

Clothing and Transformation of the Human Body in *Biclarel* and *Melion*

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In the French werewolf narratives *Melion* (c.12th) and *Biclarel* (c.13th), clothing functions as a tool of transformation, mediating the mutation of the body between human and beastly forms. I argue that these two texts, through the mechanism of clothing, transform the body into a site of possibility. This allows them to defy typical boundaries applied to human bodies, existing in a transitional or unbound state. However, while this is true for the external body, the human soul demonstrates no such flexibility. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests '[w]hen bodies become the site of possibility [...] they are necessarily dispersed into something larger, something mutable'.¹ What is key to discussions of nonhuman animals in the poetry of the later Middle Ages, according to Susan Crane, is their use to 'define humanity's special difference and closeness to God'.² The boundary between human and animal, then, is not simply one of social distinction, but also of religious significance which articulates the human by its contrast to what it is not. The Bible states that, upon death, 'the spirit [shall] return to God, who gave it', a contrast to the mutability and the impermanence of the body.³ As Joyce Salisbury observes, the heightened interest from the twelfth century in creatures which defy the conventional boundary between human and nonhuman cultivated within writers a 'fascination' which typically accompanies the forbidden or taboo.⁴ As such, the development of 'borderline creatures' which violate these boundaries reflects a growing curiosity and a desire to interrogate the limits of the self. This essay explores how clothing mediates the transformation

¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xiii.

² Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 44.

³ The Latin Vulgate Old Testament Bible, Ecclesiastes 12.7, <https://vulgate.org/ot/ecclesiastes_12.htm> [accessed 19 July 2026].

⁴ Joyce Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1994), p. 121.

of the body between human and animal, serving to highlight the immutability and superiority of the human soul by contrast with the animal.⁵ Crane also argues that ‘most medieval conceiving happens on the troubled conceptual ground of human versus animal’, with beasts configured as ‘humanity’s formative others’.⁶ The mutability of the human body in werewolf narratives thus serves not to blur this boundary between human and nonhuman animal, but to define it, reinforcing this ‘special difference’ between the two categories: our closeness to God.

Biclarel’s use of the clothing trope refers back to its literary ancestor in *Bisclavret* by Marie de France.⁷ *Melion* however, as Amanda Hopkins highlights, suggests the working of other influences due to its significant alterations in plot and tone.⁸ Among these alterations is that the primary mode of transformation is a magical ring, still a wearable object, but markedly different from the cloth clothing that binds *Biclarel* and *Bisclavret* to their human selves. In *Biclarel*, the removal of clothing and the exposure of the naked body triggers metamorphosis, whereas, in *Melion*, the hero orders his wife to ‘[d]e la blanche me toucerés’ [touch me [him] with the white stone] in his ring.⁹ He then warns her that if he is ‘[s]e de l’autre touciés n’estoie; / Jamais nul jor hom ne seroie’ [not touched with the other stone; / [he] should never again be a man] (*Melion*, ll. 171-2), a caution which foreshadows his wife’s betrayal and theft of the ring. Although the externalisation of *Melion*’s transformation draws attention away from the

⁵ ‘Soul’ is used here as synonymous with the ‘inner sense of self’ or ‘inner being’.

⁶ Crane, p. 2.

⁷ Though it is not impossible for the author of *Melion* to have known *Bisclavret*, it is more likely that these authors shared source material. As such, reference to *Bisclavret* as a supporting text throughout this essay will be limited to discussions of *Biclarel*, as a direct descendent of *Bisclavret*. For discussion of the relationship between *Biclarel* and *Bisclavret*, see Lucas Wood, ‘Of Werewolves and Wicked Women: “Melion”’s Misogyny Reconsidered’, in *Medium Ævum*, 84.1 (2015), pp. 60-88 (p. 61).

⁸ Amanda Hopkins, ‘Introduction’, in *Melion and Biclarel: Two Old French Werewolf Lays*, ed. and trans. by Amanda Hopkins (The University of Liverpool, 2005), p. 7.

⁹ *Melion*, ed. and trans. by Amanda Hopkins, in *Melion and Biclarel: Two Old French Werewolf Lays* (The University of Liverpool, 2005), l. 161. Subsequent references to this source will be given in the text as *Melion*, followed by line number. All translations are from page facing translation by Amanda Hopkins.

role of nudity in the metamorphosis, nakedness does maintain a significant role in the process. It is only when Melion has ‘[s]es dras osta, nus est remez’ [removed his clothes [and] remained naked] (*Melion*, l. 177) that his wife can touch him with the ring, rendering his body vulnerable and dependent upon the intervention of another. This distinction between the sources of Melion and Biclarel’s transformations becomes even more evident when one considers that, in *Melion*, the hero does not have to transform on a regular basis. Whereas, in *Biclarel*, the protagonist must become a beast ‘every month’, this transformation spanning ‘[d]eus jors trestoz antiers ou’ [two or three whole days], suggesting an innate condition.¹⁰ These divergences all pertain to the innateness of the heroes’ lycanthropy. While Melion’s condition is sourced from an external magical object, Biclarel’s transformation is initiated from within himself and does not appear to be entirely optional. Although Hopkins claims ‘[n]one of the authors show any interest in the mechanics of transformation’, these small details foreground what is a key conceptual divergence.¹¹ While both texts maintain clothing and nudity as significant aspects of the transformative process, what is magically granted in *Melion* is innate in *Biclarel*.

Biclarel mirrors the importance of clothing in the mechanics of transformation evident in *Bisclavret* through close replication of the transformation episode. Biclarel describes his transformation to his wife:

Et toute robe desvestir.

Et lors sui ge deus jors ou

Beste sauvage par le bois; [...]

¹⁰ *Biclarel*, ed. and trans. by Amanda Hopkins, in *Melion and Biclarel: Two Old French Werwolf Lays* (The University of Liverpool, 2005), 38-9. Subsequent references to this source will be given in the text as *Biclarel* followed by line number. All translations are from page facing translation by Amanda Hopkins.

¹¹ Hopkins, p. 8.

Mez qui ma robe m'osterait

Trop grant durté il me feroit,

Car a toujours beste cerioie

Jusqu'atant que ge la ravroie.

[I take off all my clothes,

And then, for two or three days, I am

A wild beast in the woods;...]

But anyone who took my clothes away from me

Would cause me very great hardship,

For I should remain a beast

Until I regained them] (*Biclarel*, ll. 226-36).

Clothing thus becomes a mechanism through which humanity is both lost and regained, and nakedness a state which permits the inhuman. Humanness is defined here by material culture, rather than the physical body alone. This dependence on clothing renders Biclarel's humanity precariously externalised, able to be stolen or withheld from him. The act of undressing therefore becomes transformative in and of itself, marking the moment at which the human relinquishes social identity and dons the skin of a beast. This is reinforced by the cyclical nature of Biclarel's condition, internalising his lycanthropy which is only temporarily stabilised by the presence of his clothing. Cohen defines the 'inhuman circuit' as 'an identity machine that violates the sanctity of the human body by disregarding the boundaries of fleshly form' in

which the masculine body disassembles to allow the intermingling of human and beast.¹² In *Biclarel*, this ‘identity machine’ is materialised through the act of undressing, where the removal of clothing initiates the deconstruction of the human body and enables its reconstruction as an animal. When Biclarel’s body is transformed, he is free from the social constraints of being human and may exhibit animal behaviour. He admits the following: ‘[c]onme autre beste [la] char crue; Con j’ai la esté, ge me veuz’ [as long as I am there [the forest], I eat Raw flesh, like other beasts] (*Biclarel*, ll. 230-231). As such, clothing becomes a symbolic ‘human skin’, reflective of the external factors which make us recognisably human. In violating the body in this way, *Biclarel* exposes the human body as contingent rather than essential, its boundaries dictated by external, removable markers.

The significance of clothing as the key to disrupting the boundaries of the physical body is compounded even further in *Melion*, where nudity operates alongside the influence of a magical ring. As previously discussed, in order for Melion to transform, someone must ‘[d]e la blanche me toucerés’ [touch me [him] with the white stone] (*Melion*, l. 161) in his ring. Mariah Proctor-Tiffany’s study on the social lives of rings in late-medieval France argues that ‘rings as haptic things stimulated the creation and curation of social networks’.¹³ She also identifies the significance of touch associated with rings, and their power to curate social connection and signal historical importance.¹⁴ Rings often ‘reminded wearers and their viewers of their own places within social networks’, and became representations of status, relationships, and social history.¹⁵ Not only does Melion require the ring to take the form of a beast, but he also requires

¹² Cohen, pp. 37-38.

¹³ Mariah Proctor-Tiffany, ‘Haptic Histories, The Social Life of Rings in French Late Medieval Inventories and Testaments’, in *The Social Lives of Medieval Rings*, ed. by Jitske Jasperse (Arc Humanities Press, 2005), pp. 33-56 (p. 34).

¹⁴ Proctor-Tiffany, p. 36.

¹⁵ Proctor-Tiffany, p. 44.

the same ring to transform back. If Melion is not ‘l’autre touciés n’estoie’ [touched with the other stone] (*Melion*, l. 171) he will ‘[j]amais nul jor hom ne seroie’ [never again be a man] (*Melion*, l. 172), rendering his condition permanent, not unlike Biclarel. The supernatural powers of the ring reflect its social symbolism. In the following description of Arthur turning Melion back into human form, Melion is reunited with his human body as he is reunited with his ring:

L’anel li a sor le chief mis;

D’ome li aparut le vis,

Tote sa figure mua.

[He put the ring to Melion’s head;

His face appeared like a man’s,

All his body changed.] (*Melion*, ll. 547-9).

In this way, the restoration of the human form is contingent upon the recovery of an object that signifies social belonging. The idea of social identity reflecting bodily form in *Biclarel* is thus even more evident here in *Melion*, as the mediation of transformation is relocated to an external marker of status. The human body is therefore fundamentally externalised in both narratives, where social identity is not embodied but outsourced to material objects which govern the boundary between human and beast. However, where in *Biclarel* nakedness is emphasised as a vulnerable state which leaves the body open to transformation, in *Melion* this emphasis is present, but slightly displaced. Instead, transformation of the body becomes a direct metaphor for social identity, the body made vulnerable when isolated from the indicator of its status (as human animal, rather than nonhuman). Despite this, both *Biclarel* and *Melion* present the

human soul as an internal force which extends beyond the corporal body, remaining constant even as the outward form is altered, whereas the external body becomes symbolic of social perception, mutable and dependent on wearable objects as signifiers of its status.

Christian ideas of the immortal soul, which shall ‘return unto God, who gave it’ after the body dies, are emphasised by the body’s contrasting impermanence in both *Biclarel* and *Melion*.¹⁶ Both *Biclarel* and *Melion* imagine the werewolf narrative within an Arthurian context, with King Arthur as the saviour who is able to recognise that the transformed beast is not necessarily beastly in nature. When Biclarel encounters Arthur in the woods, ‘[c]ombien qu’an beste fust muez. [...] [c]hiere li fist d’umilité’ [Even though he had changed into the beast [...] He put on a humble mien towards him] (*Biclarel*, l. 316, l.321). It is this act of nobility which ‘Au roi an print mout grant pité’ [aroused very great pity in the king] (*Biclarel*, l. 322). Biclarel earns Arthur’s protection and trust ‘[q]u’an umilité se metoit’ [for it was submitting itself humbly] (*Biclarel*, l. 332), an acknowledgment of the social order that is distinctly human. There is a similar moment of recognition in *Melion*, when the hero ‘[a]s piés le roi se lait chaïr, / [n]e se voloît pas redrecier’ [let himself fall at the king’s feet / [a]nd would not rise again] (*Melion*, ll. 406-7). Once again it is this act of humility that wins over King Arthur, as he responds: ‘[o]r sachiés bien qu’il est privés. / [m]ar ert touchiés ne adesés’ [now know well that he is tame. / woe betide anyone who touches or approaches him] (*Melion*, ll. 411-2). Despite their outward transformations, neither Melion nor Biclarel forget their place in the social order. What remains beyond their physical human bodies is their fixed human soul. Thomas Schneider observes that in twelfth-century ‘discourse of immutability within material

¹⁶ The Latin Vulgate Old Testament Bible, Ecclesiastes 12.7, <https://vulgate.org/ot/ecclesiastes_12.htm> [accessed 19 July 2026].

alteration' essential was 'belief about the soul [...] and the endurance of personal identity'.¹⁷ While the human body is presented here as a mutable object, able to transform beyond the boundaries of the human, the stability of the immortal human soul is never questioned. Crane's proposal that the use of nonhuman animals served to define humanity's special uniqueness and proximity to God is therefore evident here, as human identity is elevated beyond that of other creatures.

It is this divine aspect of human identity that we must return to in concluding this discussion. In *Biclarrel* and *Melion*, this is articulated through the transformation of the human body and, crucially, through the mediating role of clothing, which disrupts the boundaries of the physical self. Yet, while these texts stage an instability in the distinction between human and inhuman, this ultimately serves to reaffirm the immutability of the human soul. In these werewolf narratives, the inhuman body becomes not a site of human instability, but one which reaffirms 'humanity's special difference' as not an external, but internal, spiritual condition. While the external body becomes, as Cohen suggested, 'mutable and dynamic', the inner (human) self remains stable by contrast.¹⁸ The use of clothing as the mechanism for transformation reflects this, transforming one's external, physical and 'social skin', but leaving one's soul untouched. As such, in *Biclarrel* and *Melion* material culture dictates social identity, represented in the mediation of the body between human and beast. However, the influence of social markers is limited to external perception of the physical body, leaving the human soul immutable. The human soul thus remains distinct from those of nonhuman animals, and

¹⁷ Thomas R. Schneider, 'The Chivalric Masculinity of Marie de France's Shape-Changeers', in *Arthuriana*, 26.3 (2016), pp. 25-40 (p. 27).

¹⁸ Cohen, p. iiv.

ultimately exists beyond the physical boundaries with which we typically define human and nonhuman.

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