NATURE'S FORGE RECAST IN THE *ROMAN DE SILENCE*

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Nature makes her first appearance as a fully developed allegorical personification in the late fourth century.[1] She is personified as female, partially due to the feminine gender of the Latin word but also evoking Aristotle's description of nature in his *Metaphysics* as "the genesis of growing things" in the sense of origin or birth.[2] Nature's fundamental association with birth virtually demands that she be represented as a female figure; and, indeed, throughout the medieval period, she is described as having a female body. However, the work she does – Nature's role in relation to procreation – is not described in feminine terms. She is said to impose form just as coins are stamped in a mint, or as metal is worked in a forge, both metaphors used to describe the role of the male in conception; she is identified, not with gestation, but with the impression of form upon matter. During the Middle Ages, the prevailing Aristotelian view of gestation centered on the sperm placing its imprint upon the egg's undifferentiated material.[3] The womb was seen as little more than a receptive vessel in which the infant, fully formed in miniature at the time of conception, was nourished.

The image of Nature as a feminine persona who performs typically masculine labor appears frequently in medieval Latin and vernacular allegorical writings. In this regard, the *Roman de Silence*, written by Heldris de Cornüalle in the second half of the thirteenth century,[4] represents an unusual case, for in it Nature's labor is described in explicitly feminine terms. This transformation of the figure of Nature reflects an

1 In his *Commentarium in Somnium Scipionis*, Macrobius characterizes Nature as craftsman or *artifex* (I.vi.63.112). For earlier uses of the term in relation to nature which stop short of personification, see F. Solmsen, "Nature as Craftsman in Greek Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 24 (1963), pp. 473–96.

2 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 5.4, cited in George D. Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 4.

3 Aristotle, *Historia Animalium (On the Generation of Animals)*, tr. A.L. Peck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 729 A 25–34. For complete descriptions of the Aristotelian view of conception and the competing Galenic view, see A. Preus, "Science and Philosophy in Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 3 (1970), pp. 1–52 and the same author's "Galen's Criticism of Aristotle's Conception Theory," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 10 (1977), pp. 65–85. For an account of the dominance of the Aristotelian view in the Middle Ages, see M. Anthony Hewson, *Giles of Rome and the Medieval Theory of Conception* (London, 1975), especially chapters 3 and 6.

4 Dated by Lewis Thorpe in his edition of the *Roman de Silence* (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1972), p. 1. Thorpe's work, for many years the only available text of the poem, was originally updated by Félix Lecoy's editorial emendations ("*Le Roman de Silence* d'Heldris de Cornüalle," *Romania*, 99 (1978), pp. 109–25) and has been more recently modified by Sarah Roche-Mahdi in her edition accompanied by a translation: *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance* (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992).

unusual perspective on human reproduction and, more generally, on gender roles. Here, Nature's forge is transformed into an oven where, instead of forcibly shaping matter, she prepares a concoction which is moulded and baked.

Nature is first personified in a literary context in the twelfth century by the philosophers of the school of Chartres. Bernardus Silvestris' *Cosmographia* concludes with a description of the male genitals, emphasizing their procreative capacity.[5] Female aspects of human reproduction are not mentioned; Nature is linked exclusively with male sexuality and specifically the masculine capacity to generate offspring and determine their attributes. Nature reappears as a much more fully developed allegorical personification in Alanus de Insulis' *De planctu Naturae*, where her actions are described in more physical terms. Borrowing an image from Macrobius,[6] Alanus calls Nature "monetariam," "the mistress of the mint," who says of herself:

> I, to use a metaphor, striking various coins of things according to the mould of the exemplar and producing copies of my original by fashioning like out of like, gave to my imprints the appearance of the things imaged.[7]

Nature creates bodies to house souls by placing an imprint upon undifferentiated matter. No process of growth or development is implied: rather, the material is cut out and pressed to conform to the shape of the mould. The bodies are implicitly homogeneous, for each is said to exactly resemble the exemplar.

In Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, Nature again appears at her forge, stamping out bodies like coins.

> . . .dedanz sa forge
> torjorz martele, torjorz forge,
> Tourjorz ses pieces renovele
> par generacion novele.
> . . . el leur doune fourmes veroies
> an quoinz de diverses monoies (15979–86)[8]

While the homogeneity of form is more limited here, as Nature stamps "coins of different monies," some degree of homogeneity implicitly remains, for Jean stresses that each coin, impressed with "true form," exactly matches its exemplar.

The *Roman de Silence* is roughly contemporary with Jean's work, and it has been suggested that its author, Heldris, may have (like Jean de Meun) relied upon Alanus' description of Nature.[9] Despite Simon Gaunt's objection that "the metaphors associated with Nature in *Silence* are quite different from those associated with Natura and Nature in the *De planctu* and the *Rose*,"[10] Heldris' depiction of Nature's labor fun-

5 Bernardus Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, ed. Peter Dronke (Leiden: Brill, 1978), p. 154, ll. 169–70.

6 Macrobius, *Commentarium in Somnium Scipionis*, I.vi.63.112, cited in Economou, p. 19.

7 Alanus de Insulis, "De planctu Naturae," in *The Anglo-Latin Satirical Poets and Epigrammatists of the Twelfth Century*, ed. Thomas Wright, 2 vols. (London, 1882; II: 429–522), pp. 469–70, Prosa 4. Trans. James J. Sheridan, *Plaint of Nature* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), p. 146.

8 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1965–70).

9 R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: the *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies*, 70 (1986), p. 84.

10 Simon Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," *Paragraph*, 13 (1990), p. 215 n. 8.

damentally resembles that of Alanus and Jean: Nature uses moulds to imprint form upon matter. At the same time, however, Heldris significantly modifies the preceding literary tradition, for in the *Roman de Silence* Nature creates bodies not by impressing a form upon preexisting matter, such as metal in a forge, but by refining flour and pressing the dough into baking moulds.

Nature's own body is not physically described, as it is in the *De planctu Naturae* and the *Roman de la Rose*, but her voice is heard on several occasions in the *Roman de Silence*, frequently paired with that of her counterpart, Noreture (nurture or environment). This pairing of nature and nurture is derived from a proverbial source which appears in a number of different formulations. In some late proverb collections, the pair appears with nurture in the dominant role. For example, one collection from the sixteenth century states that "Nourriture passe nature"[11] and an anecdote survives from the fifteenth century in which one of the ministers to the young Charles VIII recalls that "le vieux proverbe de jadis disoit que la nourriture passe nature" (I: 269). However, it seems likely that his reference to the "vieux proverbe de jadis" may have been ironic, for a number of earlier proverb collections state the opposite, or at least imply a more equivocal relation. One flatly states that "Nature passe nurture" (II: 479); another, from the thirteenth century, reads "Nature passe nourriture / Et nourriture survainc nature" (II: 352). The twelfth-century "Proverbes au vilain" claims that

> Nature le houme preve
> Itel cum il le treve,
> Ne ja pur noreture
> Li quers feuls et vilains,
> Ne al plus ne al meins,
> N'en perdra sa nature. (II: 462)[12]

These mutations attest to what has been called "la remarquable plasticité du sens du proverbe chez les médiévaux: un même proverbe est susceptible de toutes sortes d'interprétations."[13] At the same time, Gaunt rightly states that "proverbs suggest that what is said is self-evident, giving the impression of irrefutable consensus" (204). The formulations which most closely predate the *Roman de Silence* and would have provided its proverbial context indicate that while nurture may affect an individual's character, in the end nature must finally manifest itself.

In the *Roman de Silence*, the proverbial interrelation of nature and nurture is literalized as the personified Nature and Noreture debate the fate of the character Silence, born a girl but raised as a boy. The dichotomy of nature and nurture is indirectly alluded to in the opening lines of the poem, within the poet's conventional invective against those ungrateful men (presumably patrons) to whom avarice is both

11 *Le Livre des Proverbes Français*, ed. M. Le Roux de Lincy, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1859), II: 356.

12 The "Proverbes au vilain" must have been popular at the time the *Roman de Silence* was written, for Huot notes that "all six of the manuscripts described by Tobler date from the late 13th [sic] century." Sylvia Huot, "Medieval Readers of the *Roman de la Rose*: The Evidence of Marginal Notations," *Romance Philology*, 43 (1990), p. 409.

13 Claude Buridant, "Les Proverbes et la Prédication au Moyen Age," in *Richesse du Proverbe*, ed. François Suard and Claude Buridant, 2 vols. (Lille: Université de Lille, 1984), I: 44.

"lor dame et lor norice" (l. 40). This allusion foreshadows the dichotomy of Silence's nature, determined by the mother who bears her, and her nurture, shaped by her "norice" (l. 2059), the female relative who raises her in the isolation of the woods. The conflict is emblematized in her name: her father christens her with its masculine form, Scilentiüs, stating that, if her true nature should be discovered, "Nos muerons cest -us en -a, / S'avra a non Scilencia" (ll. 2077–78). There is a play on words in the masculine ending "us" and the word "us" in the sense of usage, or how one is reared. The ending "us" represents what Silence does, her nurture; similarly, the "a" (from *avoir*) represents what she intrinsically possesses, her nature.[14]

The debate between Nature and Noreture begins after Silence has been removed from her home to the woods where she is raised as a boy. Before that time, only the influence of Nature upon Silence is described, as Heldris tells how Silence's body was formed, ascribing to Nature the same role she was assigned in the preceding medieval tradition. Nature's words, "Or voel faire ouvre forcible" (l. 1807), echo the forceful aspect of Nature's traditional work, laboring at her forge. However, the expected image is abruptly inverted as Nature picks up, not a hammer, but a sieve.

> Tolt si com cil qui prent un crible,
> U tamis, u un buletiel,
> Quant faire violt blanc pain e biel,
> . . .
> Si fait Nature, c'est la some,
> Quante faire violt un vallant home (ll. 1808–10; 1825–26)

Heldris describes in minute detail the process of sifting the flour to prepare the loaf, removing the bad elements, or bran, from the good, fine flour. He stresses the separation of these parts, stating that the sifting results in two clearly defined heaps, one used to make noble persons, the other used to make "frapalle" or riff-raff (l. 1834).

Nature's refined material is now "biele et pure" (l. 1865). At this point, the material is referred to using the masculine pronoun ("li matere," l. 1865). However, Nature makes it "encor plus bele" (l. 1867), for she wishes to create a "puciele" (l. 1868); the material is then referred to using the feminine pronoun ("la matere," ll. 1874, 1877).[15] It is subsequently placed in "molles" (l. 1887) which give the material its form. The homogeneity of forms implied in the forging of Alanus' or even Jean's Nature is not present here; on the contrary, Heldris emphasizes the diversity of the forms Nature bestows:

> Molles i a bien .m. milliers
> . . .
> Car s'ele n'eüst forme c'une,
> La samblance estroit si commune
> De tolte gent, c'on ne savroit

[14] Perret similarly suggests that the -us "représente l'usage" and the -a "son identité sexuelle." Michèle Perret, "Travesties et Transsexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine," *Romance Notes*, 25 (1985), p. 335.

[15] Alternatively, the change in pronoun may be due to the apparently random use of picard and francien feminine pronoun forms (subjective *la* or *li*, objective *la* or *le*) noted by Thorpe (51).

Quoi, ne quel non, cascuns avroit.
. . .
[Nature] a formes grans et petites,
Laides, contrefaites, parfites,
. . .
Tant mainte forme i a diverse. (ll. 1887–99)

This corporeal heterogeneity is a more realistic representation of human generation than that found in the twelfth-century allegorists or in the *Rose*. Similarly, Heldris more accurately describes formation of the body as a gradual process, where the child's form continues to develop during the period of gestation.

Heldris' representation of gestation is very different from that espoused by the dominant Aristotelian tradition, which holds that the body is fully formed in miniature at the moment of conception, when the masculine imprint is stamped upon undifferentiated matter (*Historia Animalium* 7.3; 583 B 9–11). The modified view reflects a medical tradition based on experience rather than authority, derived from a history of practical experience of miscarriage and childbirth presided over by women. During the thirteenth century, the practical aspects of prenatal care were administered by women; only later in the fourteenth century did licensed male doctors replace midwives.[16] The association of women with practical medicine is evident in the *Roman de Silence*, for both instances of medical care in the romance are performed by women: Eufemie cures Cador (ll. 589–629) and Cador's female cousin attends as midwife when Eufemie gives birth to Silence (ll. 1789–92). By altering the traditional description of Nature's labor, Heldris not only feminizes the personification but also restores a practical, female perspective on gestation.

The debate between Nature and Noreture is revived near the end of the romance, when Silence, who has successfully passed in society as a man, is sent to capture Merlin. The placement of Nature and Noreture's second debate is significant, for just as the first debate is sandwiched between an account of Eufemie's painful labor (ll. 1775–94) and delivery (ll. 1958–63), so the second appears between Silence's preparation of food to tempt the wild man Merlin (ll. 5987-95) and Merlin's consumption of the food (ll. 6100ff). Heldris' bracketing of the two debates reinforces the equivalence of the processes of giving birth and preparing food, a relation which was already evident in Nature's use of sieves and flour to create human bodies. Silence's act of food preparation is, in a sense, her second birth, for it is by means of this act that she is restored to the female role Nature intended her to have.

Because it is said that Merlin "n'estroit pris, n'ensi, n'ensi . . . Se ne fust par engien de feme" (ll. 5801–03), Silence is sent on what the king, believing Silence to be a man, thinks will be a failed mission. But because she is in fact female, Silence is able to capture Merlin. Significantly, she accomplishes this by offering him food, thus simultaneously restoring herself to the traditionally feminine role of provider and preparer of food. Caroline Walker Bynum calls attention to the importance of the "biological analogy," that "through lactation, woman is the essential food provider and preparer";

16 See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarian Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) for an account of the effect on childbirth practices that resulted from "the professionalization of medicine" (119).

she cites the existence of fourteenth-century cookbooks directed at women as evidence that "everyone agreed that the basic social responsibility for food preparation was woman's."[17] By offering food, Silence simultaneously restores both Merlin and herself to their "natural" states: Silence resumes a traditionally female role and Merlin assumes the place in society that Nature demands he occupy. Paradoxically, however, Merlin's "natural" role is to be within civilization, eating cooked meats rather than the fodder he consumes in the wild. Similarly, Silence's "natural" role is to occupy the place a patriarchal society has designated for women.

A parallel between Merlin and Silence is established as both are said to be "noris en bos" (ll. 6003; 2354 "norri en bois"). This state, "soltive et solitaire" (l. 2154), is potentially dangerous, removed from the civilizing effects of the group. A similar process of resocialization occurs in Chrétien's *Yvain*, as the hermit gradually tames the wild man Yvain has become by offering bread and cooked meat to replace Yvain's raw venison.[18] The woods frequently represent the antithesis of civilization and, more generally, of order. It is therefore not surprising that the Latin word for forest, *silva*, is used in the medieval era to mean "chaos." This realm of silva or chaos, in the woods where the wild man lives, more closely resembles our concept of nature in the modern paradigm of nature and culture. Heldris' Nature is clearly the servant of culture, for in the *Roman de Silence* restoration to one's proper nature means returning to one's role in society: Merlin's "natural" place is back in civilization, Silence's in the socially constructed feminine sphere.

The specific foods Silence uses to lure Merlin are significant, for they are intended to attract Merlin in a particular order, indicating a gradual process of civilization as he is restored to his proper nature. The hermit who advises Silence tells her that Merlin first will be attracted by the scent of cooked and salted meat to replace the "Herbe, rachine" (l. 5932) which are his usual fare. Then he will consume the honey, then the milk, and lastly the wine (ll. 5955–72). Both the meat and honey are substances which animals could be expected to consume, and so are appropriate fare to lure Merlin from his wild state. The milk implies a greater degree of humanity, however, for only young animals drink milk; the only adult animal which consumes milk is man. Finally, the wine renders Merlin most proximate to civilization, for wine is a substance which does not occur naturally: it has to be deliberately made by man.

At this point, Nature and Noreture resume their dialogue, as Noreture admits defeat: "Noreture . . . la place li relenqui. / Et Nature . . . le venqui" (ll. 6088–90). After Merlin returns with Silence to the king's court, he reveals that she is actually a woman. She is stripped of her clothing to verify this, and the last miniature in the only surviving manuscript of the text shows Silence, "a dim white figure" (Thorpe, 8), standing before the king. The miniature is placed at line 6582, immediately after the king has said that Silence has always been a good chevalier, that there has never been a better one. After the illustration, he states "Nos veöns bien que tu iés feme" (l. 6586). Within the terms of the romance, this leads to a happy ending, one in which Silence

[17] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 190.

[18] Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Champion, 1982), ll. 2834ff.

"does not pay for her male accomplishments by having to renounce a normal life in this world."[19] The king rescinds his order that women may not inherit property, so that Silence can inherit her father's lands after all; the king even chooses her to be his new queen.

Despite this apparent victory of Silence,[20] more recent readers have suggested that the work is profoundly misogynistic.[21] The poem certainly includes misogynistic passages, and the last manuscript illumination shows Silence in a position of pathetic vulnerability when she is displayed to the court – and to the reader – in her naked, natural state, stripped of all trappings of her nurture, no longer able to defend herself as she did when she had a masculine identity. Despite the misogyny that can be found generally in the *Roman de Silence* and specifically in Heldris' dichotomy of nature and nurture, however, the fact remains that his personification of Nature is far more "feminine" than that found in the preceding literary tradition, showing her engaged in a conventionally feminine task, making bread rather than hammering metal. Why does Heldris present a feminized version of Nature's labor? An illuminating example of the feminization of a characteristically masculine metaphor can be found in figurative descriptions of the writer's task. Many medieval writers – perhaps most memorably, Chrétien – use the sowing of seed as a metaphor for that task, the dissemination of knowledge. Female writers are obliged to find another metaphor: for example, in *Lavision-Christine*, Christine de Pizan likens the labor required to produce books to the labor of childbirth.[22] The focus is shifted from seed to womb, from conception to gestation, just as in the *Roman de Silence* Nature's labor is not the quick stamp of conception but the gradual moulding and baking of gestation.

In this context, it may be worth reconsidering the suggestion, first made by Kathleen Brahney (61), that Heldris may have been a female writer, disguised under a man's name just as the tale's heroine is disguised in men's clothes. "Maistres Heldris" appears to be a pseudonym, perhaps selected from Geoffrey of Monmouth due to the name's connection with Cornwall.[23] Louis Thorpe stresses some unusual features of Heldris' approach:

> Medical matters interest Heldris considerably, witness the description of Eufemie's cure . . . and the details given of the pains of childbirth. . . . He has what is surely a practical knowledge of bread-making . . . and of the preparation of food over a camp fire. . . . Finally he is intimately acquainted with the life led by wandering jongleurs. (13–14)

19 Joan M. Ferrante, "Male Fantasy and Female Reality in Courtly Literature," *Women's Studies*, 2 (1984), p. 94.

20 The ending "in terms of the romance . . . is a victory." Kathleen J. Brahney, "When Silence Was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*," in *The Spirit of the Court*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1985), p. 60.

21 Gaunt, 203; Peter L. Allen, "The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing, and *Le Roman de Silence*," in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989), p. 101.

22 Christine de Pizan, *Lavision-Christine*, ed. Mary Louis Towner (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1932), pp. 163–64. On Christine's feminization of masculine metaphors of poetic production, see Sylvia J. Huot, "Seduction and Sublimation: Christine de Pizan, Jean de Meun, and Dante," *Romance Notes*, 25 (1985), pp. 361–73.

23 Heinrich Gelzer, "Der Silenceroman von Heldris de Cornüalle," *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 47 (1927), pp. 88–99; cited in Roche-Mahdi, p. ix.

Of course, we will almost certainly never be able to say definitively whether Heldris was female; but a number of indications within the text at least raise the possibility. The misogyny undoubtedly present in the work is no evidence against female authorship, for misogyny was and is not unique to men. If Heldris was indeed a woman, she may not be an ancestress we can comfortably claim as our own.