

Born That Way? Setting and Social Status as Intersecting Constituents of Identity in the Middle English *Partonope* and the Yiddish *Bovo d'Antona*

Abstract

This essay raises the question of how the representation of social identities in romances of the late medieval period shifts in line with the different settings that the protagonists must navigate in the course of their journeys. It compares the two very different figures of Partonope of Blois, from the eponymous Middle English romance, and Bovo, from the Yiddish romance *Bovo d'Antona*, in order to investigate how the construction of their social identities intersects with the geographical and social settings that they inhabit. In doing so, this study reveals two varying and counterintuitive templates for how social identity is shaped by setting, thereby shedding light on the contradictions inherent in the representation of Bovo and Partonope as both 'self-made men' and products of their class.

Keywords

Space, Medieval Romance, Social Identity, Setting, Class.

Introduction

A central tenet of the social structure envisaged by medieval romance is that the noble and heroic knights who give the tales their names were born that way. More explicitly put: they were born noble and heroism is therefore to be expected of them, thereby justifying their ongoing high social standing. The assurance that noble birth and a high social standing always go together is the central premise that underlies the testing and proving of the hero's noble status. Thus, a recurring romance plotline involves putting the concept of nobility



by birth to the test by playing out what happens when a consistent high social status is not simply conferred upon a character at birth, but must be won or regained by a high-born protagonist proving themselves to have the noble features their high birth would imply. The romance hero's identity quest, which can take different forms, such as the recuperation of his rightful social status or a simple coming-of-age narrative arc, is intrinsically linked with setting. Not only is the quest often embodied spatially, through a pattern of exile-and-return, but settings also play a decisive role in the construction of the protagonists' shifting social identity. In this article we will consider two examples of knights whose social identity is at issue throughout their tales. We will aim to understand how the construction of their social identity interacts with the settings that they inhabit as their stories unfold. In particular, we will consider the role that setting plays in shaping and exploring their class identity as knightly heroes.

Space is a defining feature of romance, a narrative genre built on the necessity of the hero leaving his home setting in order to find or construct 'himself' within new and different, foreign spaces. In many romances, readers are left in little doubt that the spaces referenced by the texts are at once real and symbolic. A forest, for example, is a real geographical space and, as the hunting ground of the aristocracy, it is a recognisable social space where young nobles can construct their belonging to a certain class. It is also, however, a liminal space that represents wilderness and adventure, in which the hero either crosses onto an otherworld or deconstructs his social status through isolation and madness (Saunders). The settings of romance are not static but plastic spaces which "intersect with human behavior" shaping identities and, in turn, being shaped and transformed by characters (Scott 423). In an exploration of the inter-relation between setting and class identity, it is crucial to recognize both the material and social configurations of space. As Henri Lefebvre has argued in *The Production of Space*, space is produced by and productive of social relations (Lefebvre). Crucially, this means that settings are built out of social hierarchies which are not fixed but shift to accommodate the movement of individuals. By moving into new social spaces, archetypal romance heroes are forced to reconfigure their identity by adapting to new social settings. This intersection of setting with social status can unfold in two different directions: the setting can, through its social configuration, imbue the hero with a particular social status or, on the other hand, the hero can mold the setting to fit around his social position. Thus, while spatial mobility can offer

1. In this context, we will be drawing on the identification of location and class as two aspects of overall social identity as identified in intersectional models of identity discussed by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, who draw on categories such as race, gender, sexuality, location, and class, among others, to discuss the experiences of oppression faced by individuals in a sociological context.

these heroes a chance proactively to reinvent their social identity, the settings themselves, through their physical configuration, can also express or confer decisive shifts in social status. This article observes the different ways in which spatial settings function as key social and material factors in the construction of two different romance heroes' class identity.¹

As we will explore below, Elye Bokher's *Bovo d'Antona*, a Yiddish adaptation of the widespread *Bevis* romance published in 1507, emerges as one in which the high-born hero is repeatedly placed in new settings that call his high station into question and re-frame his social identity, thereby subverting and problematizing the association between high birth and high social station (Rosenzweig). By contrast, the fifteenth-century Middle English *Partonope of Blois* presents a coming-of-age story where the hero's social status, arising from his noble birth, is never called into question yet must be learned and acquired. The different settings in which *Partonope* evolves reinforce the inalienable association of his high birth with his high social station while at the same time problematizing the intersection between the essential nature of his nobility and its performance through learned behavior. In order to explore the very different ways in which these two tales represent the social identity of their protagonists, we will compare the eponymous heroes of these two works with regard to how changes in setting they traverse are used to frame or shift their social status.

The choice of these two romances provides a particularly fruitful comparison since they are both deeply interested in space, and in their hero's journey through different geographical, cultural and material settings, yet the type of heroic identities they produce is very different. While *Partonope* has been recognized as a rather passive romance hero, *Bovo* is uncharacteristically enterprising even as a very young man. As such, they represent strikingly different literary models for how class identity can be generated and performed in medieval and early modern texts.

Indeed, the tone and character development in these two works can be regarded as representing two different ends of the spectrum of popular fifteenth-century romance. *Partonope* follows a path that initially strikes the reader as more familiar by drawing on the material of its thirteenth-century source to show how different settings gradually act upon a young knight, guiding him toward fulfilling his inherent potential for leadership and a high social status. The story of *Bovo*, meanwhile, is one of dislocated identities, in which the dif-

ferent settings he traverses are an impetus for self-reinvention.

What the two romances share, however, is a process of change and renewal, in which the protagonists enhance their social status by means of the ways in which they engage with the settings they pass through or inhabit.

Setting as a Place of Affirmation in *Partonope of Blois*

The fifteenth-century anonymous *Partonope of Blois* is one example of many translations of the twelfth-century Old French *Partonopeu de Blois*. This pan-European romance travelled through different linguistic and cultural spaces across the medieval and early modern periods with translations in Middle High German, Old Norse or Spanish.² The plot of the romance, fusing the classical content of the *romans d'antiquités* with the Celtic content typical of Marie de France's *lais* thus proved highly popular and adaptable to different literary tastes and cultural milieus (Eley 6). The story follows Partonope, heir to the earl of Blois and nephew of the king of France, as he falls in love with Melior, the fairy-like Empress of Byzantium, who has chosen him as future husband and Emperor. In a gender reversal of the Cupid and Psyche myth, Melior forbids the young man to see her until he is of age. In parallel to this fairy-plot, we follow Partonope's knightly adventures battling the king of the Danes in France and participating in a tournament to regain Melior's love after his inevitable breaking of the taboo. By moving between spaces, the romance thus also moves between genres, allowing the hero to construct his identity both as a lover and as a knight and producing a highly entertaining story of love, chivalry and exoticism.

Changes in setting play a key role in *Partonope of Blois* where the hero's construction of his own identity is facilitated by his oscillation between familiarity – his home and family in France – and foreignness – the unknown and magical city of Chef d'Oire situated in a Christian Orient. Like Bovo, and indeed many romance heroes, the young Partonope is unmoored from his French home in the court of Blois and uprooted to new places early on in the tale. However, this back-and-forth eventually resists the traditional circular trajectory of romance: instead of ending up back in Blois, as the noble knight and ruling earl he was born to be, Partonope remains in the Orient, rising above his station by becoming the Emperor of Byzantium. This

2. For a summary of the transmission of the romance in Europe, see Ríkharðsdóttir 116–20.

social identity, however, is presented as Partonope's birthright. Where, in *Bovo*, different settings serve to highlight the gap between the hero's present low social status and his true identity as nobleman, in *Partonope*, each setting the hero passes through works to confirm and reinforce his 'blood nobility,' even while he learns how to behave like the noble knight he was born to be. In this respect, *Partonope of Blois* suggests that social identity is inalienable and essential in nature. One way it does so is by expressing Partonope's nobility in his appearance. As Matilda Bruckner has argued for the Old French *Partonopeu*, beauty and appearance are equated to truth and are "the expression of noble blood and lineage" (Bruckner 117). Consequently, Partonope appears as a rather passive hero (Bonsall, "Disorienting Masculinity" 139–42). His adventures and his destiny are imposed on him.³ Melior, the fairy-like empress of Byzantium, is the one who leads him away from France and into her own realm, foisting on him the identity of being her lover as well as her future husband and emperor.⁴ Partonope acquires this identity through Melior's advice and guidance, but also, importantly, through his interaction with the setting she leads him to: the beautiful city of Chef d'Oire, which Melior has built for him. Completely emptied out of its inhabitants, Chef d'Oire represents an artificial courtly setting that functions as an incubator for Partonope's knightly status. Consequently, when he returns to his French home of Blois, the deaths of his father and his uncle the king have paved the way for him to manifest this knightly status by slotting into his destined social identity as earl and military leader. In both cases, the plotline of *Partonope* casts the settings themselves – Chef d'Oire and Blois – as foundational in creating and affirming Partonope's social status.

The opening of the narrative follows the folkloric trope of the hero getting lost in a forest and cast out to sea. Settings like these work as liminal spaces in romance, where the self can be both lost and reborn. After getting lost in the Ardennes during a hunt with his uncle, the king of France, Partonope wanders through a forest all night before stumbling upon a beautiful ship. When he gets aboard, the empty ship magically sets sails and brings him to an ornate but deserted city. His crossing of the transformative spaces of the forest and the sea suggests a moment of *tabula rasa*, further embodied by the empty city where he will learn to embody his as-yet-unrealized identity. The city is wonderfully luxurious, with houses of black marble, encrusted with crystals that shine so bright that Partonope cannot believe it is actually night-time. The city is described at length as

3. The female characters, in particular, appear to be in charge of his identity. See Hosington 65 and 70.

4. On Melior's role as patron and mentor, and the romance's disrupting of gender roles, see Vines, "A Woman's 'Crafte'", and Bonsall, "Whose Sword?"

5. All quotes are from Böttker.

the young man wanders in it, torn between marvel and fear. He believes he is “in fayre” (887), and that what he sees must be the work of “nygromansy” (876) if not the devil (888).⁵ The city is further described as impressively secure and impenetrable, with its fortified castle and high towers, and yet it stands “wyde open” (945, 989) for him. Although scared, Partonope eventually decides to enter the city’s royal palace where he finds a table laid for him and a fire made. While he still sees no one, cups are magically filled and he follows the torches that light the way to a beautiful chamber. In this first interaction with Chef d’Oire, Partonope is thus seen moving beyond his fear in order to trust the desirability and availability of the setting, and, crucially, recognize that he is entitled to it. In fact, as he soon learns, the entire place was built for him.

The Byzantine empress Melior, who is learned in the magic arts, has chosen him as her future husband and has built the empty city expressly for him. She has orchestrated his coming to Chef d’Oire and made sure that he would be “servyd worchypfully for yowre degre” (1692). Because he is too young to become her husband and emperor straightaway, Melior plans to keep him in Chef d’Oire for a year and a half so that he can grow into the worthy knight that his noble blood assures her he will be. During that time, while he will get no company other than hers, she is confident that he will become such a worthy knight that anyone would choose him as governor, lord and emperor (1839–40). Partonope’s (future) high social status can be seen to be foisted on him and thoroughly managed by Melior. The programme she has organized to ‘help’ him adopt or grow into this identity is one of complete isolation from any form of social interaction as she confines him to the material and sensual pleasures of the bedroom and of his new playground – Chef d’Oire.⁶ The elaborate, confined settings play a key role in this. As Melior explains, the whole place has been built solely for him: “[I] made thys place so fresshe and gaye, / Thynkyng, my herte, that ye yowre playe / Shulde have ther-In” (2135–37). As Vines argues, the city and its resources are “marshaled for Partonope’s pleasure and use” (Vines, *Women’s Power* 93). The setting’s very materiality therefore becomes crucial to the construction of Partonope’s identity. The palace, the city, and Partonope himself, as shaped by his experiences in these settings, are all intended to be idealized, but ultimately artificial, constructions built to Melior’s specifications. This explains the long and detailed descriptions of Chef d’Oire and the palace, which are awash with references to specific objects and their rare materials and noble prove-

6. On the role of pleasure in the shaping of his knightly identity, see Kaempfer.

nance. Partonope drinks from a cup of red ruby, sleeps in a “shete of raynes” (1160 [a linen cloth from Rennes]), dresses in silk garments tailored to perfection, and washes with a towel “of Parys werke” (1972). In sum, the place bedecks him with the material attributes pertaining to royal status.

In this setting, entirely controlled and consciously built by Melior, Partonope has very little agency and decision-making power; his sole enjoyment of the setting works to shape him into a noble knight fit to become emperor. The very first night, Melior sets out the activities that will fill his time in the city. At night, he will have sexual pleasure with Melior, but while he is allowed “kyssynge,” “felynge” and “playe” (1800, 1806), he is not allowed to *see* her. During the day, he will have access to fine clothes of silk, to good food and wine, and to the country’s beautiful towns and castles, besides being permitted to hunt by the river and in the forest. The decision of whether he will hunt in the river or the forest on any given day appears, in fact, to be his only responsibility. Indeed, hunting is the chief activity offered to him and it is specifically described as an identity-shaping activity. The noise the hunting hounds make is the sound of nobility: “the crye to here yt were a feste / For an emperor and for a lord” (2250–51). As he hunts with the best dogs, in the best environment, Partonope can therefore imagine himself as an emperor and a lord. In these scenes, the setting of Chef d’Oire offers confirmation and reinforcement of Partonope’s sense of his own noble identity through material comfort and pleasurable activities fit for a king, in short through his enjoyment of the physical setting and what it has to offer.

In accordance with inhabiting this ideal immediate setting, Partonope is also cast as participating in a broader network of wealth and aristocratic power. The first morning, Partonope wakes up to a beautiful and bright chamber, puts on the “noble garmente” (1955) laid out for him and heads out to discover the town in daylight. He beholds the royal castle in which he slept and finds a horse – “fayre and able / For any kynge” (2003–04) – waiting for him. Partonope rides to the top of the tower, from which he enjoys an all-round view of the city, its surrounding countryside and the sea beyond. From this vantage point, he sees rich and luxuriant gardens, a haven full of ships and a castle far away. The text pauses on the busy mercantile activity of the country, where ships come and go loaded with exotic spices and cloths. This scene thus stages Chef d’Oire as a place of mercantile wealth and aristocratic power. It displays a “fascination with materiality, wealth, and the practical, tangible signifiers of class”

7. See Gaullier-Bougassas for a study of the Old French *Partonopeu* and its construction of Chef d'Oire as an Oriental 'urban utopia.'

8. Following the repetitive, back-and-forth spatial structure of the romance, a very similar episode will happen after Partonope betrays Melior: he flees to the Ardennes forest where he effectively undoes his social status by living as a wildman. He then goes on to re-adopt this identity by being brought by Urraque, Melior's sister, to an artificial setting of luxury and sensual pleasure.

9. Bonsall makes a similar point, arguing that Melior plays the role of "feudal lord" through her "extraordinary influence over Partonope's knightly identity," an influence both material and moral ("Whose Sword?" 122–23).

(Bonsall, "Disorienting Masculinity" 109) that is typical of medieval romances and their representation of places of alterity.⁷ In Chef d'Oire, high social status is materialized through a surplus of wealth and luxury. By having Partonope behold the territory from the top of the tower, the setting physically endows him with the high status Melior promises him. Everything in this artificial, purpose-built courtly setting, is there to enhance and shape Partonope's noble status.⁸

And yet, the artificial courtly setting of Chef d'Oire soon proves suffocating: lost in pleasure, Partonope forgets his own identity as a Frenchman and heir to the earl of Blois. When, after a year, he inevitably remembers his parents and his king, Melior agrees that it is time for him to put into practice his rather passive knightly education. She delivers the news of a war in France and the deaths of both his father and his uncle the king, thereby effectively revealing and thrusting upon him the identity of earl of Blois and military leader. She first commands him: "Drawe yow to armes and knyghthode, / And loke there lacke ynne yow no manhode" (2404–05). There follows a list of instructions on how he should behave off the battlefield, the chief requirement of which seems to be generosity. Melior insists that Partonope should "be large and gevyth faste" (2407), offering goods and clothes to worthy knights in order to establish himself as their lord and leader. Melior imposes herself as Partonope's mentor and patron, providing him with the necessary means. As Amy Vines has shown, "it is Melior, rather than Partonope's older male relatives, who instructs the young man on the expectations of knighthood, complete with a keen insight into its social and financial requirements"; she "grooms Partonope to be a knight, a husband, and a king" (Vines, "A Woman's 'Crafte'" 247–58).⁹ In that reading, the young man's stay at Chef d'Oire is not one of *récréantise* but forms the necessary condition for the active performance of his social status in France.

After a year spent in isolation, building a strong sense of entitlement and of his own nobility, returning to the setting of Blois offers a social confirmation of Partonope's high status. While he left as the young nephew of the king and son of the earl of Blois, he comes back to a changed social setting where people welcome him as their lord. Here, the social configuration of the space does not need to shift to accommodate his arrival: his social position, that of the earl of Blois, was left vacant, ready for him to slot into it. When he reaches his home palace, the porters fall on their knees as they recognize him (2582). He soon has his mother send for every "knyght, yomen, and goode Squyer" (2627) of the country. As soon as the news of his

homecoming spreads, all the “chevalrye of the Cuntre” arrives “to hym warde” (2633, 2636) – that is to protect and stand guard, in short to put themselves at his service. Despite his long absence, he is immediately recognized as a lord and a leader. This new setting is presented as a place lacking a noble and successful leader, as if waiting for Partonope to return and naturally take on this social role. Indeed, his widowed mother is in grave distress as her neighbors are rebelling and threatening to disinherit her. In a few days, Partonope manages to bring two thousand men to his cause and to regain his mother’s castles – thereby establishing himself as the ruling earl of Blois.

While Partonope’s path remains smooth overall, the romance as a whole can be read as an *exemplum*, providing good and bad examples of chivalry and kingship (Ihle *passim*). After his successful return to Blois, Partonope leaves to meet the king of France at Pontif, where the king is being besieged by the heathen king Sornegur. Here too, the role of strong leader appears ripe for the taking as the king has failed in his duty. The French war episode in particular contains several examples of bad behaviors which allow Partonope to be recognized quickly as a better knight and lord. The king of France, the nameless successor of the great Clovis, finds himself in a desperate situation. Isolated and without any military power, he is assaulted by Sornegur’s army on a daily basis. As he joins him – bringing five thousand men – Partonope wonders why the king has not sent out for his liegemen, to which he answers (ll. 2708–11):

They wylle obbeye me nothyng.
Y canne ynne no wyse trewly see
Butt that they neyder holde me
For kyng, for sovereyne, ne for lorde.

In failing to gain his men’s loyalty, the king of France opens up a space for a new lord and sovereign of the French army. While the romance does not tell us how or why this unsuccessful king failed to gather his troops, we are shown the good example of Partonope’s noble and generous behavior as he successfully takes on the role of military leader. Partonope indeed puts Melior’s mentorship and patronage to good use. Not only does he fight very well and can “devyse” the king “howe thatt [he] governyd schalle be” (2802–03), but he also knows how to act like a courteous lord. Partonope is repeatedly shown welcoming anyone to his own home and freely giving money and gifts to earls, kings and barons (see 2998–3010) in exchange for status: Partonope gives money and gifts, the knights and squires ‘gaffe hym

the pryce/Off manhode, fredome, and curtesey. / They cleped hym the flower of chevalrey' (4865–67). If the king of France's higher social status is not put into question, Partonope still manages to place himself higher in the minds of the French people because "he wyste so welle what was to done" (4861). Knowing how to act is key to the construction of social identity. This does not mean however that anyone can learn how to become a lord. The romance in fact offers a stern warning about the dangers of upward class mobility through several examples of low-born individuals who were promoted to higher social statuses with dire consequences (Eley 50–74). The French setting constructs Partonope's high social status as not only natural, but also essential. The roles of earl of Blois and French sovereign are thus left open for him – their rightful heir – to take up while at the same time emphasizing the crucial role his learned knightly behavior plays in the construction and maintenance of his elevated social status.

Unlike Bovo, who, as we shall see below, is able to reinvent his social identity in new settings, Partonope's noble status remains constant throughout. The young hero never proactively reinvents himself, rather he learns how to act in order to conform to his blood nobility. However, the narrative emphasis on learned behavior as a key factor of noble identity works together with the different settings that he traverses to eventually allow Partonope to rise above his station. While Melior engineers the settings and experiences that will shape him into a future emperor, bringing to fruition a knightly identity that hinges on his noble ancestry, the romance makes sure that Partonope is repeatedly and publicly recognized as a great knight and leader through his own actions. The romance ends with a three-day tournament, organized to find Melior a husband. This public setting aptly encapsulates the intersection of essential nobility and learned behavior in this romance. After having demonstrated his prowess in combat, it is finally thanks to his beauty – the visual and essential embodiment of his worth – that Partonope is crowned victorious.¹⁰ From being the heir to the earldom of Blois, Partonope has, by the end of the story, gained "the dignyte of a kyng" (12160). Ultimately, though, his adoption of royal status is enabled by the hero's permanent relocation to the East. The fixed social hierarchy that defines the French setting – which already has a king – may have allowed Partonope to take on the practical role of military leader, but it would have nonetheless confined him to the social status of earl of Blois. By escaping these confines and shifting the setting to the East, the ro-

10. The tournament stages the "intertwining of beauty and prowess, birth and individual performance" presented as complementary values in the romance (Bruckner 131).

mance actively reconstructs a royal identity for Partonope through the intersection of essential nobility, performance, and spatial configuration. The different settings play a key role in this: while they are used, on the one hand, to affirm Partonope's rightful and inalienable nobility, they also create space for his social mobility through relocation and through his exemplary learned behavior.

Setting as a Place for Repetition and Reinvention in the *Bovo Buch*

The story of Bevis, also known as Boeve or Bovo, was widely adapted throughout Europe in the later medieval period, surviving in a range of languages, including French, English, Welsh, Irish, Norse, Italian, Dutch, and Yiddish. It outlines the travails and triumphs of the eponymous hero who is betrayed by his mother and forced to flee his homeland of Hampton/Antona/Haunton, thereby forgoing the privileges of his aristocratic birth. The different adaptations vary widely in tone, ranging from the epic to the satirical, and often include different sets of adventures. In most versions, however, the hero eventually regains his social status and wins new power and riches following a series of foreign skirmishes and encounters, including winning the hand of the noble Josiane/Druzeyne and defeating a monstrous giant. *Bovo d'Antona*, Bokher's humorous Yiddish version of this tale is a comparatively late adaptation from the beginning of the sixteenth century and is very loosely based on an earlier northern Italian version, which is itself a fairly free adaptation of the traditional tale (Rosenzweig 5–39).

The Old Yiddish literature that was produced in Italy and Germany in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was typically disseminated across regional and linguistic borders to cater to a wide range of different readers in Jewish communities across the region. As such, it provides a valuable arena within which to explore the idiosyncratic and overlapping factors of religion, class, and location shaping the creation and reception of late medieval and early modern literature in Western and Southern Europe. Jean Baumgarten notes that the layered reception history of these works calls for analytical approaches that reflect how 'cultural compositions in Yiddish bring into play an intricate web of complex factors historical and social as well as religious' (Baumgarten vii). In keeping with this methodological approach, recent work by Astrid Lembke has shown how tales from the

late medieval period use the fictional realm to explore conflicts of identity that are specific to the social and theological ideals of Ashkenazi Jewish faith and culture (Lembke). Thus, Lembke explores how the thirteenth-century Hebrew ‘Tale of a Poor Man’ represents a protagonist dramatically failing to negotiate two competing strands of his identity as he attempts to balance the twin duties ‘of marriage and religious studies’ required of Jewish men (Lembke).

These studies illustrate the potential of Old Yiddish works to illuminate the different strands of identity shaping different social, religious and linguistic communities in medieval and early modern Europe. Among these works, the Old Yiddish romance *Bovo*, which is widely reckoned to be one of the masterpieces of Old Yiddish literature, stands out as particularly suited to this kind of analysis (Wenzel 19–20). Not only is it one of only a handful of romances that were adapted from medieval German and early modern Italian sources into the complex and fascinating Old Yiddish literary tradition of the early modern period; the many re-prints of the story also show that it was the most popular of these romances.

As an Old Yiddish version of the tale of Bevis, *Bovo* recounts the eponymous hero’s early misfortunes in Antona (here situated in the Lombardy region), which lead him into a state of anonymous exile and a seemingly hopeless romance with Drusiana in Flanders, followed by adventures and mishap in Babylon and Flanders, a triumphant return to Antona, and an eventual happy reunion with Drusiana. Claudia Rosenzweig has conclusively shown that the Old Yiddish verse version of the story was adapted by the prolific author and translator Elye Bokher in 1507 using the Bologna 1497 print edition of the Italian *Buovo d'Antona* as his source (Rosenzweig 39).

As Frakes notes, Elye Bokher’s linguistically and culturally multi-faceted biography can be read as a “cultural history of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in Central Europe and Northern Italy” (Frakes 278). Not only was Elye Bokher at different points in his life part of different Jewish communities living in Venice, Padua and Rome, he was also originally from Neustadt an der Aisch, a town with strong trading links to Venice (Rosenzweig 3–5). Elye Bokher’s own identity therefore represents both a multilingual and a multicultural point of origin for his translation of the *Bevis* story. The material context of *Bovo* in particular is similarly layered. Following his original composition of *Bovo* in manuscript form, Elye Bokher went on to amend the manuscript for the purposes of running a print version (Timm). The resulting edition was printed by

the German press of Isny in Württemberg in 1541 and went on to be circulated among Yiddish-speaking communities throughout different regions of Europe, who lived in different co-territorial communities and spoke different local languages and dialects (Rosenzweig 9). In light of this production context, the resulting romance emerges as a thoroughly European work that exceeds the confines of national borders. As we will go on to show, just as the story of Bovo is the result of layered, multilingual moments of creation, the figure of Bovo himself is one that accretes different social identities as he creates new identities for himself in order to navigate his way through different social and cultural settings.

Indeed, the varied settings of the *Bevis* story have been widely discussed as a defining feature of the tale. Scholars including Luke Sunderland (226–42) and Claudia Rosenzweig (3–5) have been interested in the wide geographical span of this episodic romance. As they have noted, the *Bevis* tradition is one whose settings range across Europe and are occasionally adapted to the mental maps of new readers in new regions, as is the case in the Italian *Bovo d'Antona*, which sets the scene in Lombardy rather than southern England (Sunderland 226–28). Reading the Yiddish *Bovo* alongside *Partonope* can help us to better understand how Bovo's social identity is signaled and developed both in line with and in opposition to conventional tropes of knightly social identity as he moves through different geographical and social spaces in the course of the romance.

In terms of micro-setting, Bovo's trajectory overall can be seen as circular in that this son of a nobleman is first shown to inhabit the stately home he was born in and then, after moving through a range of different settings in foreign regions, is restored to living in a stately home. Moreover, even while the settings he inhabits change, and Bovo's social station fluctuates throughout the tale, the social structure of a nobleman's court continues to serve as a relatively constant point of reference throughout his adventures.

The shifting settings in this tale therefore serve as points of contrast that highlight the discrepancy between Bovo's social 'level' at birth in the ducal household and the various social and physical settings in which he finds himself. As Bokher's adaptation has a comedic thread running through it, the discrepancy is most frequently highlighted in moments of comedy. Thus, for example, the first shift in social status as expressed by setting that Bovo experiences is also the most dramatic: having fled from the palace he was born in, a youthful Bovo is rescued by a group of merchants who take him onto

their ship. In this instance, the setting plays a central role in expressing his social decline. In terms of territory, Bovo has been removed from the dynastic stage of the ducal court at Hampton and is now adrift in uncharted waters. This unmooring aptly expresses the 'homelessness' that Sunderland observes to be characteristic of the Bevis story as a whole. However, even as Bovo's disappearance from the social scene of his mother's palace is being depicted, the tale follows him into this place of invisibility – the ship.

Paradoxically, Bovo's world, which appears to have widened since leaving his birthplace for the open seas, has also narrowed in terms of scope as the focus is now on the action within the confines of the merchants' ship. The fact that the three merchants and Bovo are the only crew mentioned suggests a small-ish craft that leaves little room for Bovo to enact or represent the courtly social identity suited to a prince. In keeping with the confined and neatly delineated space it creates, the ship setting creates a clear social hierarchy in that it is a self-contained social setting in which the different characters' social station initially appears to be fixed. Here, Bovo's fall from grace seems complete as his social position is reversed from that of being the beneficiary of a household of servants, to that of being a servant himself. This fixity, however, turns out to be deceptive. Even before Bovo has woken up, his physical beauty leads the merchants to suspect that the boy they have rescued is no ordinary man. This impression is confirmed after he awakes and wins over the merchants and their crew (19–20):¹¹

11. All quotations are from Smith.

By now Bovo had recovered completely and was as strikingly handsome as ever. They were all happy he was on board and everyone was very fond of him, for whatever they told him to do, he did it right away. He served all the merchants willingly and gladly and he was always full of joy, shouting and singing. But each one of the merchants wanted to have the lad for himself, as his very own servant boy, and this soon led to great animosity between them.

These descriptions of Bovo's popularity show his perceived status to be rising, as he embraces the role of a willing servant. Within the self-contained social hierarchy of the ship, the merchants' impression of 'what kind of man' this mysterious stranger is and what treatment he should therefore be accorded is detached from influences of the outside world and can be presented as evolving quickly in response to Bovo's behavior. This form of 'meritocratic' assessment is not, how-

ever, detached from broader social norms. Rather the merchants' response to Bovo shows that they, too, cannot help but recognize Bovo's qualities in terms of hard work and good nature despite his ostensibly low social status.

When the merchants of the ship start to fight with each other about who should own him, Bovo heroically reconciles that fight by engineering that he should be sold and the proceeds shared (20):

Bovo quickly grabbed up an oar and lustily hacked his way into the crowd. He separated them from each other and forced them to lay down their weapons. He hit them so hard he bent the oar! Then he said: 'Calm down, I swear to you on my oath there's no need to fight over me. Noble fellows, let's talk this over. Gather round for a moment and I'll tell you something that'll make everyone happy. Listen to me just for a second. I'll serve all of you until we come to the next port. Then sell me for a servant and you can share the money evenly between you.'

This scene shows Bovo's multi-faceted leadership skills as he orchestrates his own enslavement. On a personal level, he shows physical power and decisiveness in terms of threatening and hitting the fighting merchants with the oar (and the enthusiasm he brings to the task surely has its own humorous undertones). At the same time, he furthers the common good by reconciling the merchants and persuading them to find an equitable solution to their quarrel over him. From a structural perspective, the quarrel between the merchants leaves the social hierarchy of the ship in limbo, as the apparent 'rulers' of this space cannot agree on a course of action regarding one of the crew – Bovo. At first glance, Bovo's decision to resolve the argument through both force and reason is primarily ironic – in that he takes charge of the matter of what should be done with 'the slave' that he now is. However, in terms of social identity, this moment can be seen as the rebirth of Bovo as a leader. Indeed, this scene is the first of the tale to show Bovo taking independent initiative and proving himself to be the 'prince among men' that his high-born status would imply. Elye Bokher's vivid and humorous rendering of Bovo's role in this discussion highlights the contradictory dynamics inherent in the trope by which a high-born anonymous knight proves his worth.

Following the social limbo of his days at sea, Bovo's striking intervention in the merchant's conflict marks the beginning of a process of proactive self-making that departs from his more reactive and

passive behavior up to this point. Until this moment, Bovo is shown responding to external impulses – his life is threatened, so he flees, the merchants take him in as a servant, so he takes on the role of servant. While this passive acceptance of the servant identity given to him may be read as a revealing part of his character and ability to adapt, it stands in stark contrast to the more active self-making he undertakes when he intervenes to resolve the merchants' quarrel, thereby advancing the action of the plot. This sense of re-invention is furthered when the ship is more fully embarked upon its journey and he is asked about his identity, prompting him to spin the merchants a creative and outrageous origin story (20):

'Lord God has not been kind to my parents. They are both destitute and stay in the poorhouse at Nuremberg where they live from the charity of others. My father is a native-born Hungarian and my mother is a Frenchwoman. She would have let me die of hunger. She was a stingy, wicked hag and I was a naughty boy. I would have shit in her shoes if I had to put up with her any longer! And so that's why I left that country for good.'

Again, Bovo moves beyond a passive role to create a new social identity for himself that matches his current low social station. And yet again, the identity he officially inhabits is at odds with his behavior: in this case, Bovo's outrageous origin story is told with a vigor and aggressive imagery that sets him apart – not only from the role of a noble knight, but also from the role of a humble servant.

Interestingly, the trope of a social 'rebirth' taking place on a ship echoes the many folktales in which heroes are cast out to sea to die only to return and reclaim their social destiny. This narrative topos, which is central to the tales of the Welsh *Mabinogion* among others, casts the sea as both an endpoint and a starting point to a new identity. Bokher's rendering of Bovo's sea journey as a moment of rebirth is made complete when he reaches land and enters the entirely new, yet very familiar, social setting of King Arminio's court.

In this case, the transformation of Bovo's social identity as he enters a new setting is not implicit, but is foregrounded by the description of how he is sold (21–22):

[...] and they told [the king] all about Bovo and about how he had come to be with them. Then they showed him the boy. [...] The king looked him over from top to bottom and

then had him trot up and down and run back and forth, just as one does with a horse one is thinking of buying.

As we have seen, Bovo has orchestrated that he himself be sold by asserting his own agency. As a result, the uncomfortable scene of the sale, in which he undergoes the humiliation of being inspected, is embedded in a decidedly multivalent power dynamic.

Nonetheless, despite these overtones, Bovo's social decline must be regarded as reaching its nadir as he appears to slip from the bottom rung of the social ladder – that of slave – into the animal world by being forced to perform like a horse. And indeed, the narrator highlights the implications of this scene in terms of charting Bovo's evolving social identity. He intervenes to remark (22):

And so, dear sirs, ponder this: how the son of a count was brought so low. Truly, no one should ever rely much on either money or possessions, because he never knows what might happen to him when misfortune strikes. This world is like a ladder: one man ascends, the other comes tumbling down. And that is just what happened to our Bovo. See where misfortune took him.

It is certainly unusual for a narrator of the Bevis tradition to move so openly into view at all. Doing so suggests that Bokher regards the sale into slavery as an important moment in Bovo's story and is prepared to make the implications of Bovo's fall from grace for the possible fortunes of the reader apparent. In this moment, readers are explicitly being addressed as both listeners and students, whilst being implicitly aligned with Bovo, as humans that could, very easily, be struck down by fate at any moment.

While it seems understandable that being sold into slavery should mark a lowpoint in Bovo's fortune, it is nonetheless striking that the narrator brings in his musing on Bovo's fate and shifting social status at this particular point in the narrative. The preceding plotline provides several equally suitable moments in which to dwell on his fall from grace, for example the moment in which Bovo is lying comatose on the shore where the merchants find him. Perhaps what the narrator is remarking on is not just Bovo's general fall from grace, but the degree to which his changed social station has become apparent now that he has returned from the detached and otherworldly settings of the coastline and the ship at sea to a setting with a more fixed and recognizable social hierarchy in 'the real world.' In short, the fact that the high-born Bovo is no longer a mysterious stranger

but now inhabits the defined role of a stable boy highlights how far he has dropped down the social ladder. That point is made all the more marked by the fact that he is not a stable boy in an anonymous rural setting surrounded by similarly down-to-earth characters but is instead part of the household of King Arminio. The result is that the contrast between his current social standing and the social standing he was born into is constantly visible to readers, while other people around him, including Druzeyne and her father, inhabit the high social status that would usually be accorded to Bovo.

This contrast arises out of two intertwined dynamics – the first dynamic unfolds out of the fact that the high status of the other figures that are present or referenced creates a hierarchy in which Bovo is at the bottom, further emphasizing his social decline. The second dynamic is more subtle in that this renewed setting at a royal court recreates the original setting at the ducal court of Bovo's father, where Bovo initially enjoyed a very high status. As a result, even though Bovo has left the noble household he was born in, he continues to inhabit a comparable noble household that functions according to the same social norms and hierarchical structures. His social setting can therefore serve to fully explore the effects and consequences of social demotion in ways that can be easily recognized by the reader and, presumably, by Bovo himself. In this instance, setting functions as a backdrop that can signal different types of social standing in terms of incorporating rural or urban landscapes and rich or poor households. At the same time, setting can be seen as creating the social bracket inside which comparative social hierarchies become meaningful by creating a social structure that is both different to and the same as Bovo's original home. One of the implications of this intersection of setting and social hierarchy with the individual social identity of any given figure is that these identities are inherently mobile and the relative status of each character is affected by the arrival and departure of other characters of high or low status, whose presence recalibrates the social hierarchy.

In keeping with this comparative and fluid element in the social hierarchy of Arminio's court, the arrival of Makabrun represents a turning point in Bovo's construction of a new social identity for himself. Having highlighted the fact that Bovo has reached his lowest ebb, the narrator initially goes on to show Bovo taking on the role of King Arminio's servant with great success. His inhabiting of this role is interrupted, however, by the appearance at King Arminio's court of the powerful ruler and love rival Makabrun. By this stage of the story,

Bovo is already in love with King Arminio's daughter Druzeyne. When Druzeyne's suitor Makabrun arrives the servant Bovo decides to take on the guise of a knight in order to fight him.

He is shown taking the following steps (25–26):

[...] he had made for himself a wreath out of willow all intertwined with pretty flowers. Ah, how nice it looked on him! [...] Along the way he saw a page carrying a shield and grabbed it right out of his hands. Bovo wished there had been someone from whom he could have snatched a lance as well, but he saw no one. He [...] started looking in all the corners to see if he could not find some sort of lance. He found a beam which had fallen down behind a stable door. It was a long, thick, heavy pole, twisted and crude and as splintery as a hedgehog. But when he saw it, he came to life. Never in all his life had he thought himself richer. He said: 'This is just the thing, though it could be a bit straighter! Ah, what a beating I'll give Makabrun! If he's smart, he'll run away.'

In this moment of self-transformation, Bovo offers a physical performance of knighthood that – as the reader knows all too well – draws on his noble heritage. In doing so, Bovo reminds readers of the noble position he was born into even as he invites them to laugh either with or at him and the low social station that he now inhabits. The contradictions he thereby conjures up do not function in a vacuum, however. Rather, it is the very fact that he takes on the role of 'comedy-knight' in order to face a real knight wearing real armor that lends this scene its tragicomic power and throws Bovo's lowly station into sharp and potentially subversive relief. By this point, readers have been primed to be all the more impressed when this nobleman/stable-boy dresses up as a comedy-knight and goes on to actually defeat a real knight. Even before Bovo faces his love-rival Makabrun, Makabrun's expected presence in the tournament re-shapes the social arena in which Bovo is moving and re-shapes both Bovo's perceived social identity and the social identity Bovo himself expresses through his actions: in dressing up as a knight as well as in fighting Makabrun.

As these examples show, just as the location in which people live can be key in shaping the social identity they inhabit and how that identity is perceived and classified by those around them, the specific literary settings knightly figures such as Bovo move through and the shifting social identities these settings engender give meaning to

their social role and status. Moreover, those interactions are not limited to the places themselves, but arise out of networks of relative social status and identity that change as other characters enter or leave that social setting. What emerges from this exploration is therefore an understanding of social identity as a mobile strand of selfhood that is framed and made meaningful by location or, in a literary context, setting. And, indeed, this mobile strand of identity is further complicated by the fact that settings not only change when characters move from one location to the next, but are themselves constituted in part by the shifting network of other characters present at any given time. These same dynamics of setting functioning as a framework for social status recall the dynamics at play in *Partonope of Blois*

Conclusions

Clearly, the two romances under discussion present very different dynamics in terms of how the social identity of a medieval knight can be shaped by the geographical and social settings they occupy at different points in the text. What is striking, however, is that the differences in the dynamics shown appear inter-referential. Rather than presenting two varying models of identity-formation that overlap in some points but not in others, these two works in fact seem to present models that stand in direct opposition to each other.

The most striking aspect of these opposing dynamics is the extent to which self-conscious acts of identity generation on the part of Bovo contrast with how Partonope is shaped by acts of identity generation being undertaken by other characters or the world around him. Where Bovo engages in conscious self-construction, as he does in inventing lies on the ship or in using farm tools to dress up as a knight, Partonope is presented as being formed both by the courtly setting that he is learning to inhabit and by his educational encounters with Melior. Moreover, where Bovo grows through navigating a wealth of different social roles and settings, Partonope's growth is tied to performing far more consistent social roles in courtly settings.

Overall, these contrasts cast Bovo as a figure that functions in opposition to the more traditional romance protagonists of which Partonope appears to be an example. In this context, the later composition date of *Bovo d'Antona* at the end of the fifteenth century invites a reading by which the shift toward a more self-aware and self-gen-

erated social identity reflects a development toward more self-determined early modern models of fictional personhood. Seen through this lens of agency, *Partonope's* more passive and socially embedded development of his identity would represent a more typically medieval ideal, embedded in the values of twelfth-century courtly fiction.

On a broader level, however, the overarching trajectory of both romances runs counter to this narrative of a medieval model of personhood giving way to early modern identity templates. Simply considering where *Bovo* and *Partonope* start, in terms of social station, and where they end up reveals how the different trajectories of the two protagonists defy a simplistic understanding of how these works portray the interaction of class and agency. Thus, where the active figure of *Bovo* returns, in essence, to a social station equivalent to the one he inhabits at the outset, the more passive figure of *Partonope* rises from the position of being a minor nobleman to that of emperor, suggesting that in at least one of these two texts, the action the protagonist takes is only one of the factors contributing to his successful development of high-status social identities. As we have shown above, the settings both *Bovo* and *Partonope* inhabit must be regarded as central factors in shaping and facilitating the class identity of these two knightly protagonists. Where *Bovo* repeatedly enters new social settings in which he actively positions himself in different social roles and is given the chance to prove himself, *Partonope's* 'inherent nobility' is coaxed out into the open by means of Melior's active creation of didactic settings that model an aristocratic lifestyle and behavior. Only after this first phase can the protagonist inhabit 'real world' settings in which he can put his learned knightly behavior to the test and thereby successfully perform his destined social identity. At the same time, throughout these tales, both texts create varied and striking settings that give their protagonist space to shift through different social roles and develop new skills they might not have had access to staying at home.

From a broader perspective, then, these two late medieval and early modern romances offer a socially conservative view of society in which new and strange settings are a catalyst for very specific forms of self-making. On the one hand, as in *Bovo*, these settings can offer an arena for the protagonists to use the innate noble qualities that signal their lineage to overcome the temporary separation between being high-born and inhabiting a high social status. On the other hand, as in *Partonope*, they can also create learning opportunities for knights like *Partonope* to learn the different facets of knightly behav-

ior required for the social station they will soon inhabit and put them into practice. In these settings, then, the protagonists learn and develop, not in order to become different from what they used to be but to become more fully what they already are: representatives of the 'best' in a society that values fixed hierarchies.

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