

*William and the werewolf: the problem of
William of Palerne*

The establishment of the corpus is the foundation of any author's literary archive, one so important that it is usually taken as a given before the work of scholarship begins. Any challenges to a set corpus, such as the attributions of *The Lover's Complaint* to Shakespeare or the French poems of "Ch" to Chaucer, usually take place on the borders of scholarly interest.¹ Even the discovery of new works, such as those recently discovered *vitae* by the fifteenth-century monk Osbern Bokenham, usually does little to change the overall picture of the author's work.² The proportion of women's lives in Bokenham's oeuvre is now different, but in all fundamental ways the works discovered alter its size, not its character. There are no real equivalents to any of this with regard to the Langland oeuvre. Debates used to rage over whether *Piers Plowman* was the work of one or of five, and have more recently centered on the status of "the Z version" and on the order of the received versions, but either way, the only thing ascribed to Langland is that work, however many letters it might comprise.³ Yet, as this chapter will argue, the peculiarities of the Middle English alliterative tradition render the issue of Langlandian attribution much different.

The case in hand took shape before October 15, 1361, the date on which Humphrey de Bohun, the sixth earl of Hereford and fifth earl of Essex, died. Humphrey had at some point commissioned one "William" to translate the fanciful French romance *Guillaume de Palerne*, "For hem þat knowe no Frensche, ne never underston" (5521, 5533).⁴ The result is no doubt the oddest duck within the corpus of formal Middle English alliterative poetry, and perhaps its earliest surviving instance (depending on when *Winner and Waster* was written).⁵ While *Piers Plowman*, the *Parliament of the Three Ages*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the rest of this group focus their energies on expounding the nature of penance, *William of Palerne* strikes a much more jejune tone, telling of a werewolf, a boy who makes love to his pillow, and, most prominently,

lovers dressed in bear- and deer-suits.⁶ Did its author go by the last name “Langland,” or perhaps, as suggested by the ascription in Dublin, Trinity College MS 212, “Rokele”?⁷

If such a question is reasonable, the consequences for the Langland archive are substantial, and enable literary scholars to see what happens when questions of attribution move from the periphery to the center of discussion. Such questions affect the very character of the archive, rather than just rearranging its borders. Attribution of *William of Palerne* to Langland would both double the number of titles in that archive and produce a dramatically different picture of the poet of the dream vision, and perhaps of that work itself. It would put the inscription of authorial identity, so central to a few passages of *Piers Plowman*, and thus to much modern criticism, in a new light. The emphasis on atonement in the later work might connect to the poet’s earlier career. So too would French occupy a much larger place in Langland’s history. While it is commonplace to state that *Piers Plowman* is among a group of Middle English poems that show “considerable influence from French love narrative and *Piers* . . . , in particular, from the dream device that is prominent in the French tradition,” and perhaps from the tradition of the Grail romances, few have connected him with such romances as *Guillaume de Palerne*.⁸ If Langland began his career by translating a long French (non-dream vision) poem it would bring him into much closer communion with his peers Chaucer, Gower, and the *Gawain*-poet.

The idea probably seems new to most readers. In 1988 David Lawton observed that, even in the wake of Angus McIntosh’s proposal that “the innovatory work of a single individual” might account for the peculiarities of the alliterative corpus, “lovers of *Piers Plowman* have been stupendously silent about any slight chance that [the *William of Palerne* poet’s] surname was Langland.”⁹ Since then there have been a few stirrings: George Kane, if only in an endnote to a belatedly published essay, nominates *William of Palerne* as the best candidate for the “earlier apprenticeship” that, “because the A version of *Piers Plowman* is altogether accomplished writing,” he presumes for Langland,¹⁰ Andrew Galloway has called such speculation as that in which I engaged in an earlier version of this chapter “intriguing,”¹¹ and A. V. C. Schmidt says the possibility “deserves to be carefully examined, as the lexical and metrical evidence of affinity from all four versions is very suggestive.”¹² Even so, no one has taken up the cause in earnest, most likely because the notion that *Piers Plowman* is in effect a synonym for “William Langland” is so firmly entrenched. Even the earliest external testimony about the career of the poem’s putative maker, John But’s

explicit statement that Will wrought *Piers Plowman* and works other than that poem as well, has been taken to refer to *Piers Plowman* alone.¹³ This chapter pursues the case, even though it reaches no firm conclusion. On the one hand, there are reasonable, if not very compelling, objections to the idea; on the other, though, the historical, linguistic, and cultural indicators are strong enough to force a shift from the demonstrative to the subjunctive as scholarship's dominant mood. That is why the case is worth pursuing: for any comprehensive history of Langland's career, or of Middle English alliterative poetry, must come to terms with the centrality of the phrase "if *William of Palerne* is by Langland . . ." to its quest.

The question of evidence

Who wrote *Piers Plowman*? There are other major literary works that have resisted attribution as forcefully – *Beowulf*, the poems of Cotton Nero A.x – yet none of them has generated anything like the "authorship controversy" discussed in the Introduction, or has seemed to thematize the very question, to the extent that Langland's poem has. The very name "Langland" is as much a convenient alternative to "anonymous" as a likely surname of our poet; and whether or not the author of *Piers Plowman* used it in real life, as is suggested by a fifteenth-century note appended to one manuscript, he seems to have inscribed it – and thus the very topic of the poet's social identity – in what appears to be a reverse acrostic, "Ich have ylyved in **londe**,' quod Y, 'my name is **longe wille**" (B 15.152).¹⁴ Whatever the poet was called, the question of his name is a key to the status of the dreamer's identity, and perhaps even to the meaning of his visions. In light of the prominence criticism accords this authorial self-inscription, it might be tempting to question the attribution of *William of Palerne* to Langland on the grounds that it treats authorship as something external rather than a driving theme. Yet so does the A version of *Piers Plowman*.

In the absence of any compelling reason to dismiss the possibility out of hand, at least on the grounds of an interest in authorship, a substantial list of historical factors and coincidences renders the possibility worthy of serious attention. In 1951 Kane wrote of *Piers Plowman*, "The earliest version, the A-text, is certainly not the work of a beginner; in fact it shows great poetic assurance in its author," with only *William of Palerne*, *Alexander A*, and *Alexander and Dindimus* resembling it "both in the nature of its use of the alliterative long line and in the ability with which this appears to have been used."¹⁵ The assumption that Langland wrote something in the aa/ax mode prior to *Piers Plowman*, whether A or Z, only

stands to reason. By the same token, the existence of *William of Palerne*, a poem very accomplished in its own right, for which at most only one formal metrical model survives, would be less astounding if its author was imaginative and innovative enough to go on to produce *Piers Plowman*. Both poets seem to have been called William, though I will not go so far as to find a reverse acrostic of the author's name in *William of Palerne's* lines "And with lordesse of þat **lond** þat him **long** hade missed. / And **William** wistli" (4539–40) in the manner that Langland's critics do with the B 15 acrostic quoted above.¹⁶ The *terminus a quo* of *Piers Plowman*, the great storm of January 15, 1362 (A 5.13–14), is three months after the romance's *terminus ante quem*.¹⁷

None of that would matter if the two poems did not share so many linguistic similarities. The *William*-poet's dialect, according to its most recent editor, was "possibly one belonging to southern Worcestershire or Warwickshire, not very far from the area where Langland acquired his linguistic habits," which, given the fact that *William of Palerne* still "presents the most difficult dialectal problem of all the alliterative poems owing to the peculiar mixture of forms," in the early and still valid judgment of J. P. Oakden, is as close a relationship between two works with entirely separate histories of transmission as anyone could expect to find, even if common authorship were not in doubt.¹⁸ The textual features of the *Piers Plowman* manuscripts BL Harley 2376 and Cambridge, Trinity College B.15.17, for instance, are much more distinct from one another than are those of the putative authorial *Piers Plowman* and *William of Palerne*, yet no one attributes those texts to separate authors.¹⁹ And Langland exhibits the "easy familiarity with French" and "awareness of the fluid and shifting relationship between French and native English" that the poet of *William of Palerne* must have had as well.²⁰

Attributionists satisfied that the proposal is worth pursuing would at this stage usually apply tests, but none is of any use in this case, at least. Lexical frequency might have been worth comparing were it not for the wildly divergent subject matters of the two poems on the one hand and the conventional nature of alliterative verse on the other.²¹ *William of Palerne's* use of the term "pas" to denote a section of the poem (161) looks promising in light of the prominence of its Latin equivalent, *passus*, in the later poem, but this usage "became well established in alliterative poetry," appearing as well in *The Wars of Alexander* and *The Siege of Jerusalem*.²² Some attributionists look for "certain unconscious features of expression that characterize the style of the individual writer," such as the distribution of unstressed syllables or the use of terms like *and* or *but* at the beginnings of lines,²³ but

as Kane remarks, “to identify such data effectively one would have to know the answer to the problem.”²⁴ In any case, even if Schmidt’s judgment that the linguistic evidence is “very suggestive” of common authorship is off base, any fundamental differences between *William of Palerne* and *Piers Plowman* would be easily accounted for by Kane’s “apprenticeship” proposal.²⁵

“What is the evidence to suggest it?”²⁶ Thorlac Turville-Petre’s challenge to those who wonder whether Langland wrote *William of Palerne* is apt. On the one hand, the answer is “none,” insofar as all these potential indicators are explicable by other means. On the other, though, their quantity and quality are such as to make the proposal difficult to dismiss out of hand. To maintain silence about the possibility is to come up against the inverse question: on what grounds should the possibility be ignored? There are all sorts of reasons to reject the attribution of *William of Palerne* to every poet in the history of English literature, save Langland alone: on what grounds should we reject that attribution, too?

Christine Chism has called for “a critical change in direction” in which we “beg temporarily the etiological questions traditionally asked of fourteenth-century alliterative poetry as a group: ‘how did it come about? who wrote it? where and in what dialect?’ and move to more blatantly interpretive questions. Do these poems share common interests? Do the worlds they create resonate with each other?”²⁷ The answer to these interpretive questions as applied to *William of Palerne* and *Piers Plowman*, once we beg the question of authorship, is “yes” – an answer that itself undermines the willingness of criticism to assume that authorship is a question that must be begged if we are to engage in interpretation. In the absence of a secure Langland archive that either includes or excludes *William of Palerne*, it seems appropriate, perhaps imperative, to see what happens if we bring the two poems into such conversation as Chism urges. This will result not in an archive any more secure than it is at this stage of our investigation, but, at the least, in a recognition of the inevitability of such insecurity. The arbitrary nature of any sense that Langland equals *Piers Plowman* unless his authorship of other works is proved beyond reasonable doubt will become much clearer. So will the benefits such insecurity can reap in our continual negotiation of the medieval literary archive.

The next section will delineate these poems’ common interests not to argue positively for common authorship, which would be rash, but to show that the common belief that these poems “share none of the same concerns and possess none of the same qualities” is not quite right,²⁸

indeed, to suggest that these concerns are in fact central to both poems. The later poem itself might well comment on the authorship of *William of Palerne* in a way that accounts precisely for the differences that have led to these poems' occupation of such different places in the critical discussion.

Sheepskins, bearskins, and the *topos* of regret

If the translation of *Guillaume de Palerne* served as Langland's apprenticeship, then the relationship between animal skins and identity established in the opening lines of the dream vision is no longer the major problem it has long been:

In a somur sesoun whan softe was þe sonne
 Y shope me into a shroude as y a shep were;
 In abite as an heremite, unholy of werkes,
 Wente wyde in this world wondres to here. (A Prol.1-4)

"The expression needs further study," says Turville-Petre about line 2, immediately after having dismissed *William of Palerne* from consideration:

What does it mean for Will to say he dressed as a *sheep*? One might suppose that such an arresting characterization would reverberate through the poem, with flocks of biblical and agricultural sheep lost, or grazing in pastures, or for the slaughter. But in fact there is not one other reference to sheep in the Athlone B text! It is, as Holmes should have said, the dog that did not bark in the night.²⁹

The poet of *William of Palerne* would have had plenty to say about the problem. As Skeat observed, the "curious fancies" of the werewolf and animal skins in *William of Palerne* "form the true groundwork of the story, and no doubt, at the time, attracted most attention," even if they test modern readers' patience.³⁰

The initial appearance of its interest in the theme of deceitful, beast-like appearances comes in the figure of the benevolent werewolf, Alphouns, son of the king of Spain, transformed by his wicked stepmother's evil spell.³¹ The theme gets still more outrageous when the heroine, Melior, is about to be forced into a royal marriage, prompting her attendant, Alisandrine, to help her to escape with her lover, William, by putting her into the suit of a white bear, "Pat no man upon mold mi3t oþer parceyve / But sche a bere were to baite at a stake" (1722-3). In the French, by contrast, she looks not as if she were a bear, but "Ensi comme ele estoit vestue / De ses garnemens les millors" ("Just as if she were dressed / In her best garments" [3076-7]).³²

“Am I nou3t a bold best, a bere wel to seme?” Melior goes on to boast to Alisandrine (1728); a minute later William joins the fun by dressing in his own bear-suit, eliciting mock-terror from his companion: “So breme a bere 3e beseme a burn on to loke, / Pat icham agrise, bi God þat me made, / To se so hidous a si3t of youre semli face!” (1742–4). Again, the French is quite staid by comparison: Melior just asks how she looks (“Bele, que te samble de moi?” [3081]), and tells Guillaume only that her heart trembles because he seems so fierce (“li cuers me tramble, / Quant vos esgart, si samblés fier” [3098–9]).

This common interest in animal disguises suggests the possibility that Will’s disguise “as a sheep” alludes to the earlier work, whose relative frivolity prompts his atonement in a form of “disguise” that has now become a sign of its wearer’s penance. Admittedly, this idea runs up against what nearly all critics have taken to be the “obvious sense” of Will’s sheepskin: that he is a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”³³ But that interpretation, as Dee Dyas has commented, is “dangerously misleading” in that the passage contains neither any wolf nor the corrupted clergymen who have cure of souls, for whom medieval authors reserved the appellation, says David Lyle Jeffrey, “almost exclusively.”³⁴ An alternative that sidesteps those problems would have it that Will’s hermit, sheep-like dress represents not his unsanctified works themselves – “unholy of werkes” means “without holy works to his credit’ (but not, because of that, necessarily a man of sinful works)”³⁵ – but rather his repentance of them. The b-verse of line 3, “unholy of werkes,” would here be subordinate to the Y of line 2’s “Y shope me,” which, crucially, is necessarily understood as well as the subject of line 4: “I, unsanctified of works, dressed myself in garments as if I were a sheep: in this hermit’s habit, I went wide in this world.”³⁶

The historical foundation for this reading, too, is much more solid than for the received one. The sheepskin or goatskin of monks “signifies that having destroyed all wantonness of carnal passions they ought to continue in the utmost sobriety of virtue,” explains John Cassian, fifth-century monastic theorist, “and that nothing of the wantonness or heat of youth, or of their old lightmindedness, should remain in their bodies.”³⁷ As David Lawton has commented, “Penance, both on the individual and the social level, is Langland’s primary concern in *Piers Plowman*”; a reader thus might well expect this concern to be established in the opening lines of the poem.³⁸ It certainly recurs when the dreamer describes himself as “Wollewaerd” (B 18.1), meaning “with the body towards wool” or “dressed in wool only,” as was “often enjoined in times of superstition, by way of penance,” in R. A. Nares’s quaint explanation.³⁹

One question the opening lines immediately prompt is: what are the “works” that are unsanctified, “unholy”? The standard approach to the lines assumes they are sinful ones in general, no need to specify. But the rest of *Piers Plowman* suggests that they are something quite particular: Will’s writings, a usage we find in Will’s pugnacious observation that the “werkes” of Aristotle and Solomon did not save them from eternal pain (B 10.392–4), and John But’s reference to Will’s writings besides *Piers Plowman* as “oþer werkes” (A 12.101).⁴⁰ To date there has been little alternative but to assume that passages of auctorial self-awareness in the poem, especially the *apologia pro vita sua* of C 5.1–104, constitute *Piers Plowman*’s dramatization of attacks upon *Piers Plowman* against which *Piers Plowman* then defends *Piers Plowman*. That is possible; but other sorts of such “work” make Will very irritated, and given his attack on frivolity it is certain that if he *had* written something like *William of Palerne*, no matter how much others might enjoy and admire the results, it would have eaten at his conscience: “Japares and jangleres, Judas childrene, / Founden hem fantasyes and foles hem make, / And han wytt at wille to worche yf hem lust” (A Prol.35–7).

Thirty lines before this “jangleres” passage, just after donning his sheepskin, Will had said, “Y was wery forwandrit and wente me to reste” (A Prol.7), a line that directly echoes one such fantasy: *William of Palerne*, whose protagonists were “Al wery for walked, and wold take here reste” (2236).⁴¹ That parallel might well be conventional, but the one between the romance’s “but sche a bere were,” pertaining to its most memorable characteristic, and the dream vision’s “as y a shep were” cannot be thus explained. If Langland had translated *Guillaume de Palerne*, Will’s taking on of the penitential state by becoming sheep-like would seem to recollect, for the purpose of correction, “the wantonness or heat of youth” as manifested in his romance about the two young lovers. In this scenario the benevolent werewolf, guardian of Melior and William, would be transformed into the errant beasts both of the poet’s own past and of those external threats (usually, the friars) that show the results of such psychical disorder within both the individual and society’s institutions.⁴² As a sheep, Will would now be a penitent, but also a potential victim of such wolves, no longer the noble protectors they were in *William of Palerne*.

If the opening lines of *Piers Plowman* do constitute the first instance of Langland’s series of retractions or apologies throughout the poem in all its versions, they participate in two prominent strategies by which medieval authors distanced their works from earlier, potentially sinful ones. First is

“the *topos* of regret” described by Olive Sayce: “it is extremely common for an author to begin a religious work by repenting of the folly of his youth, the misuse of his talents and more specifically of his sinful worldly writings.”⁴³ Thus does Alcest enjoin “penaunce” upon Geoffrey, in the Prologue of Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, for the works he made “Whil he was yong” (Text G, 469, 400).⁴⁴ For a Langland who had written *William of Palerne*, this *topos* would have been especially appropriate in light of the second such strategy, which targeted works of its genre in particular: “A long sequence” of English poems of the Edwardian period (c.1270–1370), “all of them sober religious writings, begins with a rejection of romances,” observes Ralph Hanna. “The poems propose other identity models, other ways of becoming, and provide variously alternative histories.”⁴⁵

My proposed reading of the Prologue’s opening, in sum, directly addresses the problems of line 2 that remain in particular need of explanation; accords with the poem’s continual emphasis on penance; and suggests concrete ways in which Langland’s great work invokes important strands of medieval poetics. None of this is evidence that Langland wrote it, but it does show that the refusal even to wonder whether William’s surname was Langland, on the grounds that these poems have nothing in common, is misguided.

Revelation and Atonement

Disguise comes to the fore again in the poem’s subsequent dramatization of the Atonement, which likewise invokes the romance tradition, in a way that reinforces the role of the archive in humanity’s salvation. Emily Steiner establishes an important and useful context for *Piers Plowman*’s narrative of the Atonement: the *Ancrene Wisse*’s allegorization of Christ the King’s wooing of the soul of humanity via a “progression of documents” that “closely follows a common late twelfth-century practice in which English and French kings negotiated peace treaties and marriages by dispatching envoys with oral messages and letters close. These letters protected the envoys and attested to their reliability.”⁴⁶ In this popular early-thirteenth-century guide for anchorites, Christ sends the patriarchs and prophets to his soul with “leattres isealet” (letters close), and then follows them up by coming himself with “leattres iopenet” (letters patent) in the form of the gospels.⁴⁷ So too does *Piers Plowman* dramatize such a progression in B passus 17–18, beginning when *Spes* (Moses) seeks the knight who “toek me a maundement upon þe mont of synay” and who

“hath þe seel to kepe” for *Spee*’s unsealed writ (17.2, 5), and including Love’s sending the New Testament as letters patent to Lady Peace: “Loo! here þe patente” (18.186).⁴⁸

William of Palerne is among the list of romances that employ such motifs. Here they are not allegorical. Near the conclusion of the poem, William commands “menskful messageres, . . . þe grettest lordes of þat land” to bear “loveli letteres” that will invite the emperor of Rome to the wedding of William and the emperor’s daughter Melior (4808–9, 4812). Upon hearing their message, the emperor excitedly calls for a clerk, who then “undede þo letteres, / And fond as þe messageres hade munged before” (4846–7).⁴⁹ As in the historical practice allegorized in the *Ancrene Wisse*, these sealed letters testify to the reliability of the bearers of the spoken message: “Þanne wist þemperour wel þat þei were treuwe” (4850), the narrator remarks in a statement with no equivalent in the French (*Guillaume* 846of).⁵⁰ This episode, in emphasizing the dramatic role of the letters close, suggests a parallel between the material properties of these letters and the spiritual state of the poem’s actors in a very Langlandian way. The unsealing of the letters effects the revelation of a life-transforming truth that enables an atonement of sorts: “And whanne þemperour hade herd how hit ferde” with his daughter, “He was gretteli gladed and oft God þonked / Of þe fortune bifalle of so faire an hende” (4871–3).⁵¹ This connection between the unsealing of the letters close and the act of revelation, broadly conceived, is fundamental to the operations of both the French and English poems. *Guillaume de Palerne* opens with the claim that “bien repont son sens et pert / Qui nel despont apertement / En la presence de la gent” (“he truly conceals and wastes his knowledge, / When he does not reveal it openly / In the presence of the people” [4–6]), a sentiment that, even if William did not translate it (these lines would have been in the now-lost opening of his English text), he definitely took to heart.

In *William of Palerne* animal skins hide the protagonists’ human nature; in *Piers Plowman* it is human nature itself that hides Jesus’s own given nature, his divinity, in its stunning dramatization of the Atonement. This disguise effects the redemption, and makes manifest the incipient role of disguise in the documentary poetics of these passus. Just as Christ the King’s message to humanity remains hidden until the New Testament makes it patent, so does his true nature remain unknown to the devil until the Harrowing of Hell reveals it to devastating effect. “This Jesus of his gentrice wol jouste in Pers armes,” explains Faith (Abraham):

In his helm and in his haberion, *humana natura*;
 That Crist be nat yknowe here for *consummatus deus*
 In Pers paltok the plouhman this prikiare shal ryde,
 For no dynt shal hym dere as *in deitate patris*. (B 18.22–6)

This reference to Christ's "arms of human nature," which prevent others from recognizing his divinity, sets the stage for the ensuing episodes both of his joust with the blind Jew, Longeus, who, when Jesus's blood "unspears" his eyes, immediately repents his actions (18.78–86), and of the Harrowing of Hell, in which the conqueror taunts Lucifer that "in liknesse of a lede" he has beguiled the beguiler (18.356). The theological issue at stake is the notion of the "devil's rights" over humanity, gained when Adam ate the apple, but in Langland's poem forfeit now that Jesus's disguise has fooled the devil into jousting with him and thus into attempting to claim the soul of God himself.⁵²

As Wilber Gaffney says, "Christ is here represented as following the custom fairly well known in the Middle Ages – at least in the chivalric romances – according to which a renowned and formidable knight rides to a tourney in disguise so that his adversaries will not recognize him and consequently decline to encounter him in the lists."⁵³ But that custom does not extend to the invocation of the "devil's rights," which is unique to *Piers Plowman*. Medieval explanations of this theory of the Atonement, after all, usually employed the sorts of images we might expect in a story of trickery, as in this figure by Augustine: "The cross of the Lord became a mousetrap for the Devil; the death of the Lord was the food by which he was ensnared."⁵⁴ It is quite a leap from mousetraps to armor.⁵⁵ If Langland had written *William of Palerne* when he turned to this portion of his poem, though, things begin to fall into place. Romance and disguise are the stuff of the unsanctified works for which the poet himself seeks atonement; the centrality of disguise to the "devil's rights" theory, and of romance to the Christ-knight motif, led him to pull all these strands together in his own treatment of the Atonement. The Christ-knight's disguise might not be a fishhook or mousetrap, but, if my speculations are right, it served Langland's purpose quite well by recalling *William of Palerne's* own stories of disguise and chivalry.

This romance, whoever wrote it, looks forward in interesting ways to Langland's depiction of the Christ-knight, developing its emphasis on identity and disguise by exploiting the dramatic possibilities presented by the military characteristics of the romance tradition. In their waning moments in deer costumes, the lovers wonder why a hart that they find

close by in the park does not flee. Melior assumes it must be asleep, while William takes its stillness as evidence that their disguises have succeeded: “Wist it wisli whiche bestes we were, / It wold fle our felaschip for fere ful sone” (3118–19; *Guillaume* 5200–2). The hart is actually the queen of Palermo, William’s mother, come in disguise to bring the lovers into her community so that they can help defend her city against the onslaughts of Spain. Friend and foe alike subsequently know William only by his shield of gold painted with a werewolf (3211–24, 3433–7, 3570–6), “But witterli what he was wist non of alle,” as the narrator says about the people of Palermo, a remark very close to William’s about the strange hart (3327; *Guillaume* 5586). The king of Spain even wonders whether “It is sum devel degised” who is slaying his men (3888; *Guillaume* 6724–5 does not refer to “disguise”), which reverses, some decades in advance, *Piers Plowman*’s depiction of Jesus in human disguise when battling the devil. Only after the war does Alphouns, now disenchanted of his werewolf’s body, point out that, although “þis kud kniȝt with his clene strengþe” has in effect liberated the city, “Ȝit wot non wiseli wennes he come” (4612, 4615; *Guillaume* 8084). Alphouns proceeds to unveil William’s identity (that is, his parentage), showing that he has just helped the warrior’s mother, and enabling the sequence of romance-concluding marriages and their attendant epistolary exchanges to proceed.

These parallels do not provide evidence for common authorship. But if common authorship is assumed for a moment, they do render newly intelligible a number of problematic episodes of *Piers Plowman*. The sheepskin of its opening lines would be an epitome of the most memorable portions of that romance, when Melior and William look like bears or deer; the dream vision’s procession of documents would allegorize the romance’s secular, narrative version of atonement via letters patent; and the Christ-knight of its later passus would invoke the climactic battle scenes of the earlier poem, after which things become one again within its aristocratic and chivalric world. Perhaps *William of Palerne* is not needed to explain any of these episodes taken alone, but Langland’s authorship of the romance would elucidate both the otherwise jarring roles of disguise in the poem’s working through of penance and the connection these passages forge between disguise and *atonement*, and between each other.

Conclusion: prominent patrons and poetic models

This possibility should prompt fresh attention to certain historical circumstances regarding the milieu(x) of the William(s). If indeed Langland wrote

William of Palerne, the example of John Audelay, another penitential poet from the West Midlands, who might himself have read *Piers Plowman*, helps to fill out his social milieu as a young man.⁵⁶ On Easter Sunday 1417, as Michael Bennett has discovered, Audelay was implicated in a notorious assault by his patron, Richard Lestrage, on an enemy in London's parish of St. Dunstan's-in-the-East; in his later years, having become a chantry priest at Lestrage's Haughmond Abbey, he put together a compilation of his penitential poetry, which seems both to respond to this traumatic experience and to be intended to replace whatever youthful secular poetry he had written, just as the poet who, so I speculate, wrote the opening penitential lines of *Piers Plowman*.⁵⁷ Still more pertinent is Bennett's point that, "In the study of the poets of the West Midlands fuller acknowledgement is going to have to be made to the remarkable cohesiveness of the upper échelons of English society at this time, and to the extraordinary mobility manifest among all the sections of the community."⁵⁸ Langland was intimately familiar with communities of the West Midlands and London regions. Audelay's career as a chantry priest who dabbled in pious verse in his advanced years, and had traversed England from London to Shropshire as a younger man, might well have been foreshadowed a few decades earlier by, and perhaps even modeled upon, the older poet's career.

Langland had a similarly itinerant career under the auspices of a powerful family. Robert Adams has pursued this probability furthest, proposing as the poet's most likely patrons Thomas Beauchamp, eleventh earl of Warwick (1314–69), and then his son, also Thomas, the twelfth earl (d. 1401), who travelled to Brittany in 1368 in the company of one "William Rokele."⁵⁹ Adams identifies "complex, interlocking relationships" among the Beauchamps, Rokeles, and Despensers,⁶⁰ but of course that probably applies to all aristocratic families in fourteenth-century Britain. For what it is worth, then, we can add that the elder Thomas Beauchamp was third cousin of the man who commissioned *William of Palerne*. Indeed the Bohuns, as holders of earldoms, had much more in common with the Beauchamps than did the Rokeles. The respective fathers of Thomas and Humphrey, and second cousins to each other, were Guy de Warwick and Humphrey de Bohun, fourth earl of Hereford, two of the three barons who kidnapped Piers Gaveston and oversaw his execution in 1312.⁶¹ Thomas himself was a founding member of the Order of the Garter in 1349, and was joined almost immediately by William de Bohun, Humphrey's older brother.⁶² Their common ancestor was Humphrey de Bohun, second earl of Hereford (d. 1275).⁶³ It is not

difficult to imagine scenarios that could have brought the poet William, if under Thomas Beauchamp's patronage, to the attention of his cousin Humphrey before 1361.

The connection with one or both of these households is intriguing in light of another, explosive discovery by Bennett: that one "Willelmus *vocatus* Longwyll" is among the dozen men who in 1385 stood accused of aiding and abetting the murder, by the half-brother of Richard II, of Sir Ralph Stafford, son and heir of the earl of Stafford.⁶⁴ This occurred as men from all over England were gathering at York in preparation for the king's expedition to Scotland, including Thomas Beauchamp, twelfth earl of Warwick, who led a retinue. Indeed the murder victim was Thomas's nephew.⁶⁵ While Bennett allows that there must have been many "Long Wills" in fourteenth-century England, he speculates that this is Langland on the grounds that "Long Will" is how the poet signals his authorship of *Piers Plowman* (B 15.152) and, crucially, that this name is accepted by the men making a formal record of a serious crime involving two important noblemen. If this is our man – another big "if," to be sure – it is intriguing to note that among the eleven who joined Long Will on the list was Warin Waldegrave, whose brother Sir Richard, prominent member of Parliament, spent most of his life in the service of the Bohuns (and who will reappear in Chapter 2).⁶⁶

Adams's and Bennett's proposals regarding the identity of Langland are squarely in the subjunctive mood: either, both, or neither might be true. But such uncertainty is no cause not to keep wondering. Whether they explain how the poet of *William of Palerne* came into contact with Humphrey de Bohun, that poet would have found in him much both to irk and to inspire. Langland and Audelay are "orthodox critics of ecclesiastical covetousness, whose principal target is the friars," while Humphrey, by contrast, was among England's greatest benefactors of the Austin friars, in whose London church he would be buried.⁶⁷ Among the members of his household were an Austin friar who went on to oversee the production of "the most important group of English illuminated manuscripts of the second half of the fourteenth century,"⁶⁸ and perhaps John Erghome, another Austin friar, bibliophile, and author of a commentary on *John of Bridlington's Prophecy* (c.1363). Although this work is dedicated to Humphrey's nephew and heir Humphrey, seventh earl (who was patron of Richard Waldegrave), it seems probable that the sixth earl himself probably commissioned it.⁶⁹ Erghome witnessed the catalogue of the Austin York library in 1372, to which he would eventually donate much of his enormous collection of books, a library with which one copy of *Piers Plowman*,

now in CUL MS Dd.i.17 (c.1400), should perhaps be associated.⁷⁰ His commentary shares with *Piers Plowman* a propensity for the Oxford-style intellectual riddling of the late fourteenth century.⁷¹ One wonders, given all these associations, potential and real, with Erghome and the Austin friars, whether Langland might have been thinking of himself as something of an Austin friar – of, that is, the order of the Friars Hermits – in the opening lines’ reference to his dress as a hermit.⁷²

Any connection of Langland to this milieu, or to those of the Beauchamps and Waldegraves, is of course very speculative. Yet any discussion of an entity called “*Piers Plowman B*” with wide readership in the 1380s is just as speculative, but less willing to recognize as much. This is the entity at the heart of Langland studies for well over a century, despite the absence of any manuscripts from that era, evidence of minimal copying then, and powerful evidence that the archetype from which all copies descend took on many readings and passages from the C version of c.1390.⁷³ Attribution is not confined to authorship, or speculation to the murky ground covered in this chapter. So too, as the next two chapters will argue, the assumption that everything found in the archetypal traditions, or in the “best text” of any of them, is authorial unless mangled is a gesture of faith not intellect, an act of speculation no less than is any well-reasoned conjectural emendation.

Recognition of those circumstances might not lead to the large-scale embrace of the notion that William’s last name was Langland, but it will at least lead to a fairer assessment of the place of attribution and speculation in the assessment of the Middle English archive. This chapter has implicitly touched on the question of where the poet of *William of Palerne* undertook his project; as we will now see, the question of localization is intimately connected to the sorts of questions regarding the fabrication of the Langland archive raised by this analysis of attribution. Localization is in effect a substitute for authorial attribution, one that finds the external authorization of meaning in place rather than an individual mind, and as such just as thoroughly implicated in circular reasoning as is the attempt to distance the poet of *Piers Plowman* from anything so undignified as the story of William and the werewolf.