a need to protect, to provide, and to get revenge for the betrayal against himself. They are not a sign of his inhumanity, but rather a sign of his loyalty.

The first betrayal the audience sees is a threat against Guillaume, not the werewolf, and when Alphonse initially appears it seems as though he might be a part of that betrayal: he looks like a vicious wolf who is taking Guillaume into the woods to eat him (as might be expected of a werewolf). The author does not reveal Alphonse's noble intentions until after descriptions of the Queen's grief and the King's pursuit. Then the picture of the wolf presented in lines 173-83 alters the perspective of the werewolf shown in the kidnapping scene. Alphonse acts like a parent caring for his child: whatever Guillaume needs, Alphonse provides (l. 175). Thus Alphonse prepares a "den" for Guillaume (l. 177-80) and "puts the king's son to bed / and embraces him with his four paws" (l. 182-3). The image of Alphonse as provider is accentuated a few lines later when he goes in search of food (l. 197), as a father might go on a hunt.

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<sup>6</sup> Sconduto states in contrast that "the narrative literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries portrays the creature sympathetically as a victim, rather than as the perpetrator of violent and bloodthirsty deeds" ("Rewriting" 23), a statement which implies that *all* twelfth- and thirteenth-century werewolf stories display sympathetic werewolves and not just a select few. The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes, as Smith's study includes much more than just the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and these tales were likely still being told.

Strikingly, Alphonse's grief when he discovers Guillaume is missing parallels the grief of Guillaume's mother when Alphonse carried him off earlier, and his pursuit along the trail of the cowherd echoes King Embron's chase after Alphonse. His grief spurs what could almost be considered a "fury": as he runs after Guillaume and the cowherd who took him, Alphonse is "full of rage" (l. 250) until he sees that Guillaume is unharmed. Alphonse "shows his great joy" (l. 265) when he sees that Guillaume is happy and "well cared for" (l. 263), and he "bows down low" (l. 266). The poet does not specify here to whom Alphonse is bowing as he does in other places in the romance, so that must be determined by readers. If the audience recognizes that in each bowing scene Alphonse always bows to Guillaume even when he also bows to another character, it follows that he is bowing to Guillaume here. In each other instance in which Alphonse bows to others as a wolf, the poet makes clear that Alphonse is asking for something. Though this first bow is not seen by Guillaume, it may serve a similar function of communication – it acts as a goodbye, or as an acknowledgement that Alphonse is leaving for a time. Alphonse was Guillaume's protector and caretaker while they were in the woods, and once another has taken over that role he is not needed at Guillaume's side.

After Alphonse has seen Guillaume with the peasant, the narrator marks a shift in the tale, stating: "Now you can hear about him [Alphonse], / who he was and what he became, and how it all happened" (ll. 270-72). Readers now learn Alphonse's background, during which another set of characteristics is revealed. Unlike Bisclavret, a knight, Alphonse is "the son of a king" (l. 277).<sup>7</sup> This means that his relationship with

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<sup>7</sup> In *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf*, Sconduto remarks that Alphonse is also very young when his stepmother betrays him, possibly as young as a toddler but at least a year old, and approximately the same age as Guillaume (91, endnote 9 on 205). While this is possible, it is also possible to read Alphonse as

Guillaume is not that of king and knight but that of two people with similar noble and princely status, though Alphonse as a wolf cannot articulate his position. This knowledge changes the interpretation of Alphonse's bow from one of inferior to superior to one of respect for one of a similar social position. There are still differences, of course.

Guillaume, though young, still has his human form and voice where Alphonse does not. Later, Guillaume becomes Emperor of Rome while Alphonse becomes King of Spain. Alphonse thus remains slightly lower in status throughout the tale, though the difference between them is not great. They are both nobles of the highest rank, and because of this Alphonse's service to Guillaume is less an act of obligation and more one of voluntary loyalty.

Sconduto links *Guillaume* with *Bisclavret* and two other wolf-transformation tales by showing the commonality of seven motifs<sup>8</sup>. She demonstrates that *Guillaume* deviates slightly from each of these motifs, allowing for the werewolf to be slightly "rewritten."

One of these motifs is the "submission scene," of which she argues that, in *Guillaume*,

the werewolf's enactment of the homage ceremony appears almost at the end of the romance, at a time when his life is not in jeopardy. Moreover, it occurs between Alphonse and his father, the king of Spain, who is himself a prisoner and in no position to help anyone. Until he throws himself at his father's feet, Alphonse is in no danger whatsoever; it is then Guillaume,

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older, perhaps as late as pre-teen, and older than Guillaume, fitting with the image of Alphonse as caretaker and provider in these early scenes.

<sup>8</sup> These motifs are: 1) a gentle werewolf, 2) a "treacherous" female, 3) an inability to become human, 4) a "noble werewolf who is both hero and victim," 5) the homage ceremony or "submission scene," 6) a male of higher status who recognizes the werewolf's "humanity," and 7) a "sudden violent" act by the werewolf which causes those around him to question "his true nature and identity" ("Rewriting" 23-24).

not the king of Spain, who prevents anyone from harming the beast (7218-27). ("Rewriting" 32)

Sconduto is right in that this is a scene of homage and that Guillaume is the one who protects Alphonse, though this is not the only such scene in the poem. Alphonse is also in danger of losing something if he does not act, and though it is not a physical danger to himself it is an emotional danger. If readers are to understand Alphonse's humble bows as a sign of homage to a superior, there are actually four "submission scenes" or "homage ceremonies" in *Guillaume*, and in at least three of these scenes Alphonse is in danger of losing his father. Alphonse bows to Guillaume early in the poem when he leaves the child with the cowherd (l. 266), twice more while Guillaume is with Queen Felise overlooking the orchard (ll. 5837-49 and 6371-80), and a final time when he also bows to his father and embraces his leg (ll. 7209-17). Queen Felise remarks on the action each time the wolf bows in the orchard, first noticing how the wolf "imitated us in this action" (l. 5957) and then stating that "there is no doubt / that this is significant" (ll. 6391-92). These scenes represent the primary service of Alphonse, that to Guillaume.

For several reasons, Alphonse's actions change when his father is present. First, he experiences, as Sconduto states, an "emotional reaction to seeing his father" ("Rewriting" 32). Because the relationship between Alphonse and his father is different from the one between Alphonse and Guillaume, it is not difficult to see that Alphonse might react differently to seeing his father. Second, it is noted both when he bows the second time before Guillaume and the queen and when later he bows before his father, Guillaume, and the Queen that he seems to be "asking something" (l. 6388, slightly varied in ll. 7213-14). The first attempt fails as Guillaume does not understand what the

plea is for, but the second attempt succeeds because King Alphonse is able to explain what has happened. Third, Alphonse is still a wolf. Because he does not have a voice, he is unable to tell Guillaume that the man he has been fighting against in the war against the Spanish army, the king he has imprisoned, is Alphonse's father. He uses the homage ceremony to show Guillaume that he, Alphonse, owes his allegiance to this man and is asking that King Alphonse not come to harm.

Alphonse has been in danger several times in the tale – the narrator and Alphonse himself emphasize this fact several times – but he has always placed himself in these situations in order to protect Guillaume (and later Melinor) from harm. It is fitting, then, that Guillaume is ultimately the one who protects Alphonse. While Alphonse's father shares a closer blood relationship with Alphonse, Guillaume is the prince Alphonse serves. Alphonse has built a relationship of trust with Guillaume by providing Guillaume and Melinor with food, protecting them from harm, and providing them with alternate disguises. Guillaume even states outright that he has put all his trust in Alphonse while Alphonse is in wolf form: "I know not if you are afraid of me, / In you I place all my trust," Guillaume says in lines 4375-6.<sup>9</sup> In return, Alphonse trusts Guillaume to protect him when he is danger and to help him when Guillaume is holding Alphonse's father as a prisoner of war. Alphonse emphasizes this trust in Guillaume when he is human again by telling Brande that he wants to receive his armor from Guillaume specifically, and not his

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<sup>9</sup> While it is not stated why Alphonse, a wolf capable of harming both Guillaume and Melinor, might be afraid of an unarmed man and woman, it is possibly a reference to the fact that Alphonse does not linger in their presence. Since leaving Guillaume in the care of the cowherd, Alphonse provides both Guillaume and Melinor with food and protection, but does not stay with them and embrace Guillaume as he did when Guillaume was a child. The first moment of physical contact between the two after Guillaume's stay with the cowherd does not occur until Guillaume restrains Alphonse from attacking Brande.



father (l. 7786-99). It is clear throughout the tale that Guillaume is the one whom Alphonse sees as holding the highest rank. When, after Emperor Nathaniel's death, Guillaume becomes Emperor, this relationship of trust continues between the two who are, at this point, brothers by marriage.

Alphonse's second attack on Brande after the homage ceremony – before he becomes human again – accomplishes more than his first attack on her. He does not harm her and does not succeed in getting revenge, yet his reaction to the sight of his stepmother “confirms his identity” (Scundoto, “Rewriting,” 33) as the lost prince of Spain, whom his father believed had drowned. Again Alphonse's actions are similar to the “fury” Marie describes; “his eyes roll” (l. 7636), “his mouth [is] gaping open” (l. 7638), and “his heart trembles from rage” (l. 7633) at the sight of Brande. Realizing that Alphonse is in such a state because he is facing the woman who trapped him in wolf form, Guillaume both restrains Alphonse physically and calms Alphonse with a rational explanation. Like Bisclavret, Alphonse's restraint comes not from within himself when he faces his betrayer, but from the social community that has accepted him and, more specifically, from the one he has chosen to serve. When Guillaume tells Alphonse he has summoned Brande to change Alphonse back into his human body and undo the magic that she worked on him years ago, Alphonse calms, further displaying that underneath the wolf form is a mind that hears, understands, and trusts that these words are the truth.

Guillaume states that if Brande does not cure Alphonse she will die and all the men captured in the war will suffer, and, as a second confirmation of his humanity, Alphonse understands Guillaume's words. Guillaume's statement tells Alphonse that Guillaume will carry out his revenge if Alphonse cannot, and in doing so sends a message

to Brande: if she will not change Alphonse back, she will suffer. Alphonse “manifests great joy” (l. 7673) when he hears Guillaume’s words, and “by signs and by his appearance... gives him his consent” (l. 7674) to be treated. In a reverse of their earlier relationship, Guillaume becomes the provider for Alphonse’s needs, giving Alphonse a place to transform and the things he needs to change back: his stepmother and her supplies. Echoing *Bisclavret*, Alphonse transforms without his chosen lord present. Unlike that tale, however, there is a detailed ritual that Brande performs, and she is present as he changes from wolf to human form. Once he is human again, Alphonse is ashamed without clothes. Guillaume again takes on the role of provider, just as Alphonse was for Guillaume while they were travelling, and provides him with all he needs, including clothes. Alphonse’s stepmother here works as an intermediary between the recently-transformed Alphonse and Guillaume, leading Alphonse to a bath, acting as “his chambermaid and servant” (l. 7782), and bringing Alphonse the clothes Guillaume has provided. Instead of exiling Alphonse as she intended at the beginning of the tale, Brande furthers his reintegration into the community.

Alphonse remains a strong character who, though the victim of a magical ointment, still “begins a war” (l. 314) against his betrayer, prevents others from being betrayed, and takes on many roles in service to his chosen prince. Even after discovering his own stepmother could not be trusted, Alphonse becomes a character worthy of trust and respect. His loyalty to Guillaume through knightly actions and service is a reminder of his noble birth and his human mind. The fact that he is a werewolf does not hinder Alphonse’s ability to be loyal, but forces him to show his loyalty in a way that creates a bond between himself and Guillaume. They have relied on each other, provided for each

other, and Alphonse and Guillaume both benefit from Alphonse's ability to be loyal to the child he saved – his brother-in-law Guillaume.

## **Conclusion**

Animal transformations – particularly of men into wolves – present challenges to trust and loyalty that are unique to this transformation type. As wolves, Bisclavret and Alphonse are incapable of communicating verbally and must find alternative ways of showing who they are. Bisclavret must show his king that he is still a loyal knight and find acceptance in his wolf body before his human identity can be discovered; Alphonse's young age presents a different twist on this display, as his loyalty and his identity are tied together more closely. Alphonse becomes a knight in wolf form, seeking adventure while his lord is growing and identifying himself by his loyalty to Guillaume. While in wolf form, both knights are defined by acts of loyalty and by the respect they show their sovereigns as a result of those acts.

These knights face especial difficulties because of the fear-inducing wolf form they are unable to leave; the wolf body that displays loyalty is a body in which "his distinctive features... are ravening hunger and bestial ferocity." For many, the wolf "is the symbol of Night and Winter and the Messenger of Death" (Smith 2), yet the actions of both Bisclavret and Alphonse conflict with this symbolic image. Bisclavret manages to overcome the challenges his form presents by finding the right person and performing the right acts. He follows his lord, earns the respect of his fellow knights, and finds acceptance both as a wolf and as a man. While Alphonse also spends most of the text as a wolf, he spends less time by Guillaume's side than Bisclavret spent with his lord. He, like

Bisclavret, finds a way around the monstrous wolf image by performing the right acts for the right people, but he keeps himself at a distance. Both Bisclavret and Alphonse find relief at the end of their tales. Bisclavret is accepted and restored to his position; Alphonse is restored to his places as prince – and later king – after Brande removes the curse she placed upon him. In each case, the transformed character recognition of the leader to whom the transformed out to be loyal and his subsequent actions lead to the restoration of the proper order of the social community.

## Chapter Two: Human-Human Transformations

Tales of humans changing form have certain similarities to tales of human to animal transformation. The poems I will consider in this chapter treat issues such as trust, appearance, and loyalty in terms of how they are affected by verbal agreements and promises. These poems share with the werewolf tales many elements, such as oaths, knights, and, of course, a character who – willingly or not – transforms, yet these tales are more overtly concerned with the verbal contracts made between a knight and someone from outside the court community. These tales also differ from the werewolf tales in the roles transformed characters play in plot development and in how these roles are revealed in the poems. Where Bisclavret and Alphonse are victims of betrayal who prove their loyalty by trusting others and performing human-like acts while in wolf form, in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the transforming characters (the old woman and the Green Knight) put the loyalty of non-transforming characters (the knight and Gawain) through a trial or test. The knights, not the shapeshifters, must prove their loyalty, and that opportunity comes from a monstrous, transformed outsider. This is not a surprise as

The world of knightly proving is a world of adventure. It not only contains a practically uninterrupted series of adventures; more specifically, it contains nothing but the requisites of adventure. Nothing is found in it which is not either accessory or preparatory to an adventure. It is a world specifically created and designed to give the knight opportunity to prove himself. (Auerbach, 136)

In the world Erich Auerbach is describing, knights underwent “feats of arms, and love” (140) without any practical purpose except to, as stated above, “prove himself.” In the transformation tales, however, the “knightly proving” comes from surviving challenges of loyalty in order to find or maintain their place in society. The tales with where both transformation forms are human the trials the knight finds it particularly difficult to maintain his loyalty. Where the werewolves worked to be a part of the community, these knights must prove they are worthy to continue living in the courtly society.

In addition, the loyalty displayed takes a different form here than it does in *Bisclavret* and *Guillaume*. The loyalty the knight shows is not just to a person, but to an oath or agreement. This means that the knights are not tested on their voluntary, willing choices to serve, but on their personal fulfillment of promises that oblige them to take part in unpleasant situations. After the transformed character requires that an oath be made and subsequently challenges the knight to follow through, these tales focus on the struggle of the tested knight to keep his agreement. Though the narrators of both the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* imply that the knight is successful in his quest, both knights betray their oaths at least once in the process, undermining the ultimate “success.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that, in *Guillaume de Palerne*, Guillaume himself experiences a human-to-human transformation while on the battlefield. After Melinor fails a test of loyalty to her father that is presented by her love for Guillaume, Guillaume fails a similar test by running away with her. Guillaume has tested both himself and Melinor, and they have both failed. In the end, both are also considered “successful” because they are able to marry the one they love. As compared to the other two tales examined here, the sequence of events in *Guillaume de Palerne* is reversed because the test of loyalty comes before the transformation.

### Part One: Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Choice

*The Wife of Bath's Tale* takes readers to the time of King Arthur and his "elf-queene" (III 860), when England was a place "fulfild of fayerye" (III 859). Within this fanciful past, however, a knight does a terrible thing: he rapes a maiden. Due to his lust, this knight breaks one of the oaths of knighthood. While readers never actually see or hear the knight give an oath stating that he will not rape maidens or cause harm to women, the knight's actions cause "swich clamour / and swich pursute" (III 889-90) that the knight is condemned to death. He is treated as a criminal who must atone for his crimes, and the punishment by law is the loss of his life. This criminal is not just any man, either; he is a *knight*, sworn to serve the king and his law. By displaying the knight's condemnation, Chaucer implies that the knight has done more than fail to uphold his duty; the knight has done a significant wrong for which he must be punished with the ultimate form of exile, death.

When the queen gives the knight a chance to redeem himself by completing a quest, a second oath is implied: the knight will return to give his answer at the designated time. The question he must answer is also a challenge for the knight who has displayed, through his actions, that he has no regard for women's desires. Though in an analogue, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, Arthur is the one charged with finding this answer, in Chaucer's version the question relates directly to the crime committed.<sup>11</sup> Arthur and the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* arrive at the same answer in similar

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<sup>11</sup> While Arthur's shooting of the female deer might symbolically be linked with rape in order to form a parallel between *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, the crime Sir Gromer Somer Joure charges Arthur with is wrongfully giving Sir Gromer's land to Sir Gawain, not committing a crime against females.

manners:<sup>12</sup> Arthur receives his answer from an old woman who wishes to marry Sir Gawain as payment, and this knight hears the answer from an old woman who desires to marry him.

As in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, the transformation into a young maid does not occur until late in the narrative. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* adds an earlier transformation not found in the analogue. The old woman appears when the knight has nearly completed his journey and is near to failing in his quest to find what women want most. The timing, not surprisingly, parallels that in *The Wedding*, but in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* it is apparent immediately that the woman the knight finds when returning is not what she seems. The knight first sees many young maidens dancing (III 989-92) and it is not until he gets closer that he discovers only one old woman (III 995-99). According to Louise Fradenburg,

the twenty-four ladies whom the old woman replaces clearly offer a vision of happiness. Their disappearance, in turn, offers a vision of the fragility of happiness, of its tendency to vanish. Thus the promise of happiness is transformed, through a rude awakening, into an ugly truth about aging and death. (219)

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<sup>12</sup> A second analogue, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, follows a similar plot line; Arthur is charged with finding the answer to what women most desire and receives the answer from a woman in "red scarlett" (l. 56). This tale varies in that King Arthur offers Sir Gawain in exchange for the answer, and the answer is not that a woman wishes to rule over men, but to "have her will" (l. 104). Much of this manuscript is missing, including the lines from the marriage to Gawain's/the lady's choice of form and, later, part of her explanation for the enchantment. In both cases, Sir Gawain's loyalty is tested in terms of his willingness to marry the undesirable woman.



If the twenty-four maidens are meant to be “a vision of happiness,” then such a vision refers to the knight’s actions with the maid and his lustful nature. The knight himself can be seen as symbolically creating this reference, as Susanna Fein states:

The women’s lithe bodies presumably dance in a ring (as fairies were reputed to do), a shape symbolic of feminine gender, and the knight instinctively seeks to enter their circle. In so doing, his action may be read as figuratively sexual, repeating on a symbolic level the behavior that got him into trouble before. (338)

The transformation, in addition to revealing “an ugly truth about aging and death,” is a reminder to the knight and the audience that not all desires can be fulfilled, nor should they be. The old woman, then, draws the knight to her by showing him what he desires and, instead of allowing him to see her as an object of his lust, gives him only what he needs to survive the queen’s trial.

While it is unclear what the “reality” of the situation is – whether or not the old woman is really an old woman – the change in appearance from many young maids to a single old woman marks this scene as important in ways that are key to the rest of the tale. First, it displays the ability of the old woman to both transform and barter. Second, it forces the knight into an oath that he is obligated to keep. Third, because of the private nature of the scene, it opens a dialogue of trust between these characters that, though forced, is the beginning of their relationship with each other. The transformation of the young maids to the old woman alerts readers to a magical ability, causing readers to question who the old woman really is and what power she holds. She is not just an elder who knows the answer to the question of what women want because of her experiences in

life; she is otherworldly, and she requires payment in exchange for her knowledge. In light of these early actions, her ability to transform at the end of the tale is not surprising, nor are the choices that she offers unbelievable. The knight knows she is capable of changing her appearance, and the exchange of fidelity for beauty is a “payment” similar to the exchange of knowledge for a favor.

As readers learn at the conclusion of the tale, the truth of who the old woman really is is not important to this “lusty bachelor” (III 883). He is not interested in who she *is* so much as who she *chooses to be*, and this is because who she chooses to be has an effect on him and on his social status.<sup>13</sup> As his actions in the first half of the tale make clear, he cares only for himself and what benefits him, rarely thinking of long-term effects. When presented with the beautiful young maid, he chooses the immediate benefit of physical pleasure without considering the future consequences of raping her. When offered an answer that might satisfy the queen, he makes a hasty promise to do one favor for the old woman in exchange for the answer that will save his life. He does not consider that she might make a demand he will not wish to fulfill, such as asking him to marry her, in return for this favor. The benefit is immediate – just like the rape – and the price, at first, seems small. *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* here also varies from its analogues in a way that further parallels the rape: the future cost is indeterminate. While it was clear that there would be repercussions to the rape, it is also clear the knight does not suffer the typical punishment. Following his trial, he does not know if he will die because his fate rests with his answer, and he does not know if he will find the right one. Similarly, the

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<sup>13</sup> This is also made clear in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, when Gawain comments that an ugly wife by day will cause him to lose worship (ll. 670-2).

knight does not know the cost of the old woman's answer because she asks only that he grant her next request and does not specify what that request is, unlike the two analogues where it is clear that the price of the answer is a wedding with Sir Gawain.<sup>14</sup> All three tales lead to the same exchange, but only the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is ignorant of the true cost of his promise until it is demanded of him.

This first meeting also shows that neither character is completely dishonorable. Readers are shown two different forms of trust displayed by the knight and the old woman. The knight's trust is a forced trust. He cannot confirm the old woman's answer as right or wrong. He has, however, seen her transform from many young maidens to a single old woman, so he knows that she has some power, and without any other satisfactory answer to give he must use her answer and hope that the queen will accept it as correct. In contrast, the trust the old woman shows is neither forced nor complete. She trusts the knight to acknowledge the private oath made between them and be challenged by the favor she asks. Because of this, she does not make her return request in the private setting but follows the knight to court while her desires are still unvoiced. In doing so she places the knight in a position in which he will be obligated to keep his word or face dishonor, which suggests a lack of faith in his ability to go against his desires. She does, however, show that she trusts him to tell the truth when she challenges him to reveal the oath before the court. Though it would be awkward for the knight to say that he neither knows her nor that he owes her after she has come to court with him, he still has the

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<sup>14</sup> Each tale deals with this "price" differently. In *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* Arthur offers Sir Gawain as a husband in exchange (ll. 79-80); however in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* he states that he can only ask Sir Gawain to marry her and not make the promise for him (ll. 291-96). Thus, each tale deals with acts of loyalty to Arthur in a different way (the ability to serve a lord, the ability to uphold the lord's promise, and, in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the ability to uphold one's own promise).

opportunity to deny her claim to his body and escape the promise he made. Though the old woman has shown mystical power and might possibly be able to enforce her demand outside of the court, she does not need to exert those powers because of the knight's immediate answer: "I woot right wel that swich was my biheste" (III 1059). The knight knows his debt and is cornered into honoring a promise he would rather not keep. By making this request in court, the old woman thus changes their private agreement into a publicly acknowledged oath that the knight is obligated to uphold if he does not wish to face a second public shame and a second punishment. This, then, is the first test of the knight: a test of his willingness to admit to his oaths in public and thus a test of his honesty. Still, this is not yet a complete test of his ability to keep his oath because the knight has not yet had the opportunity to fulfill all aspects of the request.

Despite his promise, the knight tries to get the old woman to ask for something other than marriage, anything but his body (III 1061). Such a declaration may seem ironic from a man who has demonstrated little regard for the bodies of women, as it displays the uncommon image of a man who has committed rape fearing an act of rape on himself. While the knight has other fears aside from his desire not to sleep with the old woman, his initial fears here are for his body, reminding readers that a request of marriage includes a physical consummation. The knight is faced immediately with the attributes of the old woman with whom he would be required to sleep. Throughout, there is an emphasis on the old woman's ugliness that makes her seem monstrous, and as such the knight is not drawn to her the same way he is to the other maidens in the tale. She is foul and she is old, the opposite of the young maid the knight raped. It is not exactly clear what her age is, but she is certainly old enough to be his mother – if not his grandmother

– and seems to be past the age of bearing children. Norman Holland calls attention to this complication by stating: “our revulsion at the knight’s being asked to perform sexually for the old crone finds its roots in another taboo, that against sexual relations between a member of one generation and a member of his parents’ generation, a taboo ultimately derived from oedipal fears” (282). If the knight’s initial reaction is what Holland states as “ours,” then his lack of desire stems from deep-seated cultural expectations that arise from sexual taboos. To marry this woman would require that the knight participate in a physical relationship that is undesirable. Placed in a situation with no clear resolution, the knight asks the woman to take whatever else she might want except his ability to marry as he desires. The old woman, though, will not accept anything else, and so the two are quietly wed.

Despite these revulsions, the knight fulfills the obligations of his promise – to an extent – by complying with the old woman’s wish for a wedding. At this point all of the knight’s interactions with the woman have been as private as possible, including the wedding, and he is reluctant to spend the wedding night with her as a husband should. After hiding all day as an owl might, “Whan he was with his wyf abedde ybrought; / he walweth and he turneth to and fro” (III 1084-85). The ceremony has not established the happy ending usually associated with marriage, and the knight’s loyalty to his oaths is tested once again as he faces the reality of being married to the old woman. Though the knight was previously described as “lusty” (III 883), on his wedding night readers discover that his lust is also choosy – after hiding from his wife all day, in bed he is “lyk a man had lost his wit” (III 1095), tossing and turning about. There is a difference here between the modern definition of “lusty” and the broader Middle English use of the word

which is important to understand in order to grasp just how much the knight has changed. According to the Middle English Dictionary, the word *lusty*, when used as an adjective, primarily meant “pleasant, enjoyable, delightful,” “handsome, attractive,” “full of vigor, spirited, energetic,” “willing, desirous, eager,” or “cheerful, happy, merry” (*lustī*, adj., 1 and 2). The usages that correspond with our modern understanding are secondary usages of “lusty” in Middle English: “pleasure-loving, voluptuary,” “amorous,” and “lustful” fall under the fourth definition, and Chaucer has been cited as using the word in this manner as well. In fact, Chaucer uses many valences of the word *lusty* in *The Canterbury Tales*. The M.E.D. quotes Chaucer as using the word following the definition “amorous” and “lustful” in *The Knight’s Tale* (I 2111) and *The Squire’s Tale* (VI 272), but does not reference its use in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. No matter which definition is chosen, however, the knight fails to live up to the word when in bed with his wife; he is neither “full of vigor” nor “merry” as he tosses and turns. He is neither “handsome” nor “eager” in his disgust. He is “energetic” only in avoiding his wife, and “desirous” only to avoid his duty as her husband. Clearly he is neither “happy” nor “cheerful” about his new situation. Most importantly, any “amorous” or “lustful” actions have ceased now that he is married to an old woman, displaying a behavioral change in the knight. He does not act like a husband, and he does not want a wife who is “loothly” and “oold” (III 1100).

His actions, both during the day and at night, reveal other fears the knight has which he voices only when the wife asks. Readers find that not only is his wife “foule” (III 1082), but she is also poor. She is “of so lough a kynde” (III 1101) that her position as a knight’s wife would elevate her socially and lower his status. In addition to her being ugly and old, when it is clear that the knight is an unwilling partner the wife gives him a

lecture in bed, scolding him for not being able to see the good in her ostensible faults. She reminds the knight that Jesus chose to live in poverty, and states that “Poverté ful ofte, whan a man is lowe, / Maketh his God and eek himself to knowe” (III 1201-2). The wife also comments on her age, and how the “gentils of honour / Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favor / And clepe hym fader” (III 1209-11). While it is doubtful that she is asking the knight to call her “father” (or “mother”), she makes evident that age is something that noble men should respect. Finally, she states that both her age and her ugliness are guards against cuckoldry. Holland comments on this attention to her ugliness as a trait which “guarantees her chastity and fidelity,” stating that “the loathly lady is identifying, quite explicitly, the revulsion at her ugliness with a sexual taboo” (285). By making clear that others will not want to be with her because of her ugliness, the wife is also allowing her ugliness to be a reason why her husband would not want to be with her. The difference lies in the fact that he is her husband and is therefore obliged to consummate the marriage.

The wife’s age and appearance present two practical problems for the knight. First, it is clear that the old woman is not someone that he (or any knight) would want for a bride. However he *must* consummate the marriage in order to fulfill his hasty agreement, and his social obligation demands that his promise be honored in order for him to be considered honest. The knight faces the conflict between his loyalty to his word, which the social community expects him to uphold, and that same social community’s beliefs of what is proper interaction between a knight and a woman of the wife’s age and status. Second, her physical inability to bear him children will leave him without an heir, which was in Chaucer’s time a primary reason for marriage and marital

consummation. As he does not find her desirous and she is incapable of providing the knight with any benefits from sexual interaction, the only reason the knight has to complete the marriage is to fulfill his rash promise.

Instead of demanding consummation in her monstrous form after this lecture, the wife gives the knight a choice to counter her words, and his options again concern loyalty.<sup>15</sup> She tells him that he may either have a wife who is “foul and old” (III 1220) yet “trewe” (III 1221) or a wife who is “yong and fair” (III 1223) and visited by many men – with the implication that she will not honor her wedding vows of fidelity. What this choice becomes, in consequence, is a test of how well the knight can apply the lesson he learned earlier in the tale to his life now. He told the queen that women desire power over their husbands, but he has yet to show that he can give a woman what she desires. At this point readers might agree with Norman Holland and say that “the knight, no doubt somewhat worn down by all the things that have happened to him, gives up” (281). More sympathetic readers may feel that the knight realizes the choice is ultimately the wife’s, and simply says so. The point is that no matter which of the two provided answers the knight might have chosen to give, he would have suffered for it. Either he would have married a maiden who is old, ugly, and poor with all the associated disadvantages, or he would have married a young maiden with beauty and been compelled to forever question if his children are his.

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<sup>15</sup> Both *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* have a similar transformation plot point. In both manuscripts the choice is between having a beautiful wife by night and an ugly wife by day or having an ugly wife by night and a beautiful wife by day. In both cases, the wife of Sir Gawain remains beautiful at all times when he gives the choice to his wife, and in both cases the wife was suffering from an enchantment placed on her by her stepmother, a condition Chaucer does not make apparent.



Whatever his reasons, the knight gives his wife the power to do as she wishes, which is a different kind of choice. Fradenburg states that “the element of choice transforms unfreedom (no one can escape death) into an experience of freedom (the hero chooses to recognize the truth that he will not escape death)” (209). Her initial reference is to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, but she goes on to apply this insight about freedom to the knight’s choice in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*: “this transformation [of the wife] is accomplished through the knight’s *submission*” (209, her emphasis). Thus the knight’s happiness and blissful end are achieved not just from his submission, but from his *choice to submit*. He transforms his own “unfreedom” (his wife will do as she likes) into “an experience of freedom” (the knight lets his wife do as she likes).<sup>16</sup> As Fradenburg points out, however, the Wife of Bath’s

desire to dominate her husbands seems to many commentators a clear inversion of what, in the Middle Ages, were supposed to be the proper relations between husband and wife: the husband was to rule the wife, just as reason ought to rule the appetites. If this structure of rule was upset, then the proper order of things was upset, with dangerous consequences for all. (209)

Within *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the “upset” of the traditional hierarchy in marriage results not in “dangerous consequences,” but in the restoration of the “structure of rule.” When the knight chooses to let his wife choose, the results actually allow the consummation of the marriage to occur, and the results restore the proper order of the

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<sup>16</sup> The release of power to the spouse leads to what Holland terms “genital mutuality” and “mutual submission” (283).

marriage. It is also important to recognize that the “rule” goes both ways – the wife also obeys her husband after the wedding has been completed (l. 1255-56). Ultimately, his acceptance of his wife as a woman capable of making choices is what she wants and the knight is rewarded for his decision with a wife he is willing to hold and love. To the knight, it apparently does not matter how old she truly is, only that she looks pleasing and is loyal to him, so that they may live, as the tale states, “in parfit joye” (III 1250).

The female shape-changer in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* differs greatly from the transforming characters in the werewolf stories because the tale does not depict a situation in which her loyalty is tested. She does not prove herself through actions to be a good knight or loyal vassal, both of which would be impossible for her due to her gender. While Bisclavret and Alphonse needed to prove their rationality and loyalty, the wife in this tale is not viewed as a “savage beast” or untrustworthy by the knight. She takes on a female-gendered role similar to those of Brande and Bisclavret's wife, where her actions force the knight into proving himself. The knight is trapped in a hasty promise he must, as a noble knight, fulfill in order prove himself to be a knight loyal to his own word. Because she has the knowledge he needs, the knight is willing to make such an agreement.

The old woman nearly reveals that he is not a loyal character and that there are certain promises that he cannot fulfill when they lie in bed together and he is unwilling to consummate the marriage. With her magic she creates a situation in which he is capable of fulfilling his oath, where the sexual and social “taboos” fall away and the conflict of desire fades. By the end, however, she shows that, while the knight has his faults, it is still possible for him to honor his oaths with the help of the old woman's magic. Unlike

the werewolves who needed female help to transform back into human form, this knight requires female help to emulate the werewolves' nobility. Where they are loyal despite their transformations, the knight becomes loyal due to the transformative powers of a female. The old woman teaches the knight how to be honorable – because raping girls and breaking oaths are not what a good knight should do – and the tale makes clear that he is the one whose loyalty, honor, and life are in peril because of his actions against the young maid.

## **Part Two: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Honesty**

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there is a nearly complete reversal of key revelations when compared to *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Instead of discovering the transformative ability of another on his journey, Gawain does not learn about the Green Knight's powers until the end. While the Green Knight is clearly magical, he neither displays nor mentions his transformation to Gawain and the court when he presents his game, and he does not offer the solution to Gawain's test of loyalty. This hidden transformative power is closer to the werewolf tales, where the transforming characters did not openly display their characteristics except through human-like behavior in a non-human form, but the Green Knight does not display behavior unusual for his appearance either. The Green Knight is the one to test Gawain through the beheading game, and it is clear from the first fitt that the knight will not make the challenge easy by telling Gawain what is needed to survive. Gawain's challenge is to find the Green Chapel and accept an axe-blow from the Green Knight, a quest which tests Gawain's loyalty to the court and to his king. This loyalty, however, is given very little attention as the poet focuses on the

struggle Gawain faces with his personal loyalty in fulfilling an oath when keeping his word is likely to cost him his life. Gawain must meet the Green Knight in the Green Chapel and not run away or deny the Green Knight his right to a return strike in order to prove his ability to keep his promises.

When the audience is first introduced to the Green Knight, it is not obvious that he is a transforming character, and, unlike in the werewolf tales, the audience is not told that the extraordinary intruder is not always as he appears. The Green Knight is described as “half etayn in erde” (l. 140), yet with “alle his fetures folyande, in forme that he hade, / ful clene” (ll. 145-46). The most prominent feature, however, is that for which he is named: “al grathed in grene this gome and his wedes” (l. 151). With this striking pronouncement, the poet begins a long description of the greenness of the knight and his horse – around 80 lines in total – which ends only when the poet reminds readers that the knight has burst into the hall. The knight and the horse seem otherworldly, indeed: “Such a fole upon folde, ne freke that hym rydes, / Watz never sene in that sale wyth syght er that tyme, / with yghe” (ll. 196-98). The knight does not make immediately apparent that he is in another form by performing an act of magic or behaving unusually. The court, Gawain, and readers are led to believe that he is a man – green, probably a half-giant, and definitely mysterious, but still a man. His otherworldly appearance is almost expected as he is, literally, from outside the world of Arthur’s court. This is a distinct difference from the other three transformation tales in which readers know from the initial meeting with the transformed character that they are not what they seem.

Instead of displaying magic, the Green Knight offers a Christmas game with an unusual protocol involved in accepting his challenge. He asks any who would participate

to “Lepe lyghtly me to, and lach this weppen” (l. 292), an action which would indicate that the knight will deal a blow to the Green Knight who will stande “stif on this flet” (l. 294). He who strikes at the knight, however, may only do so if he gives the Green Knight the right to do the same to him at a future date. Three times in this exchange the agreement is repeated, during the Green Knight’s listing the terms of the game, in Gawain’s acceptance of the game in Arthur’s place, and once the Green Knight’s head has been cut off. There is an emphasis on the fact that, by taking up the axe, Gawain will have sworn to seek out the Green Knight in a year and give the Green Knight the right to “dele hym an other / barlay” (ll. 295-96) in a second encounter. Though Gawain has not actually spoken an oath to do more than seek out the Green Knight, by his actions he has agreed to the terms of the game before his peers and is now obligated to follow through.

The arrangement itself provides an interesting counter to many of the other transformation tales: instead of Gawain’s being forced from the court because of his monstrous form as Bisclavret and Alphonse were, Gawain is drawn away from the court by the monster. Even in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the undesirable form of the old woman is not what draws the knight from the court, but his own monstrous actions in raping the maid precipitate the threat of permanent exile. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain’s desire to take up the axe in place of Arthur and his agreement with the Green Knight are what pull Gawain into situations that challenge his ability to keep his oath while outside of the courtly environment.

Gawain cuts off the Green Knight’s head as Arthur encourages him to, but readers’ reactions to this are mixed. The Green Knight states at the end of the tale that Morgan le Fey

wayned me this wonder your wyttez to reve,  
 For to have greved Gaynour and gart hir to dyghe  
 With glopnyng of that ilke gome that gostlych speked  
 With his hede in his honde bfore the hyghe table. (ll. 2459-62)

There is very little of the court's reaction shown by the poet during this scene, and Guenevere is certainly not grieved to death by the sight. The poet describes the Green Knight in gruesome terms, with blood spraying from his body and his head completely severed, yet there is a touch of dark humor as the knights kick the head around so that it rolls across the floor until the body of the Green Knight picks it up. Thus while readers might expect to be horrified by the depiction of a headless Green Knight, the horror becomes a part of the game and of the revels of Christmas. It is not until the Green Knight picks up his head, when "That ugly bodi that bledde" (l. 441) moves as if still alive, that the court feels "doute" (l. 442), and some of the revelry fades. It is only when the Green Knight has left that Arthur speaks, acknowledging what has happened is a "selly" (l. 475) and has the axe hung up for the men to look at "the wonder" (l. 480). The holiday feast proceeds joyfully, and it is not until the second fitt, when Gawain sets out on his quest to find the Green Chapel, that the other knights are said to be troubled and saddened.

As Gawain finds he must fulfill his end of the bargain even after severing the knight's head, he faces his first challenge. There would of course be shame and dishonor associated with abandoning the quest given to him – by taking up the sword and swearing to find the Green Knight in one year, Gawain has signaled his acceptance of the terms of the game – but honoring his oath and fulfilling the obligations of the game mean his

death. Lacking the Green Knight's magical abilities, Sir Gawain cannot hope to survive having his own head cut off unless the Green Knight shows mercy.

Gawain seems to be headed towards his death as he leaves on his search for the Green Chapel, but it is not an immediate death. Like the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* who must find several wrong answers before the transforming old woman gives him the right one, Gawain must travel through "the ryalme of Logres" (l. 691) and face "wormez" (l. 720), "wolves" (l. 720), "wodwos" (l. 721), and other beasts before stumbling upon the transforming character who has the answer when he is near to failing. To further parallel the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Gawain does not pray to find the Green Chapel itself when he nears the end of his allotted time period and is looking for a place to stay for Christmas Eve (l. 734). He asks only for a place to "here masse, / And thy matyneze to-morne, mekely I ask, / And therto priestly I pray my pater and ave / and crede" (ll. 755-58), suggesting that he is not truly ready to find the chapel and face his death as he "cryed for his mysdede" (l. 760). What he finds provides him with what he needs in respect of lodging and mass, but also with much more. Of course, when Sir Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle he does not know that he has found the same man he will face in the final challenge of the axe-game, nor does the audience. Although the transformation is hidden, the tests of this castle are obvious: Bertilak and his wife challenge Gawain's honesty and troth in a new series of tests, a new game of exchanges. Bertilak's wife's tests are the easiest to identify as she offers him company that is both improper to accept and impossible for Gawain to give to Bertilak in the game<sup>17</sup> (while it

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<sup>17</sup> According to Richard M. Trask, "Gawain imbues the bedroom scenes with such good cheer that the possibilities for perversity become absurd rather than seriously threatening. He enters into the kissing game with good humor and relish, and gives Bertilak kisses as good as or better than those of the lady" (7). I

may be physically possible for Gawain and Bertilak to interact sexually, to do so would be a confession of improper behavior with Bertilak's wife, and an admission of guilt for them both).<sup>18</sup>

The challenges found in the tests of both Bertilak and his wife arise from the expected behavior of courtly society. Outside of that community, Bertilak and his wife are able to challenge courtly behavior without completely participating in it as Gawain expects. Gawain himself is challenged to uphold his reputation as one knowledgeable in manners (l. 916), in speaking nobly (l. 917) and in "luf-talkyng" (l. 927) while in Bertilak's home. He must do so in a situation that conflicts with courtly behavior as the wife meets him in the bedroom and tucks him into bed before he has the chance to dress appropriately for company. Bertilak's wife reminds Gawain of his duty to uphold his reputation as Sir Gawain when she says "Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed / With lordez, wyth ladyes, with alle that lyf bere" (ll. 1228-29). So he must behave with good manners and live up to his reputation of "luf-talkyng" with the wife of his host, a woman who should remain unattainable and yet does not.

Bertilak's challenge also concerns courtly behavior, yet his challenge is more subtle. His test is of Gawain's honesty, and this is made more apparent when, on the third

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would add to this argument that any further action between the Bertilak's wife and Gawain becomes absurd to readers because he is a knight, and as such would not violate his honor with "perversity."

<sup>18</sup> Susan Carter, comparing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, states "that Gawain exerts a sexual attraction over grotesque shape-shifters (or, in the case of the Green Knight, invokes a sexual dynamic at a remove, but nonetheless apparent) gives agency to both tales; Gawain's tests are more acute because the tests are superhuman, the reader's voyeuristic pleasure more acute because of the weird sexuality at work" (31-32). Since Bertilak has organized the bedroom tests between Gawain and his wife, it can be seen that Gawain seems to attract super-natural suitors in both tales, as Carter argues, however the situation is more heavily concerned with the values of those in the court against those who are outside it.



and last day of the exchange game, Gawain fails. Gawain knows that what he is doing is not proper from the moment he greets Bertilak. He accepts from the wife the green garter, then, at the exchange, rushes to greet Bertilak first and give Bertilak the three kisses he received during the day without presenting Bertilak with the garter.<sup>19</sup> During the previous two exchanges, Gawain had waited to give Bertilak the kisses he received until after Bertilak had shown what he had found on his hunt, but on this third exchange Gawain reverses the order before his host can present Gawain with the results of the hunt, which is an outward display of either a fear that Bertilak will discover his duplicity or guilt over his own dishonesty.

Gawain is both capable of turning down the gift and capable of giving the garter to Bertilak – to do so would not be a direct confession of infidelity, and no adultery has occurred. Here, though, Gawain accepts the wife's temptation by taking the garter and then is not honest when exchanging gifts with Bertilak by keeping it, failing to uphold the terms of the game and a courtly duty to respect his host. Gawain's reason for not giving the garter to Bertilak is obvious: he hopes that wearing it will save his life. He upholds his agreement with Bertilak's wife to keep the garter as a token and in doing so is disloyal to Bertilak, with whom Gawain already holds an agreement. Thus, instead of relying on his faith in religion or mercy to save his life, he puts his faith in a magical item he has never seen used and trusts the wife's words to be correct: when a man wears the

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<sup>19</sup> Trask notes that, "In concealing the gift at the lady's behest and in spite of the terms of the game with Bertilak, Gawain is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't, but only in a trivial, joking sense" (1). According to Trask, Gawain's fault is "the result of a dilemma that he cannot get out of without a necessary impropriety. Metaphorically, this is the paradox of life—disastrous in potentiality but ultimately comic in a God-centered universe" (1-2). While it may be the case that readers find Gawain's situation comic, for Gawain himself the trial is not a joke, nor is the matter trivial; it is both a matter of life and death and a matter of honor.

garter “Ther is no hathel under heven to hewe hym that myght, / For he myght not be slayn for slyght upon erthe” (ll. 1853-54). It is the answer to the question Gawain did not realize he was asking, but in attempting to “win” the game of Arthur’s court he loses the game at Bertilak’s castle. In the Green Chapel, Gawain will acknowledge his loss in this game as part of his guilt.

The need to lose in order to gain also helps readers to see the subtle irony in the earlier words of Bertilak’s wife. When giving Gawain the garter she says “I schal gif yow my girdle, that gaynes yow lasse” (l. 1829). In this line she seems to be speaking of the garter’s monetary value in comparison to the ring which she offered him previously and Gawain declined. The wife is pushing for Gawain to accept a token of her affections, but her words also suggest that the garter is a temptation that lessens his gains. That is, it does not enhance what he will gain from his experiences in these games, both in the castle and at the Green Chapel, but actually “gaynes” him a “lasse,” possibly resulting in the nick on the neck Gawain receives as the Green Knight later states. There is no answer to the question of whether or not the garter saves Gawain’s life in the end, yet this line coupled with the Green Knight’s speech at the end suggests the possibility that Gawain would have lived unpunished if he had given the garter to Bertilak in the castle games and faced the Green Knight without a loss. His dishonesty is the slight to his personal loyalty – his ability to uphold his agreement – that Gawain has suffered.

Seeing the two games as connected in this way implies a merging of the game at Arthur’s court with the game at Bertilak’s castle. The poem brings the two games together in a foreshadowing move that reveals the identity of the Green Knight as a transforming character through structural parallelism. The game in Arthur’s court and the

game in Bertilak's castle appear to be two different games, and it is not until after the final blow is dealt that Sir Gawain learns that both have come from the same person. The poem's structure, however, hints at this detail to readers before readers are told this fact. In Arthur's court, the game is set up as an equivalent exchange in which the Green Knight provides all the necessary weapons. It is, quite literally, a blow for a blow. In Bertilak's court the game is different, because the exchanges are not of equivalent value and the game continues for three days. This game revolves around threes: three days, three hunts, three tests, three kisses, three testers (Morgan le Fey working through Bertilak, who also works through his wife), and three intended victims (Gaynour/Guenevere, Arthur, and Gawain). Even the castle seems to abide by this number, as it is when Gawain crosses himself three times that Bertilak's home appears (l. 763). When Sir Gawain finally arrives at the Green Chapel, then, there is a hint that the Green Knight has ties to Bertilak: the game from Arthur's court suddenly concerns threes. Three blows are dealt, which results in an unequal exchange in at least two ways: three blows for Gawain's one and a small nick for the beheading. The game itself has transformed to conclude all of Gawain's tests in this final game where he fulfills his obligations by offering his neck to be cut.

It is only after Gawain receives this cut and tells the Green Knight "Blynne, burne, of thy bur, bede me no mo!" (l. 2322) that the Green Knight reveals himself to be Bertilak, transformed by Morgan le Fay into the Green Knight in order to frighten Guenevere, to challenge the reputation of the Round Table, and "to assy the surquidré" (l. 2457). James Winny, in his notes to his edition of the poem, states that "The disclosure that the old lady at the castle is Morgan le Fay, and that the Green Knight has been

carrying out her orders, is a blemish on an otherwise perfect story” (153). While it is true that the new information given here seems out of place at first glance, it also allows for parallels with other transformation stories – in particular the werewolf stories. In both werewolf stories examined in Chapter One, the werewolf was trapped in his wolf form by a female character who held goals counter to the expected. The same is true of the Green Knight: though he is not confined to his monstrous form, the Green Knight is still transformed by the powers of a woman who works her magic for her own goals. In addition, Morgan’s goal is unexpected, and she fails to achieve it. She does not succeed in frightening Guenevere to death – her reaction is not mentioned – and Gawain has proven he will stand up for his King in court and he will also be loyal to his word, fulfilling his obligations. He seeks out the Green Chapel as he promised to do, he does not run off as his guide suggests, and he returns to court with success in the game of Arthur’s court even though he also suffered a loss.

Like the knight of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, Gawain shows fear when faced with the unpleasant task of fulfilling his oaths. He is tempted by the garter’s magical power to save his life, and he flinches at the first swing of the axe when he thinks he may die. If he truly and whole-heartedly believed in the power of the garter, then he would not need to flinch because he would know that he was not going to die. The Green Knight does not give Gawain choices to help him overcome these fears either – Gawain must overcome his doubts without the aid of magic.

Gawain’s tests of loyalty are tests of his honesty. He must show through his actions that his words are truth and that he will not disgrace Arthur by making promises he cannot fulfill. When he states that he will take Arthur’s place in the game and then

physically picks up the axe, actually taking Arthur's place, he shows his first sign of loyalty. Not only is he protecting his king from a dangerous game, he is following through with his promise. But the completion of that promise leads to the taking up of another, much more unpleasant task: the beheading game. And in the quest to find the Green Chapel and fulfill his oaths in that game, he finds himself tested with promises made at Bertilak's court. Because he survives both games and returns to court, Gawain can be seen by readers as successful. Gawain does not view himself that way because he was disloyal to Bertilak, his host. He betrayed his promise to Bertilak because the temptation was too much, and his loyalty in terms of upholding his oaths suffered. Just as the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* took the immediate benefits of the answer to what women desire without considering the long-term consequences of an open promise, Gawain takes the immediate benefit of saving his own life without considering the long-term consequences of betraying a promise already made.

## Conclusion

The transforming characters in these tales, the loathly lady and Bertilak, are not out to prove themselves as loyal but seek to test the loyalty and honesty of others by extracting promises from knights that are inherently difficult. As is made clear with these two tales, maintaining a loyal reputation (or rebuilding a loyal reputation) is difficult, particularly when a promise must be kept that is counter to social expectations or works in conflict with another arrangement. Both the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Gawain end their quests with near-failures, and Gawain in particular carries the weight of his failure to uphold his promise. The knight needed the help of the old woman's magic

in order to fulfill his oath and Gawain was dishonest in fulfilling his arrangement at Bertilak's castle. Gawain put the loyalty to Bertilak's wife over his loyalty to Bertilak, an action that he cannot undo.

The knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* indulged in his personal desires rather than honor the chivalric early in the tale, and much of the tale is about the knight suffering the long-term consequences of his short-term benefits. Both poems show how difficult it can be to be completely honest and loyal in the act of upholding oaths and rash promises, and how complicated situations can become over time when multiple promises are made in order to fulfill the first agreement. Where Bisclavret and Alphonse are models of loyal behavior to their lords, the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Gawain are not. Though they attempt to be both honest and true, they suffer for their disloyalty as they learn from their tests that loyalty is an essential virtue.

### Final Conclusions

I began this thesis with an exploration of loyalty and rash promises. The displays of loyalty shown in these four poems both through actions and words are responses to challenges. Knights must prove themselves capable of being loyal and staying loyal before their lords, their peers, and others. Not every test is a success, yet the knights in these tales recover from their failures. The knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* ends his trials with a beautiful wife and a joyous marriage, and Gawain lives to tell his story to the court despite bearing the burden of guilt. After Bisclavret is revealed as a knight who kept a secret from his lord, he remains a knight in his lord's service and is accepted into the community. Alphonse completes his journey with a marriage to Guillaume's sister and a restoration to his royal station despite his failure to achieve revenge.

In challenging these knights, the four poems make evident a few interesting facts about loyalty itself. First, all of these transformation tales portray the struggle knights face in being true to their lord and their word in difficult situations. Loyalty is not always recognized, nor is it always easy. Second, the werewolf tales display that rationality is present wherever there is loyalty, and that the rewards of loyal actions involve recognition of that rationality, a clear place in the community, and a lord's protection. Third, the werewolf tales show that the rational performance of loyalty can overcome the obstacles of appearance and voice and establish trust between the man-as-beast and his lord. Fourth, human-as-monster tales show the obligation to follow through with rash promises in order to be considered loyal to the spoken word and the unpleasant situations hasty agreements create. This means that loyalty is inseparable from honesty.

While such tales would seem absurd if considered realistic (transformation tales, intrinsically, hold an element of fantasy in them), they also present the poet with an opportunity to play upon the expectations of the audience. Within the fantasy genre, readers expect that werewolves are savage beasts and knights are honest and loyal men. If this were not the case to an extent, then readers might not find the poem satisfying. Thus readers can be shocked that it is not Bisclavret who is the betrayer, but his wife, and that the werewolf of the tale is only vicious when seeking revenge. They can be dismayed at Guillaume's kidnapping and surprised that Alphonse has rescued him, just as they are saddened when Guillaume and Melinor suffer for their love; the savageness readers expect from Alphonse is found on the battlefield, where the werewolf is represented only on a shield. Readers can be offended by the lusty knight's actions in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and they might find him deserving of the punishment of death that he nearly receives because he has not acted as a knight should. Finally, they can be disappointed by Gawain's acceptance of the girdle on the third day, and feel pity for him as he carries his guilt back with him to court. While the physical world of transformations is a fantasy that works both with and against reader expectations, the situations within the tales lead to social and psychological responses that are closer representations of reality.

Transformation tales serve not as simple fantasies, then, but as explorations of fears and extremes in knightly society. Erich Auerbach discusses the idealization of the knight's quest present in medieval chivalric romances, stating that

Such idealization takes us very far from the imitation of reality. In the courtly romance the functional, the historically real aspects of class are passed over. Though it offers a great many culturally significant details



concerning the customs of social intercourse and external social forms and conventions in general, we can get no penetrating view of contemporary reality from it, even in respect to the knightly class. (136)

Instead of offering reality, the courtly romances offer an escape from such reality where the most true to life aspects are the “details” of “the customs of social intercourse and external social forms and conventions in general” – that is, how individuals acted and reacted. The transformation tales, a small yet significant sub-genre of the medieval courtly romance, offer possibilities for what might happen when family betrays family, when an individual is left without his voice, when desire overwhelms sense, and when the will to survive outweighs honor. These poems treat hasty words as sworn oaths that lead to unpleasant situations. They set forth clear guidelines both in what they show as loyal and what they show as wrong, establishing absolute behavioral ideals. Knights must always be true to their lords, and knights must always be true to their word. Without the loyalty to a human lord, Bisclavret and Alphonse might never have been discovered as rational, and their human form never restored. Without the loyalty to their promises, the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Gawain would suffer – one legally, the other mentally. Taken together, these four poems show that both loyalty to a lord and faithfulness to promises are required for a knight to be noble.

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