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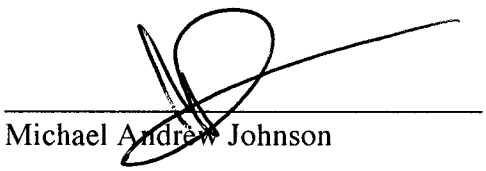


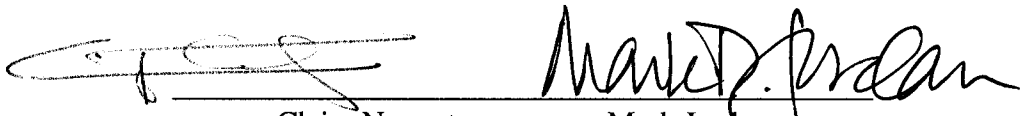
Michael Andrew Johnson

The Letter Killeth
Rhetoric of Sodomy in *De Planctu Naturae*, *Roman de la Rose* and *Roman de Silence*

By

Michael Andrew Johnson
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of French and Italian



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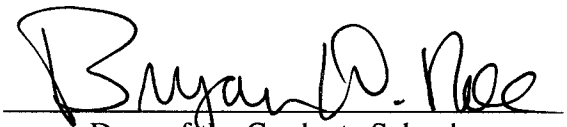

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Michael Andrew Johnson
B.A., The American University of Paris, 1998

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An abstract of a dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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2005

Abstract

This dissertation examines the figure of the sodomitic body in relationship to allegorical meaning, focusing on three allegorical works from the late twelfth to the late thirteenth centuries: *De planctu Naturae*, the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Roman de Silence*.

In the production of allegorical meaning, the body is posited as the material basis or grounding of an order of signs. Because matter was gendered feminine in medieval thought, the body on which allegory is grounded was always a female body. Moreover, this grounding — conceived of as the phallic imprint of ideal form onto passive formless matter — was often figured in terms of sexual violence.

This same body was also required to function anagogically ("upward pointing"), that is, it had to lead the reader to contemplation of God. Its anagogical function was based on a male body insofar as "man" was thought of as "created in God's image."

The sodomite arises in these works as a threatening figure, both implicitly and explicitly, for dysfunction in allegorical signification — that is, for allegories that are improperly grounded or allegories whose anagogical function is short-circuited.

I suggest that the sodomitic body becomes a figure for allegorical dysfunction (both for misreading and miswriting) because the practice of sodomy was construed paradoxically both as a denial of the body, to the extent that the sodomite refuses the teleology of reproduction, and as insidiously corporeal, to the extent that the sodomite makes corporeal pleasure an end in itself. The sodomitic body thus becomes a figure for two distinct modes of allegorical dysfunction, which I call ungroundedness and interruption.

The paradoxical and logically impossible duality of the sodomitic body, I argue, mirrors the duality of allegory (grounded yet also upward pointing), a duality that provoked considerable anxiety in medieval allegorical exegetes and poets. My interpretations of these works demonstrate that any attempt to dispense with pagan representations of sodomy by reading it as a figure for a nobler truth, turns it into a figure for allegorical reading — a mirror which, instead of evacuating sodomy, reflects the "sodomitic" quality of allegorical reading back onto itself.

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Acknowledgements

Writing about the sodomitic body can be as much fun as inhabiting one. It took four years of struggle with paralyzing perfectionism to learn this lesson, so I will first thank my dissertation for patiently training me to enjoy writing and for teaching me new ways to live and breathe in this body of mine.

I am reminded almost every day of how lucky I am for having been able to study with such a stellar group of scholars in Emory's French and Comparative Literature departments. Elissa Marder taught me the profession so honestly and introduced me to a new Freud. Without her advice and unfailing support, I would not have made it this far. Geoffrey Bennington, I will never forget, so patiently taught me during my oral exams that there is a way to speak in plain language about deconstruction, a lesson that has stayed with me during the process of writing this dissertation. Mark Jordan, *frater carissime*, without his work none of these questions could have been asked in the first place. Finally, Claire Nouvet, whose sincere rigor and beautifully crafted, incindiary readings of Ovid and Jean de Meun have forever charred me with their intensity. Her contribution to this project has been so profound, I think of Claire as its co-author.

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Contents

Introduction
The Letter Killeth

A frank and open exposition of herself is distasteful to Nature, who, just as she has withheld an understanding of herself from the uncouth senses of man by enveloping herself in variegated garments, has also desired to have her secrets handled by more prudent individuals through fabulous narratives ... in truth, divinities always have preferred to be known in the fashion assigned to them by ancient popular tradition, which made images of beings that had no physical form, represented them as of different ages though they were subject neither to growth nor decay, and gave them clothes and ornaments *though they had no bodies.*

Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*

Sex and Allegorical Meaning

Allegorical writing and interpretation dominate, and indeed could be said to characterize the very specificity of, medieval culture. Most critical accounts of allegory describe it as a response to an unassimilable alterity of some sort. Christian allegory arises in response both to the alterity of pagan writing and philosophy and to the alterity of an ever more menacing material world perceived as sinful[1]. Allegory is often described as endeavoring to imprint unmeaning "formless" material alterity with the spiritual or ideal "form" of meaning. As Macrobius suggests, allegory is thought to imprint form onto the formless, to make speakable the unspeakable, and *to clothe the bodiless.* It is especially the image of clothing a bodiless body, and a feminized one at that (Nature is always represented as a woman), that dominates the metaphorical language used to describe the practice of allegorical writing and interpretation in the Middle Ages. Moreover, the act of imprinting form onto formless matter was both sexualized and

[1] At the same time, allegory arises in response to the absolute alterity of God, or to the ideal realm. It is a writing of and across the rift between the material and the ideal, as Gordon Teskey suggests.

predicated on the dividing line of sexual difference. In his seminal study of allegory, *Allegory and Violence*, Gordon Teskey best summarizes this operation:

> The problem of how form participates in matter is transferred onto the alien context of gender, where it can appear to be solved under the image of sexual congress. Consequently, sexual relations in allegory are invested with metaphysical significance and metaphysical problems are "solved" in imaginary, sexual terms. [...] The receptacle is designated literally as "that which receives from below," the *hypodoche* [...] Matter is made pregnant with form by assuming a "subject" (*sub-iectum* "cast down") position with respect to the male [...] What is important is that both words indicate matter as assuming the proper position for the wife in intercourse [...] Considered as the basis of a social practice, allegory categorizes bodies as the material basis of an order of signs.[2] (16)

Thus the body comes to be the ground (for Gordon, "the material basis") for allegorically constructed meaning. What's more, this "grounding" of meaning on the body — deemed the "foundation" of the literal-corporeal in medieval terms — is gendered and then sexualized. For this reason, the allegorical body is a regulated one: the maintenance of a conflation of passive/active with female/male must be carefully guarded.

But what happens when allegorical meaning is grounded on a passive male body, such as in Ovid's telling of the myth of Ganymede? Or when these targeted bodies resist allegorical appropriation (what Teskey calls allegory's "project of capture"), when they insist on remaining, simply, bodies? If allegorical meaning is grounded on a body that must be named in order for allegorical meaning to be grounded in the first place, what should allegory do with those unnamable bodies, with those who practice the "unmentionable vice," the *monstrum nefandum* (the unspeakable monstrosity) of sodomy? Finally, if allegory invests sex with metaphysical significance while at the same

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[2] Teskey, Gordon. *Allegory and Violence.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1996): p. 16.

time solving metaphysical problems in sexual terms, can it still operate as it must when the allegorical exegete or poet encounters alternate discourses on sex, such as the euphemistic linguistic codes of courtly love or the hushed discourse of church penitentials, discourses that refuse to name the sexual body?

These are the questions that have shaped and defined the project of this dissertation. *The Letter Killeth* looks to a historical moment, beginning in the twelfth century, during which the reigning notion of the linguistic sign was in the process of being dramatically unsettled,[3] a shift that greatly affected the status and understanding of allegory. Alongside the shift in linguistic theories, this period also saw a shift in attitudes towards sex — in the process of becoming ever more regulatory — a shift perhaps exemplified by the Third Lateran Council (1179), in which the first ever fully institutional conciliar sanctions against same-sex eroticism were pronounced[4]. These two related shifts, effects perhaps of a broader epistemic shift in the twelfth century, we might suggest, are both also linked to yet another shift in the conception and status of the body's relationship to allegorical meaning.

This dissertation thus studies allegorical works written in the wake of this cultural-epistemic shift, works that span the period from the late twelfth to the late thirteenth centuries. I study first Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae*, a theological allegory in prosimetry (alternating verse and prose) written some time between 1160 and 1180. Alan's main conceit in *De planctu* is to personify nature in such a way that she

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[3] For a thorough treatment of this shift in relationship to *Roman de la Rose*, see Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Fortune's Faces: The* Roman de la Rose *and the Poetics of Contingency.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. Particularly the chapter entitled "*Inventio Linguae:* The Language of Contingency."

[4] Described in John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

speaks as the voice of procreative orthodoxy, a personification that greatly influenced the authors of the other two works studied in this dissertation, the *Roman de Silence* and the *Roman de la Rose*. Both of these paraphrase lines from *De planctu* in a number of places and are concerned with the same questions of natural versus unnatural sexuality, language and the body, and the encounter of allegory with other modes of truth telling. Formally, the *Roman de Silence* and the *Roman de la Rose* are quite different from *De planctu*, since both are verse romances from the late thirteenth century written in the vernacular. But for vernacular romances, they are unusually conversant with Latin scholarly discourse, and contain sophisticated debates on the nature of language, on nominalism, and on the limits between the body and language. The allegory of nature (Lady Nature) makes an appearance and speaks in language "clothed in figures" in each of these works. Given allegory's determined relationship to nature (as both materiality and essence), I take the presence of an allegorizing and allegorized Lady Nature to be a self-reflexive inscription of these works' own allegorical projects. The self-reflexively allegorical dimension to these works creates lopsided mirroring effects that challenge the univocal and logocentric quality of allegorical meaning. Perhaps for this reason, each of them reflects extensively on the relationship between allegorical signification and the body. As we will see, these allegories are subtended by queer bodies, bodies characterized by their resistance to literal denomination and to figuration, bodies that impose an intractable silence on the allegorical reader who brushes against them.

All the same, these works perform otherwise heteronormative allegorical revelations in which the production of allegorical meaning is compared to a kind of stripping bare —the reader likened to a masculine subject and the veils of allegorical

figures likened to a woman's clothing — that leads ultimately to a kind of sexual violence. Indeed, these three works all perform epistemological strip shows of sorts. Alan of Lille's Lady Nature is described by way of her dress. It is removed layer by layer all the way down to her underwear, but this dress is found to be violently torn. The main protagonist of the *Roman de Silence* is a woman dressed in masculine clothing who is finally stripped bare — literally ! — at the end of the narrative. And in the *Roman de la Rose* the object of desire, and knowledge, is the rose whose layers of defense are progressively removed until the Lover finally lifts the curtain to reveal the "relics" inside the sanctuary and finally possesses the rose "par grant joliveté" (with great delight), violently mixing his seed with the rose's. All three of these allegories perform heterosexual violence, enacting sexualized scenarios of "undressing" the Truth that figure the reader as masculine and that ground the production of allegorical meaning on a female body.

Perhaps because these works sexualize allegory and allegorize sex in such an overtly and violently heterosexual manner (perhaps parodically so, but violent nonetheless), the specter of sodomy arises as a threatening figure, both implicitly and explicitly, for dysfunction in allegorical signification — that is, for allegories that are improperly grounded or allegories that are short-circuited, prevented from referring to divine Truth. We must then ask why sodomy *in particular* arises as the privileged figure for representing the dangers of allegorical mis-reading (or mis-writing). What particular qualities of the sodomitic body interrupt the creation of allegorical meaning? In formulating the question this way, we can ask more broadly, how might these invocations of sodomy inflect our understanding of medieval allegory, or allegory in general?

I suggest that sodomy becomes a figure for misreading because the body of the sodomite, as construed by theological and scholarly discourse, was a logical impossibility. Theological construals of sodomy during this period, and for long afterwards, were deeply contradictory in regards to their conception of the body. Sodomites were thought to deny the body insofar as they refused the teleology of reproduction and at the same time they were thought to revel dangerously in the body insofar as they made corporeal pleasure an end in itself. These theological designations construed the practice of sodomy paradoxically as both anti-corporeal and hyper-corporeal. This ambivalence, Mark Jordan suggests, stems back to, "the essential contradiction in traditional readings of *Romans 1*[5] [...] On the one hand, Paul is condemning an idolatry that makes gods out of created bodies. On the other hand, he condemns it as against nature. [...] How can you simultaneously deny and divinize created bodies?"[6]" Idolatry is by definition the sin of turning an object or body from praise of God, to its own end. Sodomy's particular idolatry takes sexual pleasure as an end in itself. Sexual pleasure should be a means to the end of regeneration, a lesser

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[5] I quote the Pauline passage at length because the association of sodomy with idolatry is made explicit here. Romans 1:21-26. Dicentes enim se esse sapientes stulti facti sunt et mutaverunt gloriam incorruptibilis Dei in similitudinem imaginis corruptibilis hominis et volucrum et quadrupedum et serpentium propter quod tradidit illos Deus in desideria cordis eorum in inmunditiam ut contumeliis adficiant corpora sua in semet ipsis qui commutaverunt veritatem Dei in mendacio et coluerunt et servierunt creaturae potius quam creatori qui est benedictus in saecula amen propterea tradidit illos Deus in passiones ignominiae nam feminae eorum inmutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam [While claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of an image of mortal man or of birds or of four-legged animals or of snakes. Therefore, God handed them over to impurity through the lusts of their hearts for the mutual degradation of their bodies. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. Therefore, God handed them over to degrading passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males and thus received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity]

[6] Quotation from a personal email correspondence with Mark Jordan.

emulation of divine generation. With sodomy, the body that should emulate God, becomes an end in itself. It is thus *too much of a body* because its plenitude interrupts man's anagogical emulation of God. At the same time sodomy as the 'sin against nature' was thought to deny the body to the extent that it denies the teleology of reproduction. The body of the sodomite, conceived as sinning "against (human) nature," sins thus against corporeal nature. It is thus also *not enough of a body* because it refuses to ground human nature in the (paradoxically animal) body. So one version of the sodomitic body is a figure for interruption (*idolatria, metalepsis*) in the human-divine analogy, while the other is a figure for the ungroundedness (*peccatum contra naturam, translatio*) of the sodomite's human nature.

These two bodies — or rather, two aspects of this impossible body — characterize the way in which sodomy becomes a figure for allegorical mis-reading. The sodomitic body comes in fact to figure two kinds of dysfunction in allegory, which I will call interruption and ungroundedness.

First, the sodomite is a figure for interruption in the sequence by which allegory is supposed to lead the reader to divine Truth. The allegorical discipline of reading requires the reader to move beyond a text's literal meaning to discover its figurative sense through a process likened to unveiling. Ultimately, the figurative sense should reveal allegorical truth. But if either the literal or the figurative dimension becomes an end in itself, language's capacity to reveal truth will short-circuit. Sodomy thus appears as a figure for interruption of allegory's anagogical ("upward pointing") function either when the literal fails to give way to figurative meaning or when figuration becomes an end in itself (as

when poetic artifices are used only for the sake of pleasure). This rupture with the teleology of allegorical meaning functions analogously to idolatry.

Second, the sodomite is a figure for allegories that are either ungrounded or improperly grounded, that is, allegories in which the literal meaning — likened both to a body and to the foundation of a building — is either absent, or not properly literal. Medieval exegetes often stressed the importance of proper, literal, signification as the foundation for allegorical meaning. For example, the Christian reader is supposed to believe in the story of Melchizedech (Gen. 14:18-20) as historical fact before the story of his priesthood can be allowed to foreshadow that of Christ. In other words, you cannot ground allegorical meaning on a body that is already a figure; it must first signify proper and literally as a body. The body of the sodomite, because it denies its proper meaning in denying reproduction, cannot signify literally. It is an improper figure, a *translatio corporis*, ungrounded humanity. The human-divine emulation theory cannot work when humanness itself is not properly grounded, when those qualities that are thought to be proper to the term "human" are transferred (*translatio*) elsewhere. Paradoxically we have to be animal-like in order to ground the process by which we can emulate God and thus become unlike animals. Equally paradoxical, while humanity itself is grounded on the proper meaning of "man" (generative, etc.) and not "woman," grounding itself, cannot be thought in its materiality separately from the female body. The masculinity of this grounding is supposedly necessary in order for the emulation of God's image to function; thus it is already a figure: humanity is grounded on a figure.

For a particularly pregnant example of how these two modes of sodomitic dysfunction — interruption and ungroundedness — haunted the medieval imagination,

we can look to Paul of Hungary's *Summa of Penance*. In denouncing the denaturing effects of sodomy, he describes the properties of the waters of Sodom and Gomorrah: a piece of iron floats to the surface of the water while a feather sinks to the bottom. What is proper to iron is to sink, and what is proper to feathers is to float; but mere proximity to the burnt-out city of Sodom causes the iron and feathers to betray their proper meaning. Paul's choice of light/heavy for the properties violated by sodomitic abuse of the proper is rhetorically powerful, since the light/heavy opposition references the opposition between up and down, between the heavens and the earth. To ignore the hierarchy of up and down is essentially to violate the fundamental order of being. A feather that betrays its properties and sinks instead of floating cannot function as a "feather" in an allegory, since the correspondences upon which allegorical figuration is grounded require the qualities of the literal referent to be precise and definable. For the sodomite to ignore the groundedness of the human in reproductive teleology is to violate the order of being and to undermine any possibility of functioning as the ground for allegorical meaning. The body of the sodomite is already a figure and hence ungrounds the literal foundation of allegoresis.

On the shore of the waters of Sodom we also find trees bearing apples that are appealing to look at, but that turn out to be filled with ashes or disappear or explode upon being touched. Here, the apple's beauty has become an end in itself. An apple's beauty should be the cause for it to be eaten, and being eaten, the final effect. If beauty is taken as an end in itself, then the apple's purpose, its teleology, is ignored. The beautiful but inedible apples of Sodom are the image of cause mistaken for effect. Correspondingly, the sodomite mistakes *sexual pleasure* for an end in itself, ignoring the teleology of

reproduction. This body, in its plenitude, refuses to function as a divine index. It is like the apple, so wrapped up in its own beauty that it refuses to function as nourishment and thus interrupts the teleology of apple-nourishment.[7]

Thus the body of the sodomite as a figure for allegorical dysfunction is in fact rather complex in that it simultaneously embodies two *different* anxieties about the efficacity of allegorical meaning. First, the anxiety regarding the grounding of humanity in our animal-corporeal nature, an anxiety regarding the newly scientific understanding of nature as embodying a set of laws that apply equally to humans and animals. And second, the anxiety regarding the ultra-human (as in, that which exceeds the human) in our bodies, which being made "in the image of God's divine image," must then function as an index of his ineffable beauty and glory. Allegory would not produce as many risky sticky-spots if it were grounded, say, on the body of a cat, because a cat's feline-ness, its proper meaning will always remain the same. But since cats were not made in the image of God, the feline body cannot function as the analogue for allegory's marriage of form and matter, of material and ideal.

Thus the sodomite comes rather efficiently to embody two related, but importantly distinct, anxieties regarding the body. It is perhaps the contradiction in Paul's account of the *peccatum contra naturam*, as outlined by Mark Jordan, that made it convenient for medieval readers to target the body of the sodomite as a threat in these two so very precise ways. But as I show in this dissertation, while these effects (interruption/ungroundedness) are specifically associated with the logically impossible sodomitic body, they are in fact at work in any allegory that is conscious of its own

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[7] And Paul's is only one example of what might be called the physics of Sodom or Sodomy. Similar facts are asserted by Albert or Bernardino of Siena.

modes of production, any allegory that is concerned with the status of the metaphorical bodies upon which its meaning is grounded. The sodomitic body first points to the fact that all allegory is grounded on an abyss, on a lack of a body, as it were. Macrobius suggests as much. And second, it reveals allegory to be always potentially idolatrous, always potentially referring only to itself. The sodomitic body ultimately reveals: 1) The ungroundedness of the literal (an instability that is always there), which also points to the fact that the body can never be fully accessed, it is always already inscribed figurally. That is to say, the body is never quite a literal body; it is always already inscribed in language and is thus also always possibly a figure or inscribed in figural thinking. It also reveals 2) The danger that *all* reading, all pleasure, (and especially reading pleasure), can always potentially become an end in itself. The body in its emulation of God might interrupt that very emulation in its plenitude.

With allegory it was a matter of doctrine that allegorical meaning was paradoxically both of the body and at the same time transcendent of the body. As a recognized practice of Christian exegesis, allegory was at the same time both corporeal and incorporeal. Sodomy, on the other hand, was at the same time anti-corporeal and hyper-corporeal because of a tenacious old contradiction in Pauline theology. The theological contradiction (it's too bodily, it's not bodily enough) seems in many ways to mirror allegory's primary tenet (it's bodily, it's not bodily) in that both paradoxically necessitate the denial of the body while also giving the body a foundational role. Sodomy becomes a figure both for allegories that fail to move beyond the literal-corporeal meaning and for allegories that deny the literal-corporeal meaning. This makes the

sodomitic body into a kind of exaggerated mirror of (normative) allegory, its bad mirror as it were.

In effect, the body of the sodomite becomes a mirror for the desire of the allegorist who wishes to evacuate the threatening sexual body from the text. The readings put forward in this dissertation demonstrate that the desire of the allegorist to "make sex mean," that is to take an abject sexual referent and to try to ennoble it through figuration as a higher Christian truth, will always mirror that desire back onto him.

Chapter One, "Alan of Lille's Rhetoric of Sodomy," first sketches out the sex-grammar metaphors used in *De planctu Naturae* as they fit broadly into the medieval exegetical tradition, focusing primarily on the relationship between literal and figurative meaning within allegorical meaning production. The appearance of a sodomitic body — here, that of Ganymede — gives rise to an extended debate on proper reading method. *De planctu Naturae* seems to ask: what specific allegorical message would the rape of Ganymede hold for Christian readers of Ovid? The desire to read sodomy as a figure requires the reader to target a point of identification. But the only figure with which the Christian allegorical reader can identify is Jupiter, that is, a sodomite. The story of Ganymede, in other words, brings the reader closer to Jupiter and implicitly closer to same-sex desire. I argue, through this reading of Ganymede's body, that the interpretation of sodomy as a figure can never succeed in pointing to a truth beyond the mechanism of interpretation itself.

Chapter Two, "Naked Truth," examines the metaphor of clothing and unclothing the female body in masculine garb, used to figure the process of textual exegesis in the *Roman de Silence*. The narrator builds a theory of fiction — unmistakably a citation of

De planctu Naturae — around the body of the story's protagonist, Silence, who is described as "a man who is a woman beneath the masculine clothes." The veiling metaphor, I argue, as a traditional figure for deferral, suggests we read the presentation of biological sex (on analogy with Scriptural Truth) as endlessly deferred. I look closely at two instances of corporeal revelation and ask: what is it that gets revealed? What kind of body is put on display during these critical moments of revelation? What promises to be a revelation of the "naked truth," finally proves to be the revelation of *scripted* flesh. I engage in an extended close reading of the word *ensegne* in an effort to describe how this revelation of the naked body as always already scripted, functions in the *Roman de Silence.*

Chapter Three, "Clothing Unspeakable Monstrosities," returns to *De planctu Naturae* in order to examine Lady Nature's use of tropes of unspeakability in reference to sex and to the sexual body. Alan's Lady Nature explains her use of grammatical metaphor as a way to clothe "monsters of vice" with beautiful words and fine rhetoric. She chooses to "gild things immodest with the golden trappings of modest words and to clothe them with the varied colors of graceful diction." Euphemism, here, is justified on the grounds that her message will not reach the ears of her reader if she were to speak denotatively. Paradoxically then, to put the supposed hideousness of sodomy on display would prevent the message of its hideousness from reaching the ear of the reader. It is the sin whose ugliness prevents it from being seen as ugly. Another way to put it is, sodomy is the sin that cannot be seen, that could be described as blinding. The contradiction of Nature, who should be the condition of all denotative showing, but who speaks using the

artifices of euphemism belies the contradiction at the heart of any discourse that attempts to qualify certain sexual acts as unnatural.

Chapter Four, "Deviant Reading in the *Roman de la Rose*," examines the debate between Lady Reason and the Lover in Jean de Meun's section of the romance. The debate opposes two linguistic practices that arise in response to problems posed by the body: euphemism and allegory. As in *De planctu Naturae*, we will see the staging of a similar project of evacuating the sexual referent through allegorical operations. Lady Reason tries to ennoble the shameful, sodomitic referent (in this case testicles) by claiming that its literal meaning is in fact noble to begin with. Reason comes to embody the voice of orthodox allegorical reading method, but her insistence on the already-noble quality of the literal referent, makes us question the status of any so-called "literal" referent in allegorical writing. These testicles, I argue, come in the end to signify the failure of allegorical meaning to provide an adequate teleological path from the testicles to God. The desire to make sex "mean," to make it signify within a system ends up mirroring that very desire back to the allegorist.

Chapter 1
Alan of Lille's Rhetoric of Sodomy

Introduction: Sodomy and the Body-Language Metaphor

Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae* (*The Plaint of Nature*) is a notoriously difficult text. The work's English translator Alan Sheridan, who has translated much of Alan's other work, describes the Latin of *De planctu Naturae* as the most difficult he has ever encountered, "[t]hroughout most of the work there are two layers of meaning and in a number of places there are three."[1] Sheridan's complaint refers specifically to the famous sex-grammar metaphors peppered throughout Alan's prose, metaphors that refer to masturbation as a reflexive verb, to bisexuality as a heteroclite noun, and to copulation between a man and a woman as a subject-verb-predicate construction, just to name a few examples. The sex-grammar metaphors in *De planctu Naturae* have been treated in a number of studies[2]. In the third chapter of this dissertation, I will discuss the sex-grammar metaphors specifically as a euphemistic mode of reference that disrupts allegory. What I would like to do in this chapter is to use the body-language comparison, implicit to the sex-grammar metaphor, as a starting point. The comparison of a grammatical construction to a sexual act assumes a point of similarity between language and the body. Through the figure of the sodomite, this chapter will examine at least two of the ways that language is compared to the body. It is important to underscore the centrality of the language-body metaphor to the argument of *De planctu Naturae*, because it is the comparison of language to the body that enables Alan to refer to same-

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1 The discussion appears in the foreword to his English translation of *De planctu Naturae*.

2 Ziokolki treats the sex-grammar metaphor most exhaustively. See also Jordan, Shibanoff, Scanlon, Leupin, Epps, Ahern, and Bloch.

sex desire as an abuse of both grammatical and rhetorical norms. We see in this comparison the extent to which Alan's conception of same-sex desire was in fact shaped by the exegetical tradition. He saw a parallel in the rhetorical conception of the relation between the literal and the figurative and the theological conception of same-sex desire. Same-sex desire for Alan is a figure for exegetical interruptions and short-circuits in the functioning of literal and figurative meaning. These interruptions and short-circuits have a specificity to them, which I examine through readings of two key moments in *De planctu Naturae* when same-sex desire arises as an exegetical problem.

Thus the first section provides some necessary background information about the medieval exegetical tradition, explaining primarily how Christian medieval exegesis required literal and figurative meaning to function. In the second section I look at sodomy first as an abuse of the literal, as the literal was understood to function, and second as an abuse of the figurative, as the figurative was understood to function. Finally, in the third section of the chapter, I examine a passage in *De planctu Naturae* where the pagan representation of same-sex desire — in this case Ovid's telling of the rape of Ganymede — gives rise to speculation about the power of exegesis to read same-sex desire as a figure for a nobler Christian truth.

Drawing the Line between Grammar and Rhetoric

Thus it is crucial to establish the textual logic (and philosophical impetus) behind the body-language metaphor, the same textual logic that makes it possible for Alan to conflate the laws of grammar with the laws of nature. Indeed, Alan's sex–grammar metaphor assumes thorough knowledge of the exegetical tradition, a field that produced a

number of debates concerning the relationship of grammar to rhetoric, and of both grammar and rhetoric to truth.

While a modern reader might divide grammar and rhetoric at the line between the literal and figurative, medieval writers found the line between the literal and the figurative a difficult one to draw. Many grammar manuals written in the Middle Ages include sections on figurative uses of language, in fact. The most widely circulated grammar manual, Donatus' *Ars Grammatica*, included a section on figurative language that was so popular it circulated as a separate work under the title *Barbarismus*.[3]

Such figurative uses of language were thought to effect either a transfer (*translatio*) or a turn away from (*tropus*) proper meaning. A *translatio* or *tropus* could either be classified a figure of speech (*figura*) or a grammatical error (*vitium*), depending on one's interpretation. Now, the question of how to determine whether a *translatio* is a grammatical error or a successful figure is a tortured one. It becomes an error on the grounds that it is an abuse of the proper while a successful figure, although an abuse of the proper all the same, is justified on the grounds of its utility and truth-value. If a *translatio* attains the status of *figura* it becomes the concern of rhetoricians, but if it fails and falls into the category of *vitium* it is the concern of grammarians. Grammarians are concerned with the proper (proper meaning/the properties of a part of speech) while rhetoricians are more concerned with questions of use-value — to what end is this figure being used? — and truth-value — is there a deeper truth behind the untruth at the surface of the *translatio*? But since he must make a determination based on the concerns of the rhetorician before a *translatio* can become a figure, the grammarian is always already a

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[3] Ziolkowski, p. 16. See also Holtz, *Donat et la tradition de l'enseignement grammatical: étude sur l'*Ars Donati *et sa diffiusion (IVe-IXe siècle) et édition critique*

rhetorician[4] and the question of the proper is always inflected, in advance, with the question of use-value and truth-value. Thus, the margin between grammar and rhetoric was a volatile space. The instability of the relation between grammar and rhetoric calls for arbitration: the grammarian must decide on the truth-value of a figure. It is a problem that can only be solved with a certain arbitrary force. Figures cannot function as figures without having been declared so. The grammarian becomes invested with this power of arbitration, rendering even the most denotative mode of language a question of interpretation.

Thus, whether a transfer of meaning can count as a grammatical error or a figure is a question of interpretation. This gives a great deal of weight to the act of interpretation and makes all uses of figurative language, even those that are justified, potentially suspicious. Only proper uses of language — in other words literal, non-figurative, non-catachretic modes of reference — would seem to guarantee unequivocal truth. But as we know from Henri De Lubac's monumental study of medieval exegesis, the literal mode of reference, comfortingly straightforward as it might have been, was considered dangerous if mistaken for an end unto itself:

> Under the name "letter," in a language that Saint Paul had fixed, the Christian therefore rejects and ought to reject not every "literal sense," but, once again, the "mere letter," or the "naked history," the letter whose keeping would equivalently be the rejection of the larger meaning [...] If it is a question of practice, the letter that is rejected is that of carnal observances" (55).

De Lubac demonstrates in fact that the letter would have been much more problematic than the figure in the medieval exegetical tradition, because the letter was associated with

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[4] In practice, grammarians were also rhetoricians and dialecticians, etc. but the schema I set up here is a representation of how the medieval commentators imagined the division of labor in the *trivium* to function. See Roos, *Le Trivium à l'université au XIIe siècle,* on the division of labor in the trivium.

the body of Christ, which if kept at the level of the "mere letter" would come to index nothing more than mere body. As such, the literal dimension of a text would reference materiality, embodiment, and a gendered (feminine) embodiment at that. De Lubac continues:

> Another sort of comparison is more expressive. [...] Origen had said of Christ: "For though he bore the worthless shape of a slave, nevertheless the fullness of divinity was dwelling within him." In invoking the fragility, weakness, and humility of the flesh with which the Word is clothed, in commenting on Saint Paul's dictum: "forma servi," without sugarcoating it, the Christian tradition professes no contempt for the humanity of the Savior; nor does it minimize its essential role: it merely admires the ingenuity of the divine condescension. "For the humble Christ is our milk; the God like unto God is our food; the milk nourishes, the food feeds." Now there is here something more than a comparison; "letter" and "flesh" are not only alike in that they are both likened to a "veil"; for, according to Scripture itself, one can say that "the Word of God has been incarnated in two ways," since at bottom it is one and the same unique Word of God who descends into the letter of Scripture and into the flesh of our humanity, into this "weak and unbeautiful" flesh, to hide itself there and to manifest itself there all together (60-1).

Hence the beauty of the letter, in Scriptural exegesis, is that it participates in the mystery of the Incarnation. But if Scripture were to fall into the wrong hands and interpretation were to remain at the "mere letter," or the "naked history," or if the text in question were, say, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the reader might be capable of producing nothing more than mere flesh, body without spirit.

Therefore, the allegorical referent must signify properly on the literal register in a first step on the way to figurative signification. It must first be posited as a referent that can be named and denoted transparently before it can become an allegorical signifier. If it fails to refer transparently or if the reader fails to move beyond the literal meaning, the literal referent becomes an end in itself. Fallen into the wrong hands, for example, the erotic love represented in *Song of Songs* becomes nothing more than erotic love: its

capacity to teach, its truth-claim as Scripture, is interrupted by the exclusively literal interpretation.[5] In the same vein, readers trained in Scriptural exegesis could not accept candid representations of sexuality in the writings of Ovid and Virgil at the literal level. Sex could only have meaning if interpreted as a figure for something else. In other words, the sex in pagan writing had to be evacuated from the text through a process of making sex a figure for something else.

Both the literal and the figurative provoke anxiety in their capacity to go awry with bad interpretation. Figurative uses of language, as deviations from proper meaning, must be justified as means to some higher end or else they become abuses of the proper simply for the sake of abuse. Literal uses of language, although adherent to proper meaning, threaten to mire the reader in the pleasures of the flesh if taken for ends in themselves. Each of these articulations depends on a means/end formulation. Each level of meaning (be it literal or figurative) threatens to become an end in itself. The medieval model of Scriptural exegesis — which extended to the reading of profane works, albeit in a watered down version — required a kind of miracle. The literal and the figurative dimensions were acknowledged to be of altogether different orders, to be absolutely incommensurable. While the literal had to serve as foundation for the figurative, the figurative had to depart from, or disengage from, the literal. As de Lubac, puts it: "...the order of the spirit [i.e. the figurative] *founded upon* history [i.e. the literal] and *disengaged from* history." They are paradoxically interdependent and incommensurable at the same time, but not symmetrically so.

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[5] On the vast tradition of allegorical commentary on the *Song of Songs* see the second chapter of De Bruyn, *Etude d'esthétique médiévale* (tome 2).

Over the Denatured Waters of Sodom

De planctu Naturae articulates the question of same-sex desire in relation to the exegetical tradition, and specifically in relation to the anxiety that the literal and the figurative provoke in their capacity to go wrong. To be precise, same-sex desire arises as a figure of interruption in *De planctu Naturae* always at moments when the coherence of literal and figurative meaning comes into question.

To begin with, sodomy is an abuse of the literal, an abuse of "proper" meaning. As the "sin against nature" sodomy not only offends Nature, but also has a denaturing effect on mankind. That sodomy denatures man is another way of saying that sodomy is an abuse of the proper, that it turns man away from man's proper meaning. Philosophical and theological notions of the natural, especially allegorical personifications of nature, are always connected to grammatical notions of the proper in medieval writing. This is quite simply because any reference to man's "nature" was assumed to describe what is linguistically proper to man. Lady Nature hence becomes the guardian of proper meaning and the "sin against nature," by extension, an abuse of the proper.

The sodomite betrays the proper meaning of *man*, first of all, by denying his animal-corporeal nature, given that reproduction is part of animal nature. Since the literal and figurative were mapped onto body and spirit, a violation of animal nature (i.e. the teleology of the body) was tantamount to a violation of the literal. According to the logic of allegorical meaning — which requires the literal to function transparently before it can have figurative meaning — man cannot have spiritual meaning without first fulfilling his literal (i.e. corporeal) meaning. If man denies his animal nature he cannot fulfill his spiritual nature.

Same-sex desire is, secondly, an abuse of the proper meaning of *man* because *man*'s proper meaning was understood, in fact, differentially in relation to *woman.* Man was understood to be the active of the two sexes, to be of the order of form (spirit) while woman was of the order of matter (body), et cetera. Thus, if the proper definition of *man* is understood differentially as the complement to (or opposite of) *woman*, then desire for another man, desire for the same — rendering the desired man passive — will unsettle the differential system of meaning, adding to *man* a meaning that is not proper to the word. [6] Alan refers to this addition of meaning as "a solecistic transfer of meaning," or *translatio*. Same-sex desire, as a transfer or turning away from the proper meaning of *man*, turns man into a strange kind of figure, making man into a figure who fails to signify as letter in the first instance. For this reason, the word *sodomite* designates a "man" who fails to signify literally, properly — a deviation of proper meaning.

If *man* fails to signify literally, the stability of the sign *man*/man (signifier/signified) can no longer be guaranteed. In the context of medieval sign theory, which assumed one-to-one correspondence between signified and signifier, any abuse of the proper will indeed affect the continuity between language and nature, between language and being. In medieval neoplatonic thought, of which Alan is exemplary, nature *was* the word for being. The literal dimension of a text was the concern of grammarians, whose task was to establish a solid foundation for the revelation of truth by assuring locatable and stable correspondence between signifieds and signifiers, between the

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[6] Dicit enim Donatus quod si demonstrando virum dicimus *hanc*, aut demonstrando mulierem dicimus *hunc*, fit soloecismus ... Sed soloecismus est vicium inexcusabile. Ergo in talibus sermonibus erit vicium inexcusabile, non ergo figura.
[For Donatus states that if in designating a man we say *her* or if in designating a woman we say *him*, we are committing a solecism ... But a solecism is an inexcusable error. Therefore an inexcusable error, not a figure of speech, will be evident in such manners of speaking] (Thurot, *Notices et extraits*, p. 264).

elements of nature and the elements of language. As John of Salisbury says in his *Metalogicon*, "Grammar prepares the mind to understand everything that can be taught in words."[7] This *everything* John writes of encompasses all of nature — all that can be known in the simplest deictic mode of speech. Language in the literal mode participated in the same order of being as the natural world, while language in the figurative mode was thought to be able to designate divine matters, but not able to participate in the same order of being as things divine. In his *Summa "Quoniam homines,"* Alan explains:

> Item dictiones ideo invente sunt ad significandum naturalia; postea ad theologiam translate. Itaque secundum primam institutionem naturalia designant, secundum vero translationem divina significant. Itaque naturalibus proprie divinis vero inproprie conveniunt.
>
> [Similarly, words are for that reason invented in order to signify natural things and are only afterward transferred [*translate*] to theology. Thus in accordance with their first application they designate natural matters, while in accordance with metaphoric transference [*translationem*] they signify divine matters. Thus they are properly serviceable for natural matters, but on the contrary for divine ones][8]

When Alan refers to words (*dictiones*) in the last sentence, he makes it clear that the meaning of "words" does not include words whose meaning has been transferred figuratively. Thus when he says "words are only properly serviceable for natural matters" Alan refers exclusively to the proper meaning of words. Figurative language does not count as *words* because it has denatured words in order to signify divine matters while words, as long as they signify properly, participate within the natural world and are hence ontologically continuous with it. *Translatio* is thus a trope concerned with being. Notions of the proper in medieval rhetoric always reference a certain adherence to being, while

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7 Qtd. in Ziolkowski, p. 89.
8 Qtd. in Ziolkowski, pp. 128-29.

notions of *translatio* reference a — sometimes necessary, but always risky — breaking away from or violation of being.

It is exactly this kind of "risky" violation of being that is at stake in the highly improper and abusive *translatio* of meaning that "sodomy" names. We see the extent to which sodomy was conceived of as an abusive *translatio* of the proper meaning of man in Paul of Hungary's *Summa of Penance*.[9] In a poetic depiction, he describes the properties of the waters of Sodom and Gomorrah: a piece of iron will float to the surface of the water while a feather will sink to the bottom. Paul's floating iron and sinking feathers describe the effect *translatio* has on proper meaning. What is proper to iron is to sink, and what is proper to feathers is to float; but mere proximity to the burnt-out city of Sodom causes the iron and feathers to betray their *proper*ties, their proper meaning. Paul's choice of light/heavy for the properties violated by sodomitic abuse of the proper is rhetorically powerful, since the light/heavy opposition references the opposition between up and down, between the heavens and the earth. To ignore the hierarchy of up and down is essentially to violate the fundamental order of being. The sodomitic image of floating iron and sinking feathers is an example of this violation of being, a violation of being which disrupts the order of the natural world — specifically, that most fundamental order separating the above from the below.

But in addition to being an abusive *translatio* that threatens the capacity of words to adhere to things via proper meaning, "sodomy" also names an incorrect "use" of body and language. This abusive "use" of body and language calls into question the teleology of both body and language. To return to the description of sodomy as the "sin against nature," it is important to remember that Alan draws from a tradition dating back to Paul

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[9] Qtd. in Jordan, p. 100.

in which "the sin against nature" is described as an *usus,* a word whose meaning bridges the rhetorical and the corporeal. Paul refers to same-sex desire specifically as the "usu[s] qui est contra naturam". One of the word's primary meanings is *custom* or *habit*, a notion that has both a rhetorical and a corporeal aspect to it. Customs and habits reference the scripting of culture onto our bodies. *Usus* can also mean *use* in the more physical, corporeal sense of the word, referring to the body here in a utilitarian mode. But the word also has a purely rhetorical meaning. In classical and medieval rhetoric *usus* describes the positing of meaning in certain grammatical propositions — the word often appears in after-the-fact evaluations of figurative language: *is this an abusive "use" of metaphor or is it justified?* Implicit in this idea of proper use, both in terms of sex and grammar, is a cause/effect structure. To say that a sexual act or a grammatical proposition must be useful is to say that the body or language must be means to an end, and not ends unto themselves. We are familiar with this logic in the theological writings concerning "the sin against nature". Aquinas exploits it thoroughly in his *Summa*, as Jordan demonstrates:

> For Thomas, true pleasure is the effect of natural completion, of the fulfillment of natural teleology. The Sodomitic vice radically disrupts the most obvious continuities of animal nature. Yet the cause of this violently antinatural sin is the intensity of the pleasure it yields — a pleasure so intense that it "dissolves the soul." But it is not only the intensity that is troubling: Thomas here confronts a kind of pleasure that cannot be divided without remainder into teleological sequences. He confronts a pleasure without end. He names the possibility of this pleasure the antithesis of nature (156).

Thus for Thomas, sodomy is disruptive because it brings about a pleasure that cannot be subsumed to any system of meaning. A "pleasure without end" describes pleasure that does not have procreation as its end, pleasure that has become an end in itself. This formulation has a parallel in the disciplines of rhetoric and dialectic which view the teleology of meaning in the same way Thomas views the teleology of pleasure.

Rhetorical terminology even has a word — metalepsis — to describe precisely the violation of the teleology of means/end that Thomas describes sodomy as bringing about. Metalepsis is defined as the logical error of taking the means for the end, which can sometimes be used for rhetorical effect, but which most of the time simply constitutes a flaw in reasoning. Metaleptic tropes are often used to describe sodomy in theological and poetic writing of the Middle Ages. We find, for instance, such a metaleptic trope in Paul of Hungary's *Summa of Penance*. In his poetic depiction of the waters of Sodom and Gomorrah, we do not only see a piece of iron floating to the surface of the water while a feather sinks to the bottom. On the shore of these waters we also find trees bearing apples that are appealing to look at, but either filled with ashes or that disappear or explode at the touch.

These beautiful but inedible apples are the image of metalepsis. Here, the apple's beauty has become an end in itself. An apple's beauty should be the cause for it to be eaten, and being eaten, the final effect. If beauty is taken as an end in itself, then the apple's purpose, its teleology, is ignored. The beautiful but inedible apples of Sodom are the image of cause mistaken for effect. Correspondingly, the sodomite mistakes *sex* for an end in itself, ignoring the teleology of reproduction. Or as Jordan puts it, sodomy takes pleasure as an end in itself, becoming a "pleasure without end" that cannot be parsed into teleological sequences. Sodomites are guilty of a metaleptic flaw of reasoning.

In the rhetorical terms we have been using —which Alan exploits fully — it is specifically the abuse of figurative language (*vitium*, or "vice") that is conceived in metaleptic terms. Donatus defines *vitium,* using a means/end formulation, as a "deviatio a

fina ... sine causa excusante" (deviation in effect without justifiable cause).[10] It goes one step beyond the abuse of the proper discussed above. While *translatio* can be justified if it is to the end of revealing divine truth, deviation from proper meaning — when it has no purpose other than the pleasure of deviation itself — becomes an abuse of the very system of meaning that allows it. It is according to these terms that Alan's narrator is able to denounce sodomy as a defective trope, as he does in the opening meter section of *De Planctu*:

> Se negat esse virum Nature, factus in arte / Barbarus. Ars illi non placet, immo tropus. / Non tamen ista tropus poterit translatio dici. / In vicium melius ista figura cadit.
>
> [Becoming a barbarian in grammar, he disclaims the manhood given him by nature. Grammar does not find favour with him but rather a trope. This transposition [*translatio*], however, cannot be called a trope. The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects [*vitium*]] (68).

The narrator here refers to sodomy as a defective trope that fails even to qualify as a trope in the end. The sodomite slips out of grammar, out of the literal into the figurative, first as a trope, but finally arriving at the status of *vitium* (literally "vice"). The slippage Alan's narrator depicts here is in fact the same as the two abuses I have described above in relation to sodomy. The sodomite first abuses grammar by dislocating the literal (i.e. the proper) meaning of man. This abuse, a *translatio*, brings him into the figurative dimension of language. But as Alan writes, the sodomite cannot even properly be called a figure because he fails to perform as a figure is supposed to according to the exegetical model, which subsumes figurative language to the teleology of Christian truth. Not

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[10] Qtd. in Ziolkowski, p.16.

pointing to any truth beyond his own dislocation of proper meaning, the sodomite becomes an end in itself, not a figure but a *vitium*, the very definition of metalepsis.

Translatio Ganymedis: Reading (and) Sameness

The question of same-sex desire resurfaces at another important juncture in *De planctu Naturae,* arising once again within a discussion of literal and figurative meaning. Lady Nature engages the narrator in a pedagogical dialogue. She has just finished teaching him the complete taxonomy of sexual perversions, which she delivers entirely through use of grammatical metaphors[11]. The narrator wonders why she has focused her attack on humanity, when the poets have also represented the gods practicing sins against nature:

> Miror cur poetarum commenta retractans, solummodo in humani generis pestes predictarum inuectionum armas aculeos, cum et eodem exorbitationis pede deos claudicasse legamus.
>
> [I wonder why, when you consider the statements of the poets, you load the stings of the above attacks against the contagions of the human race alone, although we read that the gods too, have limped around the same circle of aberration] (139).

He follows with the Ovidian example of the rape of Ganymede, which he retells, describing Ganymede's abduction as a *translatio*:

> Iupiter enim, adolescentem Frigium *transferens* ad superna, relativam Venerem *transtulit* in *translatum*. Et quem in mensa per diem propinandi sibi prefecit propositum, in thoro per noctem sibi fecit suppositum [emphasis mine].
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> [Jupiter, translating the Phrygian youth to the realms above, transferred there a proportionate love for him on his transference. The one he had made his wine-master by day he made his subject in bed by night] (139).

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[11] Prose 4, discussed at length in Chapter Three.

Nature responds accusing the narrator of taking the poets at face value, of reading too literally. This launches Nature into her frequently quoted discourse on the question of poetic truth. All poetry, because it is a *translatio* of proper meaning, is a kind of lie, she claims. But poetic lies occur in three different modalities, which we must learn to distinguish from one another: a purely denotative modality, a falsely denotative modality and a figurative modality. She explains:

> An ignoras quomodo poete sine omni palliationis remedio auditoribus nudam falsitatem prostituunt, ut quadam mellite delectationis dulcedine uelut incantatas audientium aures inebrient? Aut ipsam falsitatem quadam probabilitatis ypocrisi palliant, ut per exemplorum imagines hominum animos inhoneste morigerationis incude sigillent? Aut in superficiali littere cortice falsum resonat lira poetica, interius uero auditoribus secretum intelligentie altioris eloquitur, ut exteriori falsitatis abiecto putamine dulciorem nucleum ueritatis secrete intus lector inueniat.
>
> [Do you not know how the poets present falsehood, naked and without the protection of a covering, to their audience, so that by a certain sweetness of honeyed pleasure they may, so to speak, intoxicate the bewitched ears of their hearers? Or how they cover falsehood with a kind of imitation of probability so that, by a presentation of precedents, they may seal the minds of men with a stamp from the anvil of shameful tolerance? Or, how the poetic lyre gives a false note on the outer bark of the composition but within tells the listeners a secret of deeper significance so that when the outer shell of falsehood has been discarded the reader finds the sweeter kernel of truth hidden within?] (139-40).[12]

Thus there are three kinds of lies in poetry: 1) lies presented in the literal mode (naked lies), which seduce because of something intrinsic in the lie represented, and 2) lies covered in false figures, which seduce in their figurative aspect, but which remain lies nonetheless, and finally 3) truth covered in figures, which are only lies insofar as figures must dislocate proper meaning in order to reveal another order of truth.

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[12] The reader should refer to my discussion of euphemism in Chapter Three. Nature's explains why she must not use the denotative mode (1) to refer to the *monstrum nefandum* (unspeakable monstrosity) that is unnatural sex deciding instead to refer to homosexuality in a discourse covered in beautiful figures. Oddly, this mode of reference corresponds best to the second mode of lying, that of falsely denotative reference. Nature would then be guilty herself of linguistic impropriety and a kind of sodomitic discourse.

The gist of her argument is that it is important to understand that poetry has both a surface meaning (literal) and a depth meaning (figurative), which often (perhaps always) betray one another. It is up to the reader to decide whether there is more truth at the surface of the text, or beneath the surface. This argument is crucial because it justifies Alan's own use of a poetic allegory — highly reliant on classical poetic models and pagan allegory — for the purposes of theological argumentation. But what needs to be underscored here is that this canonically important theoretical moment in *De planctu Naturae*, in which a rather comprehensive theory of poetic truth is articulated, itself follows a question about the pagan representation of same sex-desire. Given that it is presented as a response to a question about the representation of same-sex desire, can Nature's theory of poetic truth account for this representation? In other words, can pagan representations of same-sex desire have meaning for the Christian theologian?

While Nature's discourse on poetic truth brings the truth-value of the pagan poets and any secular poetry into question, it does not answer the question of whether this particular Ovidian scene — the representation of same-sex desire that spurs her theory — can have meaning for Christians. She does not declare whether it is possible to read these scenes allegorically. While she warns the narrator about the three varieties of poetic falsehood, Nature does not explain what specific kind of poetic falsehood the story of Jupiter and Ganymede constitutes. Is it one of the first two kinds, designed to either seduce (1) or trick (2) the reader into committing sin? Or is it the third kind, a poetic lie that hides a deeper truth beneath the surface of its figurative artifice? Nature seems to suggest the latter, first to the extent that she often uses Ovidian examples herself to bolster her arguments, and second because she insists on the dangers of literal reading,

which can only be remedied by reading allegorically. This is clearest in the conclusion of her discourse:

> Quia ergo, ut poete testati sunt, plerique homines predicamentalibus Veneris terminis ad litteram sunt abusi, narratio uero illa, que uel deos esse uel ipsos in Veneris gignasiis lasciuisse mentitur, in nimie falsitatis uesperascit occasum; ista nube taciturnitatis obduxi, illa uero in lucem uere narrationis explicui.
>
> [Because then, many men, as we know from the testimony of the poets, have misused, *by a literal interpretation*, the terms applied to Venus, this account of theirs which falsely states that there is a plurality of gods or that these gods have wantoned in the playgrounds of Venus ... Over these statements [the literal interpretation] I draw the cloud of silence, the ones preceding them [Christian truth] I unfold to the light of truthful narrative.] (141).

Nature draws a cloud of silence over the literal interpretation of the pagan poets because the literal is corporeal, of the same order as animal nature, which is mute[13]. It is only through *explicatio*[14] (literally "unfolding," "revealing to view") that the light of Christian truth can be revealed in this poetry. Through Nature's *explicatio*, pagan poetry goes from a cloud of silence ("nube taciturnitatis") to the light of narrative ("lucem uere narrationis"), from falsehood to truth. What is at stake is the possibility for figurative language to transfer meaning, from the literal signification of same-sex desire to a nobler allegorical signification.[15] But the question remains, is there an allegorical truth hidden beneath the apparent falsehood at the surface of the story of Ganymede's *translatio*? Further, we might ask what specific allegorical message would the rape of Ganymede hold for Christian readers of Ovid?

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[13] The association of muteness and animality has a highly determined relationship in the theological writings on "the sin against nature." See Jordan, esp. chapters 5 and 7.

[14] See the entry on *explico* in the OLD: *1. To free from folds [...] 2. To extricate [...] 3. To disentangle [...] 7. To reveal to view; to make clear (to the understanding) [...] 8. To make known or set out in words, give an account of, unfold.*

There persists a threatening possibility that the narrator's example of Jupiter and Ganymede might in fact have no allegorical value, that it might constitute an utterly unmeaning poetic passage in the midst of a theory of poetic meaning. But it is clear that Nature, at least, does have an allegorical interpretation of Jupiter and Ganymede in mind. Recall the conspicuous word choice in the narrator's description of the scene. He uses words such as *transfer/translatum* (metaphor, transposition, transfer), *suppositum* (having been placed beneath or subjoined both physically and in writing or speech), *propositum* (having been placed in front of both physically and in writing or speech, proposed, stated as fact) and *relativam* (brought back, reciprocal, recalled in speech or writing by similarity) to describe the relationship between Jupiter and Ganymede, words that, in addition to having a straightforward physical-literal meaning, have a clear meaning in the disciplines of grammar and rhetoric. Since Nature accuses him of reading too literally, we can assume, that the narrator intended *translatio* in its most literal-corporeal sense as a physical displacement of Ganymede's body from the earth to the heavens. Nature's theory of poetic falsehood can thus be read as a response to the double meaning of those words that refer literally to the displacement of Ganymede's body, but figuratively to various rhetorical maneuvers. The allegorical meaning of the story was hidden in the figurative meaning of these seemingly corporeal words, a figurative meaning to which the narrator was blind because he could not see beyond the veil of the body, beyond the literal dimension. This is all the more criminal since the "figurative" meaning is in fact part of these words' proper meaning. The words refer "properly" to various rhetorical and grammatical functions, and the conspicuous emphasis on *translatio* leads one to suspect that the allegorical interpretation of Ganymede will have something to do with the very

workings of figurative language.[16] The double meaning of *translatio*, and the particularity of that doubleness, suggests that we can read the story of Ganymede as an allegory of interpretation, that is, as a representation through poetic artifice of the doubleness of the allegorical text split between its surface and depth meaning.

With this in mind I cite the passage here once again, so that we can determine what such an allegorical interpretation might look like.

> Iupiter enim, adolescentem Frigium *transferens* ad superna, *relativam* Venerem *transtulit* in *translatum*. Et quem in mensa per diem propinandi sibi prefecit *propositum*, in thoro per noctem sibi fecit *suppositum*. [emphasis mine]
>
> [Jupiter, translating the Phrygian youth to the realms above, transferred there a proportionate love for him on his transference. The one he had made his wine-master by day he made his subject in bed by night] (139).[17]

Ganymede has a double structure. The verb *transfero/translatum* functions as a sort of switch-between: he is "transferred" from earth to the heavens; Jupiter "transfers" his love to an equivalent love for Ganymede; his function is "transferred" from day to night, and Jupiter "transfers" him from an active role (*propositum*) to a passive one (*suppositum*), from the public realm to the private, from wine-boy to lover. The doubleness of Ganymede — both active and passive, earthly and divine, diurnal and nocturnal, wine-master and sex slave — imitates the doubled structure of a text that has both a literal and figurative meaning. Like the literal dimension of a text, which reveals truth only through the interpretive effort of figural reading, earthly Ganymede must be "transferred," through an elevation upward, in order for the divine Jupiter to be able to possess him. For

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[16] In the narrator's retelling *transfer/translatum* replaces the verb Ovid uses (*abripio*) to describe the kidnapping of Ganymede.

[17] See the *Altercatio Ganimedis et Helene*, ed. Lenzen *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche*. Chronologically close *to De Planctu*, this anonymous twelfth-century debate between Helen and Ganymede contains an extended argument, from Ganymede's point of view, defending homosexuality with examples from grammar, specifically the notion of the copula ("hic et hic grammatice debent copulari").

this reason, the most important *translatio* Ganymede undergoes is the move from earth to the heavens (*transferens ad superna*), from the earthly to the divine. Just as Nature creates a binary distinction — inside/outside, veiled/unveiled — in her discussion of literal and figurative meaning, the use of the word *supernus* (literally "above," "heavens") places Ganymede in an above/below binary which imitates the relation of the literal to the figurative.

As for the words *propositum* and *suppositum*, which are used to describe Ganymede's two tasks as both wine-boy and lover, they too have a rhetorical meaning in addition to a physical one. Moreover, the way they are set in contrast here suggests we might read these words as referencing literal and figurative meaning. *Propositum* refers to Ganymede's "placement" as Jupiter's wine-master, but another common meaning of *propono* is *to put on display.*[18] As Henri de Lubac and others have argued, the literal meaning of a text was associated with the immediately visible in the medieval imagination[19]. The literal meaning was that aspect of a text which is put on display. Ganymede, as Jupiter's wine-master is a public figure, put on display in the wine-hall ("in mensa...propinandi"), in full daylight ("per diem"), visible and knowable to all by virtue of his task. But this aspect of Ganymede's existence is only the surface beneath which his true task, and truest meaning, is secretly hidden. To this extent, Ganymede's *propositum* references the literal dimension of a text which is visible and knowable to all but which hides secret truths that require one to "transfer" its meaning to another level.

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[18] Elsewhere in *De planctu Naturae*, Alan uses the words *appositum*, *suppositum* and *propositum* as grammatical terms referring to various modes of subordination in a phrase.

[19] "The old etymology of *historia* had been recorded by Saint Isidore of Seville, whose *Etymologiae* enjoyed an extreme popularity for centuries: 'History is derived from the Greek *historein*, i.e. to see and get to know; for no one among the ancients used to write a history, except for one who had been there ... For we grasp what happens better with the eyes than we gather it by hearing.'" (De Lubac, 43).

Suppositum refers to Ganymede's subjection (literally "placement beneath") to Jupiter in bed. The above/beneath binary here references the relation of literal to figurative meaning. Figurative meaning is always hidden, covered beneath the literal meaning, which must be unveiled to reveal the figurative meaning. Thus allegorically, Ganymede's doubleness — having been placed simultaneously above and beneath — comes to signify the paradoxically simultaneous existence of literal and figurative meaning in one signifier. But if the doubleness of Ganymede allegorizes the dual levels in the allegorical text, how then are we to read the abduction or *translatio* that Jupiter operates, a *translatio* that accounts for this very doubleness?

In their relationship, Ganymede is a kind of textual object whose meaning gets transferred (*translatum*) through the arbitration of a powerful *auctor* (Jupiter). As the god of gods, Jupiter has the power to "translate" Ganymede from a mortal to an immortal being, to raise him from one order of being to another. Jupiter the lover thus becomes a figure for the reader of allegory, invested with divine authority. The figure of Jupiter as lover/reader posits the reader as an active subject whose reading enacts a *translatio* upon the passive literal dimension of the text. Jupiter's love for, and action upon, Ganymede would thus come, allegorically, to signify a certain encounter between reader and text. This encounter would be here allegorized as driven by love and desire: the reader, like Jupiter, "loves" the text so much that he is driven to "lift" or translate its literal meaning into a "higher" meaning. The rape of Ganymede would, in other words, bring to the foreground the desire that propels even the most Christian of allegorical interpretation: the desire to "abduct" that is, to "lift up" and "elevate" the literal meaning into a "higher" one. What allows this elevation to take place?

Jupiter, out of love, translates Ganymede's body, from earth to heaven, from the wine hall to the bedroom, from day to night, from wine-boy to lover, from active to passive. In each of these transfers Ganymede is the direct object of the verb. The passage makes it clear that Jupiter is driven to transfer Ganymede's body by his love, which is itself the direct object of a *translatio*, having been transferred onto Ganymede's body —"relativam Venerem transtulit" (he transferred [to Ganymede] proportionate love). So there are two "transfers" that occur: one of Ganymede's body and one onto Ganymede's body. As Sheridan reads it in his English translation of *De planctu Naturae*, Jupiter translates his love from heterosexual to homosexual love, from Juno to Ganymede as though they were equivalent. But the textual logic of this passage, which invites allegorical reading, requires the reader to account more scrupulously for the adjective *relativam*, which modifies Jupiter's love. The verb form *refero* has several meanings, including: "to return," "to bring back," "to repeat," and "to call to mind by similarity" among other things, which makes it possible to read "relativam venerem," as meaning *a love that was (for) the same. Relativam*, here, would refer in fact to the sameness in their same-sex desire. Jupiter thus "translates" Ganymede because he is driven by a desire for sameness. If the scene functions as an allegory of allegory, as I am suggesting it does, then what does Jupiter's love tell us about the desire that drives the uplifting movement of allegorical interpretation?

Jupiter's love for Ganymede is described as qualitatively different from his other extramarital loves. While the women he seduces are beautiful things he wishes to possess, Ganymede is described as a beautiful thing Jupiter wishes to be. His love for Ganymede is a question of being, not having. As Ovid's version tells it:

quod Iuppiter esse, quam quod erat, mallet
[whom Jupiter wanted to *be* more than what he *was*]

Thus in Ovid's version, which Alan knew well, sameness is articulated in concretely ontological terms as an identification. Loving someone of the same sex involves an identification of some sort, which might follow such varied formulas as "I am like him" or "I want to be like him" or even "that is me." Identification is at the core of the mechanics of metaphor, which must posit an identification before a transfer of meaning can succeed. In the narrator's retelling of the Ovidian story, Jupiter's love-for-the-same, having been "transferred" onto Ganymede's body, impels him to "transfer" Ganymede's body to the heavens. This mimics the structure of metaphor, which necessitates the *translatio* of identification — what is often referred to as a connecting bridge of metaphor — as a condition for the *translatio* of meaning that characterizes metaphor. In other words, allegorical reading is always predicated on a moment of identification. In *this* allegory of allegorical interpretation, Jupiter, the masterful reader, must identify with Ganymede, must love only in the way same can love same, in order to transfer or translate Ganymede's meaning/essence.

This would seem to suggest a complete, successful allegorical interpretation of the Ovidian representation of same-sex desire. The sex between them would come to figure the encounter between a reader and a text, one that necessitates a passive/active structure. And the sameness between them would come to figure the necessary identification, the passion for sameness that drives allegorical interpretation and which alone enables the allegorical reader to elevate the literal meaning by invoking its similarity with a higher,

nobler meaning. Same-sex desire would figure the metaphorical bridge upon which allegorical interpretation relies in order to ennoble meaning.

But something very strange happens when we try to turn the representation of same-sex desire, through a conscious effort of allegorical interpretation, into an allegory of interpretation. The very gesture of interpreting the rape of Ganymede as an allegory of reading necessitates an identification. The very effort to read sodomy as a figure requires the reader to target a point of identification. But the only figure with which the Christian allegorical reader can identify is Jupiter, that is, a sodomite. The story of Ganymede, in other words, brings the reader closer to Jupiter and implicitly closer to same-sex desire. The allegory's self-reflexive structure traps the reader, who attempts to convert sodomy into a figure, in a mode of reading that looks suspiciously sodomitic. Like Jupiter, he must acknowledge that he is driven by a desire for the same that drives him to transfer meaning from one term to another.

Although the Christian reader may have tried to dispense with same-sex desire by reading it as a figure for a "nobler" truth, the only figural reading that he can provide turns same-sex desire into a figure for reading, a sort of mirror which, far from evacuating desire, *highlights* it. Same-sex desire, even when read figurally, can only figure and send back the "sodomitic" quality of allegorical reading itself. Moreover, the figural reading of same-sex desire points to no truth beyond the truth of this sodomitic quality of reading. It is, in this sense, a failed or "defective" figure. The interpretation of sodomy as a figure can never succeed in pointing to a truth beyond the effort of interpretation itself. Same-sex desire will always fail as a figure because it mirrors the sameness necessary to figuration hence short-circuiting the teleology of meaning, which

requires figures to point beyond their own working. This traps the reader in a short-circuit (or something more like a feedback loop), whereby the teleology of meaning cannot but fall back on itself.

Chapter 2
Naked Truth

On the Unveiling Metaphor in the *Roman de Silence*

Do you not know how the poets present falsehood, naked and without the protection of a covering, to their audience so that by a certain sweetness of honeyed pleasure, they may, so to speak, intoxicate the bewitched ears of their hearers? [...] Or, how the poetic lyre gives a false note on the outer bark of the composition but within tells the listeners a secret of deeper significance so that when the outer shell of falsehood has been discarded the reader finds the sweeter kernel of truth hidden within?

De planctu Naturae, prose 4: lines 128-36

"Jo ne puis altres estre! Donques sui jo Scilentius, Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus"
[I cannot be anything else. I am thus Silentius or else I am no one / naked)]

Roman de Silence, line 2538

If everything on this earth is a fiction, then how can we know the truth? If nature is only knowable through the artifices of thought and language, doesn't the very distinction between the natural and the unnatural become incoherent? These critical questions — which arise by definition out of the allegorical mode — fuel the narrative of the thirteenth century Arthurian verse romance, *Le Roman de Silence*. Its plot is structured on what R. Howard Bloch calls an "elaborate biopolitical drama" of genealogical succession, obsessed with paternity and filiation. When women are excluded from inheriting land after King Ebain declares a royal prohibition of cognatic succession, the only daughter of the Duke of Cornwall (Eufemie) and her husband (Cador) must produce a male heir in order to invest Cador with the paternal duchy. The birth of a daughter to Eufemie and Cador threatens to interrupt the continuity of the ducal lineage so the parents decide to raise the child as a boy ("com un fil") naming her *Silentius* because the child will have to remain silent on the matter of its true sex. If her true sex is ever discovered they will simply change her name from *Silentius* to *Silentia.* This

deception is described as a *coverture*, a covering or cloth, but also a linguistic deception or ambiguity and a metaphor for allegorical interpretation. Clothing becomes a metaphor for linguistic operations and specifically for language in relationship to the body in the *Roman de Silence*. Accordingly, the story of Silence's life begins with an elaborate narration describing the covering of her genitals (in Old French her *nature*) and ends in a dramatic scene of uncovering, the *descovrir* (uncovering or discovery) of her *voir nature* (her true nature, or true sex).

Silence only becomes aware of the deception when he is an adolescent, at which time he is drawn towards the art of minstrelry. He escapes to join a troupe of itinerant jongleurs. When his skill surpasses theirs, they plot to kill Silence. Silence escapes their clutches and returns to the kingdom where he must unveil his identity to his father in a compelling episode of father-son identification, analyzed in depth in this chapter. Silence then becomes a knight at the court of King Ebain. He is soon exiled to the French court after the lustful Queen Eufeme accuses him of rape. Ebain calls him back to front a war against rebellious barons, where Silence outperforms all of the other knights in his chivalric prowess. Eufeme tries again to seduce Silence and again accuses Silence of rape when she is rebuffed. This time the king exiles Silence who must set out on a hopeless expiatory ordeal. He is sent to capture Merlin who, it is prophesied, can only be caught by the wiles of a woman. Silence thus fulfils the prophecy, capturing the magician and presenting him to the court where Merlin publicly reveals Silence's true sex in addition to unveiling a number of other deceptively hidden truths. Ebain executes Eufeme, disgusted with her perfidy, and finally marries Silence, whose femininity is at last restored. Both the feminine ending of her name (Silenti–a) and the "natural" coloring of her face — rose

and lily, joined in conjugal harmony, "Remariä lués en son vis / Assisement le roze al lis" (6675-6) — are added in order to restore of her femininity.

Almost as intriguing as the narrative is the history of the work's reception. After a long period of neglect — not fully edited until 1972[1] and not treated critically at length until 1986[2] — *Silence* has begun to attract considerable critical attention in the past two decades. As some critics have noted, the romance seems uncannily contemporaneous; it speaks to modern readers, its resonant indeterminacies inviting all sorts of modern appropriations.[3] Indeed, critics have found the romance to mirror a number of critical-philosophical points of view, mostly incompatible with one another. The romance has been read variably as radically proto-feminist[4], as deeply misogynistic[5], as a Barthesian *texte de jouissance*[6], as a Marxist bio-political drama[7], as a staging of a Butlerian queer

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1 The only extant copy of the *Roman de Silence* is contained in folios 188 recto to 223 recto of what is now MS.Mi.LM.6 of the University of Nottingham. Roche-Mahdi relates the manuscript history in the following manner: "The very existence of the manuscript containing *Silence* — a well-worn anthology that must have been the property of a professional entertainer — was unknown to the scholarly world until 1911, when it was discovered in the manor house of a British nobleman in a box marked "old papers — no value," together with letters from Henry VIII and other documents (Cowper 1959, 17). The poem itself [...] was edited for the first time by Lewis Thorpe in the 1960s and first published separately in 1972." (xi.)

2 Bloch, R. Howard. 'Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère.' *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986):81-99.

3 Gallagher, Edward J. 'The Modernity of *Le Roman de Silence*." *University of Dayton Review* 21.3 (1992):31-42.

4 Ferrante, Joan. "Public Postures and Private Maneuvers: Roles Medieval Women Play." *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalski. Athens, GA: U Georgia Press, 1988. 213-229.

5 Gaunt, Simon. "The Significance of Silence." *Paragraph* 13.2 (1990): 202-16

6 Allen, Peter L. "The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing and *Le Roman de Silence*." *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*. Ed. Julian Wasserman and Lois Roney. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1989. 98-112. Also, Gilmore, Gloria Thomas. "Le Roman de Silence: Allegory in Ruin or Womb of Irony?" *Arthuriana* 7.2 (1997):111-123.

7 Sturges, Robert. "The Crossdresser and the *Juventus*: Category Crisis in *Silence*." *Arthuriana* 12.1 (2002): 37-49. See also Bloch (1986).

body[8] and as many other things. Bloch suggests that its appeal to modern readers stems from the web of complex articulations set up in the romance: "between language and desire, between writing and sexual difference, between poetry and power (economic, military, political) [which] pressures a reading of the *Roman de Silence* toward the modes of textual production inherent to every age." This is certainly true, but it renders the relative invisibility of the romance in France even more mysterious. With only a few exceptions[9], critical attention to the *Roman de Silence* has remained almost non-existent in France. The first modern French translation was only published in 2000 in a collection of medieval stories[10] and there is still no separate edition of the *Roman de Silence* in French.

I would suggest that the particular "modernity" attributed to the romance by Anglo-American critics pertains more to the fact of its arrival onto the Anglo-American scene soon after the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).[11] The master trope of the romance — gender likened to the veil of figures in allegorical interpretation, while biological sex is likened to ineffable, and ever receding, textual "truth" — does recall, in a medieval way, the terms of Butler's argument (i.e. the circularity of the sex/gender binary, the interpellation of name and gender identity, regulatory practice,

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[8] Clark, Robert. "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the Roman de Silence." *Arthuriana* 12.1 (2002): 50-63.

[9] Two articles on the *Roman de Silence*, written by Florence Bouchet and **xxx** Victorin, appear in the volume, *Le nu et le vêtu au Moyen Age: XIIe-XIIIe siècles*. Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2001.

[10] Bouchet, Florence, trans. *Le Roman de Silence*. In *Récits d'amour et de chevalerie XIIe-XVe siècle*, ed. Robert Laffont. Paris: Bouquins, 2000. 461-557.

[11] Two English translations of *Silence* came out in close proximity to one another, the first in 1991 (Psaki, F. Regina, trans. and intro. *Le Roman de Silence*. By Heldris de Cornuälle. Garland Library of Medieval Literature 63B [New York: Garland, 1991]) and the second in 1992 (Roche-Mahdi, Sarah, ed., trans. and intro. Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance. By Heldris de Cornuälle [East Lansing, MI: Colleagues, 1992]).

etc.). For this reason, the *Roman de Silence* has been all too easy to read as a confirmation of *Gender Trouble's* argument regarding the sex/gender binary. But one problem with this critical approach, as fruitful as it has been, is a tendency to allow itself to be seduced into viewing *Silence* as a mirror, a confirmation, of contemporary theories rather than a thinking of gender in its own right, with its own historical and cultural specificity. They have been right in one respect: *Silence* is a self-fashioned mirror, in the medieval sense, a *speculum mundi*. The romance's explicit allegorical intent encourages readings in which the narrative function of the romance is subsumed to its allegorical function, inviting meaning to be imposed in various ways.

Because it is crucial to account for the work's self-reflexive use of allegory, my own approach to the text takes intertextual echoes with *De planctu Naturae* and *Roman de la Rose* — both similarly concerned with allegory and the sexed body — as a starting point. Some critics have considered Silence to be a vernacular version of *De planctu Naturae*[12], while others have entertained the possibility of influence from the *Roman de la Rose*[13]. These works interweave questions of sex and language in a similar manner, each in response to the paradoxes produced by newly concocted theological and scholastic notions of "natural sexuality" and "natural grammar"; they all display an anxiety regarding allegorical modes of revealing truth and this anxiety is pushed to the point of crisis around questions of sex and the sexed body. This chapter thus looks at the

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[12] For example, R. Howard Bloch writes "*Le Roman de Silence* reads, in places, like a vernacular version of the *Planctus Naturae* in which it is no longer possible to discern the difference between Nature and Noreture, between "straight writing" and invention, between the sexes, or between the suffixes (*–us* and *–a*) and the customs (*us*) appropriate to each." (Bloch, R. Howard, *Etymologies and Genealogies* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983] 197)

[13] Stock, for example, fruitfully compares the figure of Dangier in the *Roman de la Rose* to the representation of Merlin as the *homme selvage* in the *Roman Silence*. (Stock, Lorraine, "Civilization and Its Discontents: Cultural Primitivism and Merlin as a Wild Man in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12.1 (2002): 22-36.

Roman de Silence as a reflection on and of the medieval exegetical tradition and asks: what does the comparison of Silence's masculine gender to the drape of figures in allegory teach us about both sexual difference and allegory? Does it suggest that we might understand the rift between the material and the ideal in allegorical signification as somehow built on the rift between sex and gender, between the body and language? I look at the cross-dressing protagonist as an allegorical figure for the process of allegorical interpretation, which creates a clothing of figures in order to unclothe the truth. The narrative of the romance promises and putatively performs a revelation of the "truth" of sexual difference. I look closely at the supposed revelation of Silence's true sex and ask: what is it that gets revealed? What kind of body is put on display during this final moment of revelation?

This chapter is not the first critical effort to look at the question of allegory in Silence. Gloria Gilmore's article examines the figure of Merlin, suggesting we read him as the deliverer of allegorical meaning. His participation in the narrative of *Silence*, she suggests, functions as a declaration of the romance's overarching allegorical intent. She reads the story Merlin tells of a bud grafted onto sterile stock, which then flourished, as a parable of allegory's operation:

> These are among Merlin's first words to Silentius, counseling her that the power of Nurture, adding otherness, can be vital to generation: Nature is often sterile without a skillful grafting-on of unnatural yet life-giving forms. Natural figures are dead to understanding if not read allegorically [...] Merlin's image of the grafted tree underlines the role of allegorical intent in art. *Engien* means art; *entente*, intention or understanding; *estos*, essence; *surece*, that which is added; and *haltece*, height. The passage thus says: 'understanding the essence through that which is added to it moves one vertically to a higher level of understanding.'[14]

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[14] Gilmore, 112-13.

While Gilmore's article is most sensitive to the romance's self-reflexive use of allegory, it does not bring the question of allegory back into relation with the question of the sexed body, asked so insistently by the romance. In a study of specularity in the *Roman de Silence*, Kathy Krouse examines the expression, *mireöirs del mont* (mirror of the world) used to describe Silence. And while she does not outright say so, her own observations suggest we read the character Silence as a kind of metaphor of allegory:

> Medieval theologians, following the church fathers in general and Augustine in particular, saw Scripture as the primary mirror which provides this mediated image of God, and thus of what man should be; for we were created 'in God's image' and are destined to be transformed back into that glory lost with the Fall. In addition, Nature, as God's creation, was also seen as reflective of God, as revealing essential clues to God's own 'nature.[15]

But Krouse's article also fails to articulate the question of allegory expressly in relationship to the sexed body. This chapter works from the assumption that allegory and the problem of the sexed body are articulated inextricably in the *Roman de Silence*, just as it is so in the work's intertexts *De planctu Naturae* and *Roman de la Rose.*

The Veiling Metaphor in Scriptural Exegesis

Typical medieval conceptions of allegorical interpretation described the process of interpretation as one of covering in order to uncover, or with similar metaphors such as: veiling in order to unveil, clothing in order to unclothe. Two of the most common medieval terms designating allegorical interpretation were *integumentum* and *involucrum*,

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[15] Krouse, 87. [Krouse, Kathy, " 'Li Mireor du Monde': Specularity in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12.1 (2002): 85-91.]

both describing kinds of coverings, wrappings, or clothing[16]. Allegory promised to reveal ineffable truths by creating a veil of figures that might be subsequently unveiled, revealing a divine referent that neither literal nor figurative language alone was capable of designating. It was only by way of the veil of figures draped upon a text's literal dimension that its divine referent, its truth, could be revealed. The literal was veiled in order to reveal something of a completely different order. The notion of veiling the literal in order to reveal something beyond it only makes sense if we bear in mind the fact that the literal was itself considered to be a kind of veil.

The *sensus literalis* was like a veil because it was understood in many Christian traditions, quite literally, as flesh. Henri de Lubac explains, (referring to it as *the letter*):

> [A]t bottom it is one and the same unique Word of God who descends into the letter of Scripture and into the flesh of our humanity, into this "weak and unbeautiful" flesh, to hide itself there and to manifest itself there all together.[17]

On such a view, writing in the literal mode belonged to the flesh-of-the world. It participated in and was part of natural creation. As de Lubac explains, both the flesh-of-the world and the letter are like veils promising eventually to reveal the Word of God. This understanding of the literal followed the structure of the Mystery of Christ's Incarnation: just as the body of Christ clothed the spirit (or word) of God in the humble

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[16] "Le mot meme d'"*integumentum*" suggère l'idée d'un vêtement, d'une espèce de manteau poétique sous lequel une vérité d'ordre moral ou philosophique est cachée. En réalité chez Guillaume [de Conche] le terme *integumentum* ne se présente jamais seul: il est toujours accompagné du mot "*veritas*". Nous avons donc affaire à un couple de notions complémentaires don't l'une appelle nécessairement l'autre: il s'agit précisément, pour le maître qui commente un texte, de découvrir, sous l'"*integumentum*", la "*veritas*". (Jeauneau, Édouard, "L'Usage de la notion d'*integumentum* à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age*. 32.1 (1957): 35-87). According to Jeauneau, by the twelfth century, scholastics such as Abelard recognized no difference between the terms *integumentum* and *involucrum*.

[17] De Lubac, 138.

form of a servant (*forma servi*) so did the flesh-of-the-world clothe the spirit (or word) of God. Thus it was the task of allegory to unveil the flesh of nature in order to reveal the divine truth clothed within nature. But it was only through clothing the literal in a veil of figures — or in other words by positing correspondences between the things of nature and things divine — that the literal could reveal the divine truth contained in it, hence revealing the divine truth in nature. Given that the truth allegory sets out to unveil is ineffable, outside of language, it is only through analogy that we can understand it. Analogy posits likenesses between unlike things. Smalley explains the importance of analogy, fundamental to allegory, in her account of what might be the founding moment of Christian allegorical interpretation, a famous episode in the life of Origen. Origen responds to an exegetical crisis in a Christian community confused by corporeal references in the texts of the Law. The first set of analogies, in this influential model of Christian exegetical practice, are elaborated via bodily members and the five senses.[18]

> Two texts of the Law (Lev. xvii. II and Deut. xii. 23) seem to imply that the soul is in the blood. The 'Arabian' heretics held that it was. How, then, can the soul survive the death of the body? Origen feels compelled to answer this question by propounding a mystery which ought not to be spoken before profane ears. He begs his hearers to purify their hearts in order that they may be fit to understand. The bodily man in Scripture is doubled by the interior, spiritual man. The sacred writers refer to the parts of this second man under sensible names: the eyes and ears signify the understanding; to raise the hands in sacrifice means to lift up the spirit of God. Origen collects many texts where the bodily members and the five senses are employed in a figurative sense [...] Origen then points to the consequences of restricting oneself to the literal sense of Scripture: it negates the hope of immortality. The soul does not remain with the body after death and before the resurrection.[19]

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[18] It is crucial that we underline the fact that this founding moment of Christian allegory arises in response to a threat posed specifically *by the body.*

[19] Smalley, Beryl, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages,* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1952), p. 12.

Thus the figurative–spiritual sense (understanding) is to be found beneath the literal–corporeal sense (eyes and ears). However in order to discover the spiritual sense hidden beneath the corporeal sense we must posit an analogy: the eyes and ears are receptive to physical data, so there must be a similarly "receptive" faculty in the soul that works analogously to the eyes and ears to the end of bringing about "understanding." It is this moment, the moment of figuration that gets described metaphorically as a veil of figures in medieval exegesis.

The metaphor of veiling, which seems necessary to this model of interpretation, might strike the modern reader as strange: why veil another veil in order to reveal what is hidden beneath the first? And what about figurative language makes it like a veil? A medieval response to this question would argue, to put it simply, that figurative language is like a veil because it is not true, because figuration violates proper meaning making it, morally and grammatically, both unnatural and untrue. In contrast to the figurative, the literal dimension of a text was considered "true": first because on a Scriptural model the literal referred to historical events that Christian readers were supposed to believe actually happened (the literal was often referred to as the *sensus historicus*) and second because on a grammatical model the literal dimension referred to the proper meaning of a word, to the correspondence believed to be "natural" between signifier and signified (to use Saussure's terms). Literal meaning was considered true to the extent that it was "proper" and locatable while figurative meaning was considered "untrue" because it was improper and displaced.

The interpretive moment, in which the reader was to cover the literal in figures, was described as either a *translatio* (a transfer, or displacement) of proper meaning, or

tropus (a turning away) from proper meaning. *Translatio* was like a veil to the extent that in displacing and thus supplanting proper meaning it also tended to obscure the literal / "proper" meaning. This aroused a great deal of anxiety for medieval readers, because it was essential for this model of reading that the literal function transparently: The *sensus literalis* was the foundation for all other levels of meaning among which it was the most stable because of its anchoring in historical and grammatical truth. For this reason the veil metaphor was particularly useful since at this stage in the exegetical process the "untruth" of the figurative could be pulled away and shed aside, so to speak, revealing the divine truth that neither literal nor figurative meaning alone could point to. So the displacement of the proper and violation of the truth effected by figurative meaning was justifiable *only* to the extent that it would ultimately give way to the revelation of a much greater truth. Or to put it simply, according to the Scriptural model of interpretation we have been discussing, you have to violate the truth in order to tell the truth.

It is this "Scriptural" model of interpretation and its implicit understanding of the relationship between language and truth that informs the particular kind of revelation promised by the narrative of the *Roman de Silence*. Every scene that occurs between the baptism — in which she is given both a masculine name and masculine clothing — and the final stripping bare of her clothing and name, is structured around the tension that arises from the difference between her body and her clothing. This difference compels others to desire and interpret (*goloser / gloser*) Silence, whose masculine clothing is construed explicitly as unnatural (*denature*) and untrue (*mençoinge*). The metaphor of clothing in order to unclothe constitutes the master trope of the *Roman de Silence*.

To begin with, this metaphor extends beyond the story of Silence's deceptive masculinity to describe the narrator's conception of his narrative as a *translatio*, a poetic gloss or translation into French of a Latin original. The *Roman de Silence* figures itself explicitly as a veil of fiction (*mençoinge*) draped over a Latin original in the service of ultimately unveiling a greater truth that would have otherwise remained ineffable, silent. The narrator formulates his theory of fiction, not coincidentally, at the exact moment he is preparing to tell the story of how Silence's father, Cador (an author-figure himself) conceived of the deception to raise a girl in boy's clothing. Thus the fiction of Silence's feigned masculinity is compared to the fictional, veiled, status of the romance itself.

> De Cador, de s'engendreüre
> Comence chi tels aventure
> C'ainques n'oïstes tele en livre.
> Si com l'estorie le nos livre,
> Qu'en latin escrite lizons,
> En romans si le vos disons.
> Jo ne di pas que n'i *ajoigne*
> Avec le voir sovent *mençoigne*
> Por le conte miols acesmer :
> Mais se jel puis a droit esmer
> N'i mettrai rien qui m'uevre enpire
> Ne del voir nen iert mos a dire
> Car la verté ne doi taisir.
>
> Of Cador and his offspring / Begins such a tale of adventure / As you never heard of in any book. / Just as it was written / In the Latin version we read, / We will tell it to you in French. / I'm not saying that there isn't / A good deal of fiction mingled with truth, / In order to improve the tale, / But if I am any judge of things, / I'm not putting in anything that will spoil the work, / Nor will there be any less truth in it, / For truth should not be silenced.[20]
>
> (lines 1657-1669)

[20] All citations and English translations of the *Roman de Silence* are from Roche-Mahdi's edition and translation, except where otherwise noted.

The narrator prefaces the invention of Silence's fictional identity with what looks like a theory of fiction — perhaps even a theory of language. Fiction (*mençoigne*) must be added to the truth in order for the truth to be heard. In other words, the truth will otherwise remain silent without the "addition" or "covering" of lies.

For him, language is never quite identical with the truth. It is always in some way untrue because it is in a fallen state. This is most clear in his prologue. He inaugurates the story with a wordy lament on the fallen state of language:

> Car jo n'i fas nule sofime.
> Jal savés vus tres bien meïme :
> Losenge est mais en cor oïe [...]
> Car moult grans volentés me point
> De muevre rime et conmencier,
> Sans noise faire, et sans tenchier.
> Ebans fu ja rois d'Engletiere [...]
> Li siens comans n'ert pas jenglois.
>
> For I don't deal in sophistry. / Indeed, you yourselves know very well / that False Praise is preferred at court, [...] / For I feel a tremendous urge / to begin to tell my story / without a lot of fuss and bother [lit. noise or debate] / Once upon a time Evan was King of England. [...] / His rules were not just idle talk ["jenglois"].
> (lines 69-71; 104-6; 112)

False Praise — language with no truth referent — is now preferred at the court. All the poet can do is express a desire to tell his tale "sans noise faire, et sans tenchier." But he makes it clear that his desire to speak truth without making a fuss and without multiple perspective is *merely a desire*. In actual fact, the narrative of Silence itself is full of complaint, debate and references to the impotence of the narrator's speech — a linguistic blanket of melancholy white noise. His own speech is *jenglois* as opposed to the king's speech which is pure action, pure truth. Significantly, Heldris expresses the performative nature of the king's speech by denoting it through a negation: the king's speech is "pas

jenglois" (not the speech of poets / not fiction). This fantasmatic performative speech is lost in a distant past, a golden age of sorts, and is meant to be opposed to the present state of the royal court in which speech (disintegrated to the status of "lozenge") has lost its claim to truth.

From the preface we might assume that his opinion of poetry is low but in the passage we just examined, in which Heldris elaborates his theory of fiction, we learn that *jenglois* in fact has truth as its ultimate end while *losenge* does not. He conceives of *jenglois* thus as a drape of fiction analogous to the veils of figures in allegorical interpretation. For Heldris the truth is beyond words and is hence absolutely silent, lost to a golden age that cannot be restored. Without spoken language and its noisy fictions and approximations, the truth would be unable to come out of its silence — better then to lie to the end of revealing truth than not to speak at all.

In addition to figuring his story as *mençoigne* the narrator makes it clear that his story is a *translatio*: an improper transfer or displacement of proper meaning. It is both a translation in the sense we use the word today in English and a blanket of figures draped upon the text in order to reveal a truth perhaps obscured in the Latin original. This suggests the author of Silence conceived of the relationship between Latin and French as somehow parallel to the relationship between literal and figurative, or to the relationship between (silent) truth and (noisy) fiction. Latin is the language of the book, of the law and of patriarchal authority. The mention of a Latin original gives authority and truth-value to the author's *jenglois* French translation[21]. He writes that the Latin original is

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[21] The existence of a Latin original is itself a fiction, which is interesting to us because it would function analogously to a phallus. It would sustain the verisimilitude of Silence's story and the truth-value of the narrator's comments. It has a kind of cohesive function, this "covered"

written while his version will be spoken, ("Qu'en latin escrite lizons / En romans si le vos disons") giving us the image of something unstable and vacillating layered atop something stable and unified. French is the (feminine) language of the nurse ("norice") who is associated with allegorical personification of Nurture ("Noreture") and generally with the metaphor of clothing and covering. French is also the language of *jenglois.*

To give just one example, the relationship between French and Latin is perhaps best dramatized in Silence's name. He is baptized in Latin *Silentius* which enables him to inherit land and to transfer property. The Latin name enables Silence to be inserted, as though syntactically, within the system of patrilineal transmission. The narrator puns on the masculine ending *–us* of the name *silentius*, which is likened to a penis — since it can be removed — and is also the French translation of *usus* (social custom or grammatical norm). *Silentius* is thus grammatically and culturally masculine, granted with an imaginary phallus. At least according to his Latin name. Throughout the rest of the narrative, except the final scene of unveiling, Silence is named in French. In French the name *Silence* is epicene, morphologically the same whether its referent is feminine or masculine. The epicene name is *covierte* (veiled); it is ambiguous and arouses doubt and desire in those who encounter it: in its ambiguity and non-difference it "covers" Silence's Latin name. It functions much like the other instances of veiled speech in the *Roman de Silence* in which characters are confronted with the undecidability of a word which has two opposed meanings. Thus a comparison is drawn between Silence (the ambiguous epicene French name covering a marked unambiguous Latin original) and the narrator's conception of his work as a blanket of spoken words covering a written Latin original.

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referent that in fact does not even exist (like Silence's masculine ending beneath his clothing, like the Lacanian phallus behind its veil) but without which the story's cohesiveness disintegrates.

Translating from the Latin to the French is conceived as an additive process: the narrator conceives of his task as a covering, a noisy but beautiful blanket of words and figures layered atop a more literal and truthful, but less revealing (silent) Latin original. The verb he uses is *ajoigne* which means to add, to place, and to cover. Metaphors of addition and supplementarity define the interpretive moment in the *Roman de Silence.*

It is worth noting that this theory of fiction prefaces the moment in which the fiction of Silence's feigned masculine identity is conceived. The narrator, in theorizing the relationship between language and truth in these terms, invites the audience to interpret Silence in light of his theory of interpretation. It is a comparison that continues to be suggested at all the key moments in Silence's life. When she is born, Cador decides to cover her genitals in cloth so that the Priest charged with baptizing her does not recognize the deception. Cador then prays to God that their child will be able to "faire coverture". The expression *faire coverture* in Old French means figuratively 'to lie' and 'to deceive' as much as it refers literally to the physical act of covering. It also echoes an expression that appears frequently in the *Roman de Silence* "parole coverte" (veiled / covert speech) used to refer to deceptive, ambiguous, euphemistic or figurative uses of language. In other words, the metaphor of covering combines notions of figurative language, fiction and deception. Silence is all of these: only a man through the artifices, the "coverings" of fiction, she is also a figure for the relationship between language and the body, between literal and figurative, and between the biological and the cultural.

The antagonistic relationship between her body and her clothing references the relationship between language and nature that is precisely at stake in allegorical interpretation. As we see in Origen's response to the 'Arabian heretics', allegory arises in

response to the muteness of the natural body, to the perceived evil of the material world, promising that through figuration nature will reference the realm of truth. Allegory in that sense is always deeply concerned with the material, with the feminine, the corporeal[22]. To that extent Silence's is also the story of allegory, a female body likened to an imperfect cloth, ennobled by a drape of (masculine) figures which set out to ultimately reveal the divine truth hidden within Silence's imperfect embodiment. The following section thus looks at Silence as a kind of allegorical signifier — an embodied *parole covierte* — tracing the notion of *parole covierte* from the beginning of the romance (the lovers' dialogue of Cador and Eufemie) to the life of Silence.

The Body is Nothing but a Cloth

It is in the lovers' dialogue between Cador and Eufemie that the figure of covering is first used. The dialogue's emphasis on the undecidability of ambiguous speech in the mouth of the beloved anticipates the life of Silence who goes out into the world as an undecidable figure of speech ("Noreture li fait *sofime"* – Nurture made her into a sophism). The narrator uses the term "sofime" to describe a figurative, "improper" or dislocated use of language. Cador cannot decide on the meaning of the word *ami* uttered by his beloved:

> Mais que li parole est *covierte*,
> Car ja soit cho qu'ami le claimme

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[22] « For the Word came into the world by Mary, clad in flesh ; and seeing was not understanding ; all saw the flesh ; knowledge of the divinity was given to a chosen few. So when the Word was shown to men through the lawgiver and the prophets, it was not shown them without suitable vesture. There it is covered by the veil of the flesh, here of the letter. The letter appears as flesh ; but the spiritual sense within is known as divinity. This is what we find in studying Leviticus ... Blessed are the eyes which see divine spirit through the letter's veil. » (Origen, *In Libros Informationum Litterae et Spiritus super Leviticum Praefatio*, P.L.). Qtd. in Smalley p. 1.

> N'est pas provance qu'ele l'ainme [emphasis mine]
>
> Except that the word is ambiguous, / for the fact that she calls him "ami" / is no proof that she loves him.
>
> (lines 908-10)

Since the word can mean either 'friend' or 'lover', and could thus signify either 'I love you' or 'I don't love you,' Cador calls it a *parole covierte* — literally a *covered* word. The dual meaning of the word *covers* the true meaning or the speaker's intended meaning. This use of *parole covierte* or euphemistic-figurative speech — speech that hides its referent — was at the core of the codes of courtly love[23]. Lovers were always readers and readers always lovers. This is certainly the case in the *Roman de Silence* in which the enterprise of speaking with the beloved and decoding his speech is described using metaphors of textual exegesis. The narrator exploits the comparison of love and interpretation with frequent punning on the words *gloser* (to gloss) and *goloser* (to desire). In other words, the linguistic codes of courtly love creates a situation in which the lover is like a biblical exegete, unveiling a layer of fiction in order to access the truth.

The notion of a "parole covierte," an ambiguous object of interpretation compared to a love object, describes Silence on many levels. The entire life of Silence seems to replay the passion, uncertainty, and textuality of the lovers' dialogue. Everyone he encounters is compelled to interpret and desire him. Silence is a walking figure of speech, a *parole covierte* incarnated, who arouses from characters in the story — including, significantly, Cador her father — the same uncertainty and overwhelming love that the lovers feel faced with the other's speech and signs. There is not a character in the story who does not fall in

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[23] For an in-depth discussion of the role of euphemism in the linguistic codes of courtly love refer to Chapter 3 of the dissertation in which I discuss euphemism at length in reference to the dialogue between the Lover and Reason, on precisely this subject, in *Roman de la Rose.*

love with Silence, and not a character who is not put in the position to "read" Silence, to seek the truth, his "true nature". To that extent nearly every scene, each encounter with a new reader-lover threatens to unveil his sex. The notion of covering and uncovering (also: discovering) describes the narrative movement of a romance, an idea of the story as uncovering exciting new truths and at the same time draping them in a cloak of beautiful words: a conception of the jongleur close to a 20th century idea of the magician who should always mystify and demystify at the same time.

In effect, when the narrator describes the birth of Silence he describes his own telling of the event as follows: "Se jo le vus di et descuevre."[24] It is notably at the birth of the story's protagonist, the greatly anticipated moment when we find out whether the child is a boy or a girl, that the narrator describes his own enterprise as one of uncovering. As Cador and the audience wait for the sex of the newborn child to be unveiled, Heldris promises that the story will itself enact an unveiling. The metaphorical language used to describe the narrator's telling of the story and the metaphorical language used to describe Cador's decision to raise his girl-child as a boy invert and violate the natural order of paternity. Cador should be a "natural" father but instead becomes an "author-figure" who creates a veil of fiction over his natural child. And while Heldris promises to father the "natural" truth through his "unnatural" fictions, Cador denaturalizes the truth by fathering a fiction.

Thus even before the birth of Silence, Cador describes the deception he will author if the child is born a girl, in terms of covering:

> Se nos l'afaire ne menons
> Si cointement *par coverture*

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[24] Line 1800.

> Que on n'en sace l'aventure.
> Faisons le com un fil norir,
> De priés garder et bien *covrir* [emphasis mine]
>
> Unless we arrange things so / cleverly and secretly / that nobody finds out what we're up to. We will raise her as a boy, / watch her closely and keep her covered up. (1754-9)

By putting the words *cointement* and *coverture* together Cador would seem to be describing a poem he is planning to write. *Cointement* is an adverb used often in Old French to describe elegance in writing, and the art of rhetoric in general. It is also used to describe a courtly manner of speaking or acting as well as ornament, jewelry, and anything decorative. So Cador's idea is not simply to "cover" Silence's "nature" in the artifices of fiction but to do so beautifully and in a courtly manner. They will raise the child "com un fil" — like a boy — and watch him closely and cover him/clothe him well. Like the author of a poem Cador will do so with close careful attention "de priés garder". If he were writing a poem, its master trope would be simile: *like a boy* — and the figure to describe this trope is covering/clothing. But what does it mean to describe simile as a covering? Allegorical signification depends on correspondences, similes such as the one that defines Silence as a trope "like a boy". But "com un fil" is not simply a simile comparing two unlike things, it is a simile as a covering. In other words, the way "like a boy" is being used here refers to an imposition of masculinity. "Com un fil" is a catachresis in the end: masculinity as an imposition, as a figure for something that has no proper designation.

The description of Cador's plan is followed by a lengthy allegorical description of Lady Nature's creation of Silence, much reminiscent of Natura in Alain's *Anticlaudianus*. Like Cador, Nature is figured as an author creating a masterpiece: "or voel faire ouvre forcible." Her creation is described like a cross between the work of a sculptor and that of a

baker; She is made of the finest, thrice sieved flour, placed in a unique mold made especially for Silence. All this talk of matter, likening the body to an artist's clay, to a parchment, or to a baker's dough, leads the narrator to reflect on the materiality of the body. He declares:

> Ne poés vos sovent trover
> Vil cuer et povre, et riche cors
> Kist sarpelliere par defors?
> Li cors n'est mais fors sarpelliere,
> Encor soit de la terre chierre.
>
> Don't you often find / a poor, vile heart with a rich body, / which is nothing but sackcloth on the outside? / The body is mere sackcloth, / even if it's made from the finest clay.
>
> (lines 1842-6)

Importantly, as the creation of Silence's material body is narrated, the body is described as nothing but a cloth or covering. Given that Silence is consistently described in terms of his clothing or covering, the fact that the narration of Silence's material creation describes the body as "nothing but cloth" is quite suggestive. Silence, like allegory, is construed as a cloth (male deception) over a cloth (the body marked female). If the body is nothing but a cloth, and Silence is a cloth beneath a cloth, and who knows how many more cloths, then the project of unveiling Silence's body will be more complex than the narrative at first promises. In the following sections I focus on two moments in the story when Silence's body is unveiled. In reading these moments, I ask again, what kind of body is unveiled if not another cloth?

Li Ensegne: The Mark of Maculinity

The scene depicting Silence's birth is staged as a public spectacle. All of the barons are present waiting for news of the child's well being and, more importantly, for knowledge of its sex. The nurse announces the birth of a boy:

> [La norice] Vient en la sale tolt riant,
> Oiant tols les barons criant:
> "Faites vos liet, bials sire cuens!
> Jhesus le pius, le vrais, li buens,
> Un moult bel fil vos a tramis."
> [...]
> La lie chiere de la dame
> Ki en riant nonça la fame
> L'errance de son [Cador's] cuer deboute:
> Mais par lui mesme i est la doute
>
> She came into the room all smiles, / and cried out in the presence of all the barons, / "Rejoice, good Sir Count! / Jesus the pious, the true, the good / has granted you a most beautiful son." [...] The cheerful demeanor of the lady / who smilingly announced the news / opposed the doubt in his heart, / but he himself had caused this doubt
>
> (lines 1969-73; 1987-90)

Cador experiences "errance" (great doubt) as he hears his own words readdressed to him ("bials sire cuens") from the mouth of the nurse. The critical moment, in which the child's sex is announced, Cador experiences as a *parole covierte*. He knows he will hear the same words whether or not a biologically sexed male is born: the nurse's words will either announce the birth of a biologically sexed male or not. But I would suggest that the announcement "it's a boy" has a certain truth to it here, no matter how the child is sexed. It either announces the birth of a biologically sexed male or it announces the creation of a boy, referencing its power to do so in the very pronouncement of the boy's supposed sex. In other words, it either functions as a constative or a performative utterance.

This is why it is particularly important that the scene is staged as a public spectacle. Cador experiences a moment of disconnectedness from the whole spectacle of the birth because it functions *all too well* as the celebration of the birth of a baby boy. The nurse's laughter and the barons' joy seem almost menacing to him, perhaps because it compels him to face the reality that his "son's" masculinity is as much a product of the web of social relations into which he is born (here staged literally as a spectacle) as it is rooted in biological sex. Further, the disconnectedness he experiences is the effect of witnessing his own fiction work undifferentiatedly within this web of social relations as though it were truth. The scene represents what for Cador is a dislocating of the body as the ground for truth, a displacement of the very notion of "truth". He is disturbed at his own success because it points to the possibility that even his own masculinity, although putatively guaranteed by biological sex, is merely an effect of social relations. Significantly, much of this anxiety is displaced onto the feminine figure of the nurse in whom are condensed notions of education, artifice and the social.

Cador's anxiety in response to the success of his fiction reminds us that even the masculinity of a biologically sexed male would be a kind of *parole covierte*. The metaphors of veiling and fiction here suggest that masculinity as gender, and not just genitalia, is always a supplement or a covering, a kind of inscription draped atop a mute body. In fact, the scene uses the metaphor of textual exegesis quite explicitly in comparing the fictional veil of words ("it's a boy") to an allegorical veil of figures, and the "true sex" of Silence to the truth of allegory. The comparison of allegorical veiling to the artifices of masculinity embodied in the Nurse's utterance, "it's a boy", creates a comparison (or rather, an inter-seepage of meaning) between *truth* and *sex*. This suggests that, like the truth of allegory —

the ineffable divine truth which can never be fully unveiled but rather recedes ever more as further layers of veils are removed — biological sex is similarly inaccessible. It is only knowable through layer upon layer of unveiling. Just as with divine truth, there is no knowledge of biological sex without the veil of language here figured by the nurse's words and by Silence's masculine clothing. True knowledge of biological sex always threatens to withdraw in the same way the allegorical referent does. The body itself remains absolutely unmeaningly silent. And knowledge of this body, the fully unveiled body, can only provoke silence, a silence that is equated finally with shame — shame in the place of knowledge. Cador has to fight the shame provoked by his desire for knowledge of Silence's true sex. He has to verify by looking at the body of the newborn despite the shame "Li voloirs qu'a del voir savoir / Tolt qu'il ne puet *vergoigne* avoir / Qu'al lit ne voist de l'acolcie" (lines 2003-5). Even the visual apprehension of the newborn's sex is likened to a textual revelation: "Atant sa fille li ensaigne. / Li cuens le voit, et si le saine." (lines 2021-2). The rhyme pair *ensaigne / saine* indicates that as much as the child's sex is shown to Cador, it is not fully revealed but rather marked, signed, and finally signed with the mark of the cross [25]. This rhyme pair, through which the gender of Silence is likened specifically to a mark of the cross, is absolutely crucial to the rest of the story and will return in another pivotal scene of unveiling. What immediately follows this scene is Silence's baptism in which his masculine name is likened to the cloth with which his genitals are covered. There is thus a gradual textual progression whereby the nurse's announcement of a boy is materialized into the

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[25] **Enseignier** v. (XIe s., Alexis ; lat. pop. *insignare*, de *signare*, indiquer). 1. Marquer. –2. Montrer. –3. Faire signe. – 4. Faire la preuve. –5. Instruire. [...] **Saignier** v. V. SEIGNIER, marquer d'un signe, faire signe à, faire le signe de la croix. (All Old French word definitions are cited from, Greimas, A.J., ed. *Dictionnaire de l'ancien français jusqu'au milieu du XIVe siècle.* [Paris: Larousse, 1969])

masculine clothing of Silence (*wallés dras*) as Cador's deceptive fiction is materialized into Silence's deceptive clothing (*feinte vesteüre*).

This scene prepares us to examine another scene in the *Roman de Silence* in which Cador experiences the same sense of "error" faced with the veil of fiction that is his son. In the scene, Cador is confronted with his son dressed in jongleur disguise and experiences great doubt as to the identity of the jongleur presented to him. The scene is likewise staged as a kind of metaphor of interpretation: Cador the anxious reader must interpret the veil of fiction that is presented to him, except that his anxiety no longer turns around the question, "is he biologically male or not?" but rather "is he my son or not?"

Some background will be necessary before we discuss the actual father-son scene. When visited by two itinerant jongleurs Silence thinks to steal away and join them with the mind that, if ever discovered and made to become a woman, (s)he would at least have the consolation of her musical skills — which are transferable to the enclosed, sequestered, feminine sphere. So he learns *jonglerie* because it is one domain of knowledge that bridges the masculine and the feminine spheres. His choice of *jonglerie* is explicitly connected to Silence's recent realization that his masculinity is a fictional artifice authored by his father so that he may inherit and transfer power and property. Silence chooses *jonglerie*, I would suggest, because of the jongleur's particular relation both to fiction and to filiation. The fiction of the jongleurs is openly avowed as fiction. It does its work telling truth *as* fiction, as we learn from the narrator's reflections on fiction, related above. Silence chooses *jonglerie*, adding another layer of fiction, but a layer of fiction that avows itself as fiction. The avowedly unnatural quality of the jongleur's fiction has a denaturalizing effect on the supposedly natural veil of masculinity— the word *parody* comes to mind. In addition, the

choice of jonglerie goes right to the heart of what is at stake in Cador's deception with Silence, namely the continuity of inheritance through filiation and the stability of (written) transmission of property and tradition. The jongleurs are threatening precisely because their mode of transmission (oral) is not familial, not property-bound, not masculine — insofar as they function outside of patriarchal onomastics. In that sense the jongleurs are aligned with rupture, dislocation and to that extent, ultimately with death[26].

For this reason, perhaps, Cador, banishes all jongleurs from the kingdom threatening execution to all who remain and all who return to the kingdom after the disappearance of his son, which he imagines to be a kidnapping. As they mourn the loss of their son Cador and Eufemie refer to Silence twice (lines 3063 and 3116) as the "mireöirs del mont" (*speculum mundi* – mirror of the world). The formula *mirror of the world* was a commonplace medieval reference to literary representation[27]. Literary representation creates a mirror of the world in order to reflect what can be seen beneath its surface (or "veil of flesh" as we have been saying). The notion of mirroring refers specifically to the necessity of fiction in any mode of representation, including allegorical. Silence as the "mireöirs del mont" is thus a way of referring to Silence as Cador's fictional creation.

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[26] As Sturges argues, Silence's departure echoes that of the *juvenis*, the class of disinherited younger brothers who, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were left with no choice but to seek their fortunes in adventure: "Primogeniture, in Duby's analysis, created a crisis for the nobility in the category of class. Indeed, it created an entirely new class category of noble but penniless younger sons, a category Duby calls the *juventus* or 'youth': 'When deprived of any hope of certain interitance, younger brothers had often no other prospect than adventure' (Duby, *Chivalrous* 118). These younger sons were forced to seek their fortunes outside of their homes, at foreign courts, as wandering knights or as crusaders, the threat of their unconfined violence posing a danger to medieval society." (Sturges, 38). It is crucial, however, to keep in mind the fact that Silence is the first son (primogenitor). He decides to join the jongleurs by his own election!

[27] See Krouse on the medieval concept of *speculum mundi.*

As we analyze the following scene we should be especially mindful of this fact. How do we read the fact that Cador reacts to the loss of his own fictional creation by essentially banishing all creators of fiction from the kingdom? Is this banishing of the jongleurs what causes Cador to fail to recognize his son at first? In banishing the makers of fiction does Cador in some sense also retroactively erase his own status as a maker of fiction ? This erasure of fiction functions like disavowal. Cador must completely disavow the one condition for Silence's masculinity, his own *mençoigne* (fiction), because it is threatened by the jongleur whose fictions are avowed as such. If "jenglois" (fiction) is banished from the kingdom then there can no longer be doubt ("error") or debate ("tenchier") as to Silence's masculinity. The "fictional" status of his penis (phallus) is then disavowed so that it can function as though it were a literal, corporeal, penis.

Why this disavowal of Silence's fictional status?

Part of the answer resides in a paradox that arises from Silence's masculine masquerade. Cador authors the whole fiction in order to maintain the continuity of "natural" filiation. But in order to maintain the natural order, Cador had to effect a radically unnatural rupture. This makes Silence into something of a paradox: he is the unnatural creature who maintains the natural order, so long as we disavow his unnaturalness and disavow the rupture through which he was able to maintain the continuity of the natural order. It means that in Silence inheres the potential to explode the whole system, as much as he is necessary to its maintenance. It almost suggests that the banishing of the poets works as a retroactive banishing of Silence whose existence was a threat (as much as it sustained the order of things). This paradox explains why the jongleurs constitute such a grave threat to Cador's patriarchal order. Their fiction is avowedly fictional and avowedly unnatural. Furthermore,

the logic governing this paradox helps us understand the motivation for the disavowal at play in Cador's confrontation with his "son". It helps us understand why Silence cannot, must not, reveal himself as a "she" but rather reveal himself through a complex process of figuration and negation. In broader terms, it forces us to reconsider what kind of "truth" the unveiling promised by the narrative might constitute.

Thus when Silence returns, it is to a kingdom in which fiction — the very condition of his masculine identity — has been abolished. After he finally surpasses his teachers' skill as a jongleur, inciting their jealous rage, he overhears them plotting to hill him. Silence tricks them (with "parole covierte") into letting him live. He returns to the kingdom nostalgic for his parents, still in jongleur guise, but learns quickly that all jongleurs in the land are subject to execution. When the jongleur's presence is made publicly known in the kingdom, an elderly wise man advises Cador that the jongleur is in fact his son. ("Veés la vostre fil Silence"). Cador responds accusing the man of lying, "Traistor, tu mens." This is an instance of marked textual irony : Cador accuses the wise man of lying (tu mens) although he is by definition a creator of fiction (mençoigne) while the old man is by definition a seer (veés la). The elderly man then speaks to Silence and identifies him by referring to him as a counterfeit son, the product of a counterfeit upbringing ("Ne los a vos n'a vo parage / D'avoir mené si fait usage.)[28]. Although we presume that he knows the "true sex" of Silence, he successfully identifies Silence *not* by revealing him to be a woman but by identifying him as a fictional man, as an artifice (Silence is who he is, his "truth" is that he is a fiction, a "fait usage").

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[28] The expression "fait usage" is quite remarkable. The adjectival past participle "fait" simply means "the product of creation, production, authoring while "usage" is clearly a reference to Paul's "usum qui est contra naturam".

The elderly seer finally succeeds in convincing Cador to meet with the jongleur, convincing him that the jongleur has information about Silence. The count arranges for a meeting in a secret place (significantly, a "covered" place, "Li cuens violt bien cel plait celer"). Face to face with his son he is wracked with doubt. He vacillates between two certainties ("Et Dex, est cil! [...] Par foi, nenil!"), a distinct parallel to the moment he is confronted with Eufemie's ambiguous "ami" (she loves me / no she doesn't) or with the nurse's "it's a boy" (it's a boy / no, it's a girl). The narrator exploits the dramatic irony of the situation, a father who wants his son back but fails to recognize his son standing right in front of him:

> Son fil demande et il le tient;
> Il le convoite et nel voit nient!
> Li cuens est en dure sentence,
> Qu'il ainme plus son fil Silence
> Qu'altre richoise n'altre avoir,
> Et por quant ne le violt avoir!
>
> He asks for his son while holding him; / he wants to have him and can't see that he's there! / The count is serving a harsh sentence, / for he loves his son Silence / more than any wealth or possessions, / and yet he doesn't want to have him!
>
> (lines 3619-3624)

He sees his son but cannot see him. He has his son but cannot have him. Cador cannot see his "son" because Silence is dressed as a jongleur. The jongleur guise creates a second layer of clothing/fiction beneath which is hidden Cador's son. The second layer of fiction here (Silence as jongleur), in doubling up the structure of the veiled truth, has a defictionalizing, materializing effect on the first layer of fiction (Silence as man). This is made quite evident in the proliferation of masculine pronouns and the use of the word "fil" in reference to Silence.

Their father-son relationship can be summed up in this one phrase: *He sees his son but he cannot see him*: the notion of a seeing that is not seeing and a having that is not a having, et cetera, would have been familiar to a medieval reader as a theological formula (Origen: "...and seeing was not understanding; all saw the flesh..."). Seeing at the level of the corporeal and the literal is not "true" seeing; the reader must learn to "see" in a way that transcends the corporeal and the literal. Silence is likened to the veil of flesh and to the letter that clothes his "true" meaning while Cador is likened to the reader who fails to look past the literal and misses out on the joy of "possessing" the truth. But here what true vision will reveal is the knowledge of Silence as Cador's *true son*. Beneath the veil of his jongleur guise, Silence has thus materalized as the son Cador always wanted. Silence is as much or more a proper son to Cador as a sexed male son would have been. This redoubling of veils dramatizes the way cultural artifices, such as masculinity and filiation, are ultimately naturalized. One need only layer on a superficial veil of fiction and the deeper veil appears to be the truth in relation to the other(s). As this scene demonstrates, the truth, or what is deemed "natural" can only appear as such in relation to veils of untruth.

But Cador's failure to recognize his "son" standing before him, I would suggest, is not merely the result of Silence's jongleur guise. The encounter between father and son here is coursed with desire, as the use of demand verbs implies (*demande, convoite, ainme, violt*), but it is a desire that does not recognize its object. Cador's desire for Silence is predicated on the failure (or refusal) to recognize Silence, a disavowal of sorts. The split between seeing and having, exploited knowingly by the narrator here, dramatizes this disavowal (Il le convoite et nel voit nient! ... Et por quant ne le violt avoir!). Cador gets what he wants but cannot recognize it because recognizing it would be tantamount to acknowledging the

unnaturalness of putatively "natural" filiation. His own success at creating an unnatural filiation is also a threat to the cultural institution of filiation, which relies on an idea of itself as "natural". The medieval obsession with genealogy, of which the *Roman de Silence* is exemplary, stemmed from an anxiety concerning the maintenance of continuous lineage perceivably linked to a stable origin. This meant it was necessary to naturalize filiation — always at the brink of revealing itself to be a cultural artifice due to the fact of extra-marital sex — through an effacement of the feminine body. We might read Silence as a condensed figure for the simultaneous effacement of the female body, and for the naturalization of filiation, that was part and parcel of the high medieval conception of filial lineage. There is both an effaced "female body" and a naturalized "son" condensed within the name *Silentius*. Indeed, Howard Bloch, who is one of the first scholars to identify the rich potential of the *Roman de Silence*, claimed it as a "romance of succession" (195).[29] His treatment of the romance, while rigorous, does not take the question of filiation much farther than to claim its status as crucial to the narrative's construction of meaning.

Cador's disavowal shapes the way in which Silence will finally reveal his identity — as his father's son — to him. When Silence reveals himself to his father, it is not as a girl, but as a "cloth," a covering. He identifies himself both as a cloth and as covered:

> Vos savés bien de ma *nature*:
> "Jo sui," fait il, "nel mescrées,
> Com li malvais *dras* encrées
> Ki samble bons, et ne l'est pas.
> Si est de moi! N'ai que les *dras*,

---

[29] Bloch writes about the relationship between fiction and filiation (Marcabru) as follows : « In a false perception of filiation lies the beginning of fiction. The *losengiers* or spreaders of scandal misperceive true genealogy ; and this misperception — an invention synonymous with the troubadour's art (« Non sabon mais que n'an trobat ») — creates the conditions of the possibility of poetry itself. The love lyric or canso is a « caulking » of an unbridgeable gap in « true » paternity, a « filling-in » of an irrecuperable distance between language and meaning » (Bloch, 113)

> Et le contenance et le halle
> ki onques aparteigne a malle." [emphasis mine]
>
> You know my nature very well. / "I am" he said, "believe me, / like an inferior piece of cloth / powdered with chalk, that looks good, but isn't. / That's what I am! I have only the clothing / and bearing and complexion / that belongs to a man."
> (lines 3640-46)

Rather than unveiling he seems rather to redouble the veils: it is an unveiling by *adding* rather than removing. He reveals his nature, not by unveiling the unequivocal truth, but by referring to it through figures and periphrastic speech. The figures used to "unveil" the truth both compare Silence to cloth and refer only allusively to his identity through mention of his clothing. So rather than removing layers of cloth, Silence seems only to add more. As opposed to the final scene of unveiling in which his true sex is literally unveiled to the entire court, here he unveils himself *as* a veiled sex. Veiling is understood as a mode of revelation and identification: like Eufemie's "ami" and the nurse's "it's a boy". Silence claims that Cador knows his true "nature" ("vos savés bien de ma nature") but the "nature" Silence identifies as his own, is an identification with a defective cloth ("mescrées/com li malvais dras encrées"). And the identification with the defective cloth is precisely an identification with something against nature. The logic of her assertion works as follows: She is like a bad cloth because she only has the clothing of masculinity, but that clothing is disconnected from its natural referent (a flesh penis). She is thus like a sign divorced from its referent — cut from the natural referent that should anchor its meaning. But although she is dismayed that her masculinity is not anchored by a natural referent, her own words suggest that masculinity might be nothing more than a "malvais dras" a sign or product of language that is disconnected from "nature" just as Silence's phallus (his masculine ending) does not refer

to a literal penis. This divorcedness from his natural referent *is* Silence's true nature, as he suggests (vos savés bien de *ma nature*).

Immediately following this unveiling of Silence as veiled, as unnatural, is a more literal unveiling of the body. Silence follows these figural allusions to his true sex with a partial revelation of his body. He unveils his shoulder to reveal a birthmark in the shape of a cross :

> Sor diestre espaule li ensegne
> Une crois qu'il ot a ensegne.
>
> He showed him a birthmark shaped like a cross / that he had on his right shoulder.
> (lines 3646-47)

The fact that Silence has to resort to a literal unveiling suggests that one unveiling is not enough. There will always be more veils to peel away, perhaps endlessly. For although it supposedly reveals a body, this unveiling of Silence's shoulder does not reveal the "naked truth". Rather, it is a revelation of *scripted* flesh. Significantly the word for birthmark is "ensegne"[30] or "sign" the word both for a corporeal marking and a linguistic sign. The word also describes a penant that would carry the family insignia on it, so it also reveals Silence as marked by his lineage, by the force of a history and kinship structure that precedes him. Indeed, the punning use of the word *ensegne* recalls the scene in which Cador is presented with the newborn. He is shown (*li enseigne*) the child's sex and at the same time blesses the child with the sign of the cross (*le saine*), already using a masculine pronoun to describe the child. It is as though the birthmark in the shape of the cross were the literal materialization of this earliest blessing of the father, who makes the *sign* of the cross (*ensaigne / saine*) on

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[30] **Ensiegne** n.f. (Xe s., *Passion*). 1. Marque, tache. –2. Banderole de la lance, lance. –3. Signe, signal, indication. –4. Preuve: *les ansoignes l'en puet mostrer* (*Eneas*). –5. Cri de ralliement: *Carles (crie) Munjoie, l'enseigne renumee* (*Rol.*).

his newborn "son" (masculine pronoun) as the child is *shown* to him by the (already invisible) mother.

The multiple meanings of *ensegne* make it a "parole covierte" in the romance's own terms, suggesting in fact that the unveiled *ensegne* is itself a kind of veil or covering.[31] At the moment we are supposed to see flesh, instead we see a "sign" that blurs the orders of the corporeal and the linguistic. Something gets revealed, but if it's not literal flesh then what is it? The body is posited as truth here to the extent that the body and truth are presumed to stand outside of, or to exist prior to, any system of signs. But here the revealed body is itself *marked* by a sign. There can be no "naked truth" below language, no naked body below the language that clothes and speaks it. The body is from the beginning "marked", that is, written and encoded in signs — it is in its very nature already a matter for linguistic signification. Rather than revealing the "naked truth" Silence reveals the truth as always already mediated, veiled, encoded.

This has implications for how the romance construes masculinity, in particular. Silence is here unveiled as "dressed like a man" — as veiled — and it is this that identifies him as "Cador's son", and *not* as Cador's daughter. Masculinity is thus construed as a play of surfaces that creates the illusion of depth (i.e. the illusion of a penis beneath the veil) but that is essentially nothing more than a masquerade. Masculinity is construed here precisely as an "ensegne", a marking of the flesh through which the orders of the corporeal and the linguistic become impossible to separate, and at the same time a mark of the family insignia, a haunting inscription of the past (of the family name and the imperative to continue the

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[31] Incidentally moreover, one meaning of *ensegne*, "banderole de la lance" would have been made of cloth. A medieval reader could imagine this word as referring to a kind of cloth that would be at the same a "sign" connected to patrilineal transmission of land and power. Since the ensegnes were expressly for the purpose of expressing familial appurtenance.

lineage) directly onto the mute body. Silence's partial revelation, and what it reveals about masculinity and filiation, will haunt the final scene in which his true sex is revealed to the royal court.

Al descovrir de sa nature

The scene of Silence's baptism, in which he is named and given the masculine ending is set in parallel with the final scene of unveiling, in which the masculine ending is removed and a feminine ending is added. Placing the two passages next to one another enables us to see the extent to which the gendered endings –US and –A are likened to the veils of masculine or feminine clothing, or more precisely, to the notion of gender as non-coincident with biological sex. In addition, the scene of unveiling is likened to a castration. But, as we will see, it is a symbolic castration that not only affects Silence but also castrates all who are witness to the unveiling of his "true sex."

The naming and conferral of the masculine ending :

> Et s'il avient par aventure
> Al *descovrir* de sa nature
> Nos muerons cest –us en –a
> S'avra a non Scilentia.
> Se nos li *tolons* dont cest –us
> Nos li donrons natural us,
> Car cis –us est contre nature,
> Mais l'altres seroit par nature [emphasis mine]
>
> And if by any chance / his real nature is discovered, / we shall change this –us to –a, and she'll be called Silentia. If we deprive her of this –us, / we'll be observing natural usage, / for this –us is contrary to nature, / but the other would be natural.
> (lines 2076-81)

The removal of the masculine ending and feminine renaming:

> Silence atornent come[32] feme.
> Segnor, que vos diroie plus ?
> Ains ot a non Scilensiüs ;
> Ostés est –us, mis i est –a
> Si est només Scilentiä.
>
> They dressed Silence as a woman. / Lords, what more can I say? / Once he was called Silentius: / they removed the –us, added and –a, / and so he was called Silentia.
>
> (lines 6664-68)

The noun *us*, and the masculine noun ending *–us*, are both set in opposition to nature : *us* is of the order of culture/custom[33] while the masculine ending *–us* is purely grammatical, and is being used in this case to defy nature. The masculine ending is likened to masculine clothing which can be removed to reveal the truth, as suggested by the verb *tolir* here: "nos li tolons dont cest –us"[34]. Heldris' puns on the double meanings of both *us* and *nature*[35] both in order to grant Silence a figurative penis and to point to the ungroundedness of masculinity. The metaphor implicit here likens genitalia to grammatical endings, highlighting the problem of determining biological, "true" sex.

Silence's masculine clothing functions similarly to the masculine ending in his Latin name: both work against nature. Both Silence's masculine clothing and the masculine ending are understood to adjoin ("ajoigne") fiction to the truth. They are

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[32] Again, the word is "com" – simile, catachresis...

[33] **Us.** n.m. (1164, Chr. De Tr. ; lat. *Usum*). 1. Usage, emploi [...] –2. Habitude, coutume. –3. Existence: *Qui en infer soeffre mal us* (Chr. De Tr.). –4. Usufruit.

[34] And yet the opposition is confused by the fact that us can also refer to existence/essense, and that –us is a pun on the genitals (could quote self here). Opposition breaks down around the notion of a removable penis...figure this out later, or save til queer section.

[35] **Nature** n.f. (1119, Ph de Thaun ; lat. *natura*). 1. Ensemble des lois qui régissent l'univers (Br. Lat.). –2. Personnification de ces lois [...] –3. Essence, condition propre à un être ou une chose (Chr. de Tr.). –4. En part. une bonne nature [...] –5. Parties du corps humain servant à la génération : *Mais il cueuvrent leur nature d'un pou de drap* (M. Polo).

"adjoined" in order create and sustain participation in the patriarchal sphere of father-son filiation. Both are removed at the end of the story. Thus masculinity itself functions as a supplement, an effect of culture (*us*) rather than the direct expression of some kind of bodily rootedness in biological sex. Gendering is an unnatural gesture that cannot help but go against nature. This suggests that even if the masculine grammatical ending were to coincide with the biological sex, it would still be a denaturing gesture to add the "us" or the "a". Gendering is unnatural because it is not anchored in biology. Cador can "add" the *–us* to Silence's name although it is against custom and against nature, because it can be removed later "al descovrir de sa nature" at the unveiling or discovery of his true nature — or if we read the narrator's pun on the word "nature" the Latin word ending will removed upon the unveiling of the sex. The fact that it can be removed, which Heldris insists on here, demonstrates that masculinity is not anchored in biology.

The removal of Silence's masculine ending, which coincides with the unveiling of the "true sex" is also likened to a castration. It is both literally and symbolically like a castration. Exposing Silence's biological sex (to a court of powerful men) is the same as removing Silence's potency as an agent in the masculine sphere of father-son filiation. At the moment the non-coincidence of the genitals to the masculine ending is supposedly revealed, the masculine ending must be removed and replaced by a feminine ending. But the unveiling of a noncoincidence of biological sex and masculine ending is far more castrating to the knights who are witness to Silence's unveiling, who presumably understand their own masculinity to be anchored in biological sex. What is truly castrating, in this scene, is the experience of noncoincidence of the biological sex and the

masculine ending, which Silence's success as a man reveals to them — the revelation, precisely, of a non-rootedness of gender.

If the unveiling of Silence's genitals is like a castration, then we might ask: what finally gets revealed when Silence's true nature is unveiled to the audience? And what does this comparison of Silence with the metaphor of veiling in medieval exegesis reveal to us about allegorical interpretation? The line "al descovrir de sa nature" suggests an equivalence between genitalia and truth, both hidden beneath Silence's clothing to be "discovered" once "uncovered". If the castrating revelation of the non-rootedness of gender is the "truth" promised by the unveiling, then what does this say about the truth referent of allegory? Is it equally castrating to bear witness to the non-coincidence of word and thing?

We should be cautious, however, about assuming that the final revelation of Silence's true sex enacts a complete and total unveiling. A number of aspects about the final scene of unveiling indicate otherwise. To begin with, just as the scene in which the sex of the newborn Silence is announced, it is staged as a public spectacle. More than seven hundred people gather to watch as Silence brings the denatured magician to the court:

> Or a Merlins moult mal tissu.
> Plus de .vii. .c. en sunt issu
> Por Merlin garder a mervelle.
>
> Now Merlin was really in a fix. / More than seven hundred people turned out / to gaze in wonder at him.
>
> (lines 6181-83)

The scene, like many others in *Silence*, is structured around metaphors of covering and uncovering. Merlin's predicament is appropriately referred to as a "tissu" (a cloth)

because it is quite literally a question of veiling or unveiling. Merlin will be demanded to unveil a truth that no one can tolerate hearing, a truth that will unravel the very symbolic order that structures his and Silence's place in the court. An enormous crowd gathers to witness the "mervelle" of the magician. The word "mervelle"[36] suggests both an unveiling and a spectacle. Silence himself sees Merlin as the man who will "uncover" him. Silence believes that Merlin will unveil his "crime against nature" to the audience:

> Par lui [Merlin] perdrai jo tolt mon pris,
> Car il fera *descoverture*
> De quanque ai fait *contre nature*.
>
> Because of him, I will lose everything, / for he will reveal / what I have done that is contrary to nature.
>
> (lines 6455-57)

Silence's covering is understood as a crime against nature, a violation of the proper. Merlin takes the role of the masterful hand which initiates the final unveiling of the long awaited "mervelle". He is the authorial figure who will reveal hidden knowledge to his audience:

> Il tienent or Merlin por sot,
> Mais il *decoverra* le pot. [emphasis mine]
>
> They thought Merlin was a fool, / but he was about to lift the lid off the pot.
>
> (lines 6186-7)

But as much as the public staging of the scene and its construal as a *mervelle* promise an ultimate unveiling, it also warns the audience of the dangers such an unveiling might entail. Merlin's initial response to knowledge of Silence's true sex is to bend into

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[36] **merveille** n.f. (XIe s., Alexis; lat. pop. **mirabilia*). 1. Ce qui provoque l'étonnement, l'admiration. –2. Chose étonnante

uncontrollable laughter, a laughter that can be read as expressing an imperative not to know at the same time it expresses knowledge of the truth:

> Dont prent Silence a regarder
> Et s'on le deüst dont larder
> Ne se tenist il pas de ris,
> Mais ne dist mot, tant lor fist pis
>
> Then he began to look at Silence, / and even if they had burned him alive, / he couldn't have stopped laughing, / but he didn't say a word, no matter how upset they were.
>
> (lines 6239-42)

His laughter is so powerful it prevents him from speaking at all when he is first presented to the royal court. But as much as laughter prevents the speaking of the truth it points to Merlin's knowledge of the truth. It is the laughter that compels the king to seek Merlin's knowledge in the first place. But Merlin refuses to reveal this knowledge even after repeated beatings and four days of starvation in prison. It is, notably, only with the threat of decapitation by naked sword (espee nue) that Merlin finally speaks. Only when the punishment is equal to the gravity of his particular revelation, a revelation that will symbolically castrate the entire court (notably full of chevaliers, who would be most invested in *and threatened* by Silence's masculinity), will Merlin fold and reveal the truth. Thus the revelation of Silence's true sex is in the end a *reluctant* one. Moreover, laughter would be the only appropriate response to the particular kind of knowledge promised by the unveiling of Silence's naked body. On the one hand it expresses knowledge. But it expresses the knowledge as something that *should not* or *cannot* be transmitted. Hence when he is finally forced to speak, Merlin speaks using veiled language, revealing while maintaining the veil of language:

> Li sale est de chevaliers plaine :
> Oiant trestolt Merlins devine

> Alques priés de la verté fine,
> Mais la parole est moult obscure
> Car dite est *par coverture.*
>
> The hall was filled with knights, / all listening to Merlin / almost revealing the complete truth, / but obscuring his meaning / by means of veiled statements.
> (lines 6486-90)

The crowd is described as always "somewhat close to hearing the real truth" but they can only approach it, it will always escape their grasp, because Merlin speaks "par coverture"[37]. Merlin's revelation veils as it unveils. We see how this operates in the actual representation of Silence's final unveiling. Merlin first announces that Silence has in fact only the clothing of a man:

> Silences ra moi escarni
> En wallés dras, c'est vertés fine,
> Si est desos les dras meschine.
> La vesteüre, ele est de malle
>
> Silence, on the other hand, tricked me / by dressing like a young man: in truth, he is a girl beneath his clothes. / Only the clothing is masculine.
> (lines 6534-37)

What strikes the reader about this revelation at first is that Merlin, master of all knowledge, reveals to the audience that he was fooled (*escharni*: also = shamed), or in other words that in Silence he encountered a failure to know. So the first order of the revelation, what should be revealing knowledge to the audience, is the revelation of a failure in knowledge, or rather an abyss in the place of knowledge. It is an abyss that shames Merlin (escarni), an abyss associated with the muteness of the naked body.

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[37] The final scene becomes a mise-en-abyme of the jongleur's performance of the romance itself: Merlin — revealing truth to the audience through veiled / figurative language — is the jongleur with his crowd of chevaliers filling in for the audience. Keeping with the analogy, Silence would figure the body of the text itself : mute, on display, layered with drapes of figurative language — marvel in the end.

Second, the phrase "c'est vertés fine" is ambiguous. It refers either to the fact that Merlin was fooled by Silence "en wallés dras" or to the fact that Silence is "desos le dras" a woman. In other words, the "truth" in question refers more precisely to the difference, or to the unbridgeable gap, between the masculine clothing and her body. In the expression "si est desos les dras meschine" the affirmative "si est" in Old French is typically a way to affirm the contrary of something said before, to the effect of "but actually". This suggests we read "c'est vertés fine" (which most have taken to mean something like "but actually") as referring to the fact that Merlin was fooled by Silence "en wallés dras"[38]. So the truth is first that Silence fooled or shamed Merlin in men's clothes, and only secondarily (or supplementarily) that he is actually a woman beneath those men's clothes. I think it is important to underline the ambiguity of the referent to "c'est vertés fine" because it shifts slightly how we understand these revelatory words to be functioning. The fact that Silence is a woman beneath men's clothing is less "the truth" than it is an addendum to "the truth", added by the "si est".

Merlin's figurative unveiling, however, is not enough. The king must demand proof in the form of a more literal unveiling. Thus he orders Silence to be undressed using, significantly, the verb *despollier*:

> Et Silence despollier roeve.
> Tost si com Merlins dist les trueve.
> Tolt issi l'a trové par tolt. [lit. He found it thus in all [the right] places ... And thus he found him to have everything]
> En la sale ot moult grant escolt :
> Nus n'i parla se li rois non,
> U s'il nel conmanda par non.

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[38] Sarah Roche-Mahdi's English translation has the "c'est vertés fine" refer to the fact that Silence is a girl underneath her clothing: "In truth, he is a girl beneath his clothes." But this translation elides the existence of the particle "si" which must be accounted for in some way.

> He ordered Silence to be undressed. / It was just as Merlin had said: / he found everything in its proper place. / There was complete silence in the hall: / No one would speak except the king himself, / or whomever he commanded by name. (lines 6571-77)

First the revelation unveils the fact that everything is just as Merlin said[39]. The word "com" (com Merlins dist = as Merlin said) is the same word that characterizes Cador's fiction when he decides to raise the child "like" a boy (com un fil). The simile or catachresis suggested by Merlin's use of the word "com" marks this as a moment of literary creation. It is as if Silence switches from being *as Cador says* to being *as Merlin says*, from being the product of one author-figure to being the product of another author-figure, but always the product of speech even in this moment of supposed revelation. The verb used to describe the exposure of Silence's genitals is worth considering for a moment. They are not seen or witnessed but rather they are *found*. The verb (*trover*) is used twice in two consecutive lines: 1. "Just as Merlin said he *found* them [plural genital referents?]" and 2. "He *found* him/her with everything". In the first line the object of *trover* is the pronoun *les* which presumably refers to the plural biological referents that would indicate a sexed woman (breasts, genitals), while in the second line the object of *trover* is probably Silence (s/he was found to have everything). From the first line to the second the plural genital referent is crystalized into Silence, herself, who becomes, in other words metonymically subsumed to her "parts" (inverse metonymy) — part *becomes* whole. This process whereby part becomes whole describes the beginning of Silence's new interpellation as a woman, the beginning of the effects of the feminine ending (a

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[39] The use of the word "com" ("com Merlins dist") recalls the founding of Silence's feigned masculinity announced by Cador's words, ("com un fil"). Cador and Merlin are parallel figures, both authorial, and they are both significantly associated with simile, analogy, metaphor via the use of this word "com".

part) onto the entirety of her being (whole). Moreover the verb *trover* has a distinctly rhetorical-poetic meaning ("inventer, composer, faire des chansons").[40] This further emphasizes Merlin's role as an author figure whose words, like Cador's "it's a boy", have a performative effect on reality. Silence's true sex is not "discovered" as much as it is rewritten, reinscribed onto her body. And it is Merlin who, in the revelation of an abyss in the place of the body, finally authors this reinscription of gender onto Silence.

But what can we say about this abyss, the interim space of time during which Silence is exposed to the court, deprived of masculine ending but not yet re-inscribed with a feminine ending? Do we see a body then? Is vision of this impossible body, or rather vision of its impossibility, what castrates?

While the verb *trover* is the verb used to describe the action of unveiling Silence's true sex, the noun *tolt* (everything) is used to refer to Silence's revealed sex. The whole narrative moves towards the revelation of Silence's true sex and the audience, hoping perhaps for specific knowledge of sexual difference (read = a glimpse of female genitalia), gets *everything* instead of specific knowledge of sex. Silence is found to be "par tolt", *with everything*. *Everything* here is a euphemism to refer to the *nothing* that is found, not to her genitalia as a lack — after all, her genital referents are plural! — but rather to the body that Silence had successfully veiled for so long as an absence or silent presence. To the extent that "tolt" is a euphemism it is also a "parole covierte" meant to cover. So again, when the final unveiling is supposed to occur, we are witness instead to what is perhaps the most powerful of textual veils, an *everything* covering over a *nothing*

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[40] **Trover** v. (fin XIe s., *Lois Guill.* ; lat. Pop. **tropare*, de *tropus*, fig de rhétor.). 1. Inventer, composer, faire des chansons. –2. Découvrir, trouver. [...] **troveure** n.f. (fin XIe s., *Lois Guill.*) 1. Poésie, composition littéraire. –2. Action de trouver, trouvaille. •**troveor** n.m. (1160, **Ben.**). 1. Celui qui trouve, imagine. –2. Trouvère –3. Menteur.

or an abyss. The word is also a homograph with the verb *tolir* in the third person ("tolt") used to describe the action of removing Silence's masculine ending and would also be used to describe the lifting of a veil. *Tolt* as a verb is thus the verb of castration. This vacillation between everything and nothing is exactly what is at stake in the scene of unveiling because the particular nothing being covered by everything, here, is the body. There is an absence, or silence, of the body prior to its inscription within language. Thus the word in both its meanings has an effect of simultaneous covering and uncovering, of simultaneous everything and nothing.

Nonetheless, in the paradoxical generalizing-localizing effect of this veil of *everything* over an abyss/absence/silence (Barthes calls it "la mise-en-scène d'une apparition-disparition") another order of revelation occurs. This is not the expectant vision of an unveiling of the true sex but the glimpse of an intermittence, in the period between the removal of the masculine ending and the reinscription of the feminine ending. And it is this, I would like to suggest, that comes closest to realizing the narrator's desire to reveal the naked truth. If there is the revelation of a body that is prior to or outside of inscription it happens at this moment in the narrative. If there is the revelation of a body here, it is a revelation that both unveils the body as silent (as the ground of silence itself?) and imposes silence on those who behold the body. The audience of seven hundred — figure, as I've mentioned before, for the web of social relations into which we are born, and hence for the interpellative force by which gender is inscribed — are compelled by the spectacle of Silence's revelation into a state of total, absolute, silence:

> En la sale ot moult grant escolt :
> Nus n'i parla se li rois non,

U s'il nel conmanda par non.

As I have mentioned, for Heldris, the "truth" is beyond words and is hence by definition silent. Since the ultimate truth around which the entire narrative of Silence is built is in a sense a fantasmatic body that would exist prior to inscription, the text suggests that there is a body that can be accessed. But this body is silent. It might even be the definition of silence itself. So to answer the question the *Roman de Silence* seems to be asking, is there true biological sex outside of the coverings of gender? We might say, yes, but it only reveals itself in the silence that subtends the melancholic speech of the narrator. There is no way to designate it without already resorting to the veils of language that would render the body always already gendered.

Silence is unique in that this silence of the body prior to language becomes inscribed in his/her proper name. The name itself is perfectly emblematic of the relationship between the body, prior to the inscription of gender, and language as the inscription of gender. Whether he is called silenti-us or silenti-a the root of the name remains, and it is this root that is most radically "proper" in that it refers singularly to the singular body inscribed with that name. In other words, if you remove the grammatical endings you are left with a root that cannot function in language (it no longer has syntactic value) but that signifies nonetheless. In either its feminine or the masculine incarnation, the name signifies *silence,* referring to an absence of language, an absence of voice. The name itself ultimately refers to the silence of the body prior to the linguistic inscription of gender.

Thus the plight of Silence also references the relationship between the proper name (radically singular) and the common noun (necessarily general). In the vacillation

between everything (euphemism) and nothing (body) we also see a vacillation between language as a system that necessitates generalization and language as a means of designating individual things. The radically proper (or singular) must be negated in order for language to function as a system. Heldris suggests as much in his pun on the words *non* (negation) and *non* (proper name): ("Nus n'i parla se li rois non. / U s'il nel conmanda par non."). Silence's submission to the (generalizing) demands of linguistic gender ultimately requires her to sacrifice her singularity. This sacrifice is necessary in order for Silence to be a subject of language and of the culture in which she lives. In order to speak she must also renounce a certain agency that one would have as a singular, proper, name. For this reason, I suggest, there is an immense ambiguity to be found in her final speech, which she pronounces just before submitting to the final switch of gendered markers. She goes from the radical singularity of silenti– (a syntactic root) to silenti-a (gendered proper name).

Silence experiences the moment in which body becomes coincident with the grammatical ending of his/her name simultaneously as a silencing and a "finding» of voice. Her last words, spoken just after she is stripped bare in front of the court, are taken to be the "naked truth":

> La vertés nel puet consentir
> Que jo vos puissce rien mentir,
> Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir.
> Faites de moi vostre plaisir.
>
> Truth does not permit me / to continue to lie to you / Nor do I care to remain silent any longer (alt: Nor do I have any care but to remain silent[41]) / Do with me what you will (alt: have your pleasure with me)

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[41] The ambiguity of this line has caused some controversy. Roche-Mahdi argues in a footnote to her article, "Gaunt's translation of this line (1990, 213) has caused much mischief (e.g. Waters 1997, 36); it has even surfaced in the *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (1996, 232). His reading 'I only care to be silent' goes against both context and syntax. It destroys the irony of

But while her story is told in the mode of naked truth, the phrase that announces her entry into silence is suspended between two completely opposed meanings. She says: "ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir," which, because of the polyvalent word *mais* meaning both 'never' and 'but', can be translated as *either* "nor do I care to keep silent any longer" *or* "nor do I have any care but to remain silent". In two alternate readings of the same sentence she either reclaims a voice that she didn't have as an unnatural man, or as a natural woman renounces her agency as a speaking subject. At the moment of unveiling, she inhabits the voice, which speaks her true sex and naked body, but this voice must be silenced in the exact moment it is allowed to speak. The paradox embodied in the mutually impossible double meaning of Silence's last words points to allegory's construal of its object of knowledge as feminine, and consequently the difficulty of thinking feminine voice except in paradoxical terms. Silence's naked body is construed as the object of knowledge, the degree zero of Heldris's narrative, as the naked truth of sexual difference. It is the abyssal silence of this naked body that the final scene of castration reveals. The metaphor of the veil, rather than revealing any kind of truth, reveals a deep lack of agency and voice at the space where the figurative unveiling is supposed to reveal the hidden truth, where the body is supposed to reveal itself to be more than a body, where sex is supposed to reveal itself to be more than sex, etc.

In this process that I have described as allegorical, of clothing the ineffable truth in figures so that we may unclothe and discover the truth within, the female body gets

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the situation: Silence finally speaks the truth, but as Eufeme's replacement, she will be silenced from now on" (21). ("A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the Roman de Silence," *Arthuriana* 12.1 (2002): 6-21). She is seems unwilling to accept that Heldris might have intended a double meaning, although she suggests as much in evaluating the irony of the situation.

construed as the object of allegorical knowledge, and as such becomes that thing outside of language that language strives to attain. In other words the female body is construed as the condition of knowledge, which must by definition be outside of knowledge, and as such represents an abyssal and terrifying silence, the absolute outside of discourse.

Chapter 3
Clothing Unspeakable Monstrosities

Introduction: Clothing Unspeakable Monstrosities

The title of Alain de Lille's *De planctu Naturae*[1] (*Of Nature's Complaint)* promises the reader knowledge of the referent of Nature's complaint, if only he continue to read past the title. What follows is, indeed, a complaint uttered from the mouth of Lady Nature. But at the surface of her language we discern little more than that her complaint refers to unspeakable monstrosities (*monstra nefanda*). The object of her complaint is thus somehow one that cannot be spoken, or at least not named or denoted as one might normally expect the referent of an invective to be. These monstrosities are apparently so unspeakable that Nature must refer to them exclusively through allusive, euphemistic metaphors. Nonetheless, context clues — namely sexual allusions from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* — suggest sexual disorder of some sort as the object of her complaint. In addition, the very fact that the invective is uttered from the mouth of Nature, who was associated with sexuality insofar as sexual sins were euphemistically named "sins against nature" (*peccata contra Naturam*), further suggests that Nature's complaint would be directed against those sins that work against her purpose. In particular, both the unspeakability and the unnaturelness of the sexual sin(s) in question suggest that Nature's complaint targets homoerotic sex above all. In his book, *The Invention of Sodomy*, Mark Jordan demonstrates, tracing the theological codification of the term *Sodomia*, how homosexuality came to be constituted as *the* unspeakable sin, and how it came to be known as the sin, above all others, against nature. It is thus paradoxically because of the allusive and euphemistic quality of its denunciation that we can know with some confidence that the sexual disorder in question is homoerotic sex.

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[1] The title was added by copyists only after Alain's death. See Häring on the various manuscript histories and traditions of titling *De planctu*.

In fact, there is an overwhelming consensus among readers of *De Planctu* that Nature's complaint targets homosexuality alone. This is problematic only when such an interpretation is presented as though no interpretation were required, which has most often been the case: these readers seem to forget the process of decoding that had to occur before they could posit the referent of Nature's complaint as homoerotic sex. I find this astonishing, since one of the most marked features of Alain's allegory is the opacity of its language, along with the difficulty and complexity of its allusive metaphors. It is precisely this opacity and allusiveness that enables readers to declare with such easy conviction that the object of Nature's complaint is homosexuality. In other words, the opacity of the language tricks the reader into not seeing it as opaque because it is a specific kind of opacity — that of euphemistic reference to homoerotic sex — an opacity that automatically signifies homosexuality. This paradox should be taken into account as we analyze the use of euphemism in *De Planctu.*

Although no one has addressed the euphemistic mode of Nature's complaint in depth, a few critics concerned with sex and language in *De Planctu,* have noticed Alain's belabored use of euphemism. Larry Scanlon comments briefly on his use of "tropes of unspeakability":

> Alain accomplishes his attack on homoerotic acts almost exclusively through tropes of unspeakability. They are "unspeakable monstrosities" (*monstra nefanda*, 808, I, 52), and as Nature explains, "monstrous vices" should be covered with "euphonious speech" (*predictis viciorum monstris euphonia orationis volo pallium elargiri*, 839, 194-95). [...] While the term *nefandum* had been associated with homoeroticism since late antiquity, no one before Alain exploited it anywhere near as systematically or self-consciously. To render something unspeakable is not only to speak of it but to give it a paradoxical prominence, and Alain not only acknowledges this paradox but revels in it.[2]

Two of Scanlon's points need to be highlighted: First, that this is a *systematic* exploitation of euphemism as a self-conscious *linguistic* trope. The implications of his

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[2] Scanlon, 218-219.

observation are far reaching: if we understand euphemism in *De Planctu* as systematic and self-conscious, we should also be able to read Alain's work as a reflection on — and not just a prudish use of — euphemism. In other words, *De Planctu* might be concerned less with homoerotic sex *per se*, as much as with the ways silence and euphemism punctuate discourse on sex, or the ways speech about sex can bring about silence and euphemism interrupting the proper referential function of language. It is not so much a question of shifting the emphasis from *sex* to *language*, but rather reflecting more carefully and at greater length on the way Alain uses tropes of unspeakability, how they function as a reflection on sex *and* language. Second, Scanlon observes how the paradoxical term *nefandum* both hides the sexual referent and at the same time gives it great prominence. From this observation, we see that Scanlon takes his cue from Foucault, who shows in *Histoire de la sexualité* the paradoxical ways sex had to be constituted as unspeakable in order for it to become the thing one confesses. Foucault's study, not coincidentally, gives a great deal of weight to the period during which *De Planctu* was written, a period during which the church formalized its stance vis-à-vis Sodomy, and during which the church began to institute confession systematically. Like Scanlon, queer medievalists have accomplished many fruitful readings by studying, via Foucault, the paradoxical ways silence constitutes sex as an unspeakable sin that must be confessed. But what is unique about *De Planctu*, and I agree with Scanlon here, is its unique position in the corpus of medieval writing as a systematic reflection on euphemism, one of the very few works of its time to ponder so rigorously the ways language can both hide and designate a sexual referent.

De Planctu is thus not simply a medieval text to be read in light of queer theory, I believe, but rather a queer theory in its own right to the extent that it reflects critically on the function of euphemism, a mode of reference that has a special, even privileged, relationship to homosexuality. But for us to disengage this text's own "queer theory", we need to understand first how it exploits euphemism, how its definition of euphemism

might differ from our definition, and finally we need to reflect on how *De Planctu* is a reflection on language and sex, in general, and euphemistic modes of reference in particular.

Thus, my reading focuses initially on the peculiar mode of euphemistic reference Alain chose to use: the grammatical metaphor. Grammatical metaphors in *De Planctu*, refer to sexual acts and preferences, without explicitly naming them, by drawing a metaphorical comparison. To use one famous example, the narrator uses the terms *subject* and *predicate* to refer to masculine and feminine roles in bed. The grammatical term is meant to function as a euphemism, covering over "monstrous vices" with "euphonious speech", as *Nature* argues. But the reader is left wondering whether grammatical metaphors can count as euphonious speech — is grammar beautiful? —and whether these grammatical metaphors finally succeed in covering, that is to say, preventing the reader from apprehending the sexual referent. We find that, more than covering, the grammatical metaphor teaches us about the sexual referent by way of the comparison it draws.

Comparison brings in a new set of terms, a kind of surplus of meaning, that denotative reference expressly limits. The subject/predicate metaphor, for example, exceeds what a denotatively named sexual act communicates, adding to "sex" new information about activity and passivity as it pertains to masculine and feminine sexual roles. This extra information that the subject/predicate metaphor communicates is a surplus effect of the euphemism, ostensibly meant to restrict meaning. What's more, grammar in the Middle Ages referred to that most denotative mode of reading that required linguistic reference to be transparent, untroped. Grammar was meant to be a tool for apprehending the literal meaning of a text, in order that a reader might move on to understand its allegorical meaning[3]. What would it mean, then, to use grammar in order to trope and render opaque linguistic reference such as in *De Planctu*? Alain's use of grammatical terminology as a euphemistic mode of reference to sex and sexed bodies, is

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[3] See Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 243-305.

anything but innocent. That he would employ terminology from the most denotative mode of reference in the service of a euphemistic mode of reference shows, in fact, the limits of both. In other words, we see that euphemism can never properly cover up, and might in fact bring more attention and titillation to the referent, while denotative speech can never properly denote its referent, except by tropings and coverings. We find that both euphemistic and denotative speech, seeming opposites, appear to blur into one another in strange unforeseen ways, at least when the referent in question is sexual. My reading of *De Planctu* will track this blurring and its varied consequences throughout the text.

These are the more general theoretical considerations that will run through this chapter. As we move towards closer readings of *De Planctu*, though, we will notice that grammatical metaphors are used in different ways, by different characters, and to different ends. Alain's allegory is far from univocal, a point that few readers have noticed. Mark Jordan argues for a reading that would be more attentive to narrative framing, ironic distance, and polyvocality[4]. Readers, including literary critics, have ignored much of the literary figures and techniques that Alain employs in *De Planctu*, such elementary distinctions as: author/narrator, dreaming/awake, poetic speech/prosaic speech. Jordan demonstrates how Nature's discourse is contradictory, tautological and ultimately incoherent. For him, this is a deft rhetorical maneuver on Alain's part, an ironic framing of Nature's speech that ultimately demonstrates the incoherence of the distinction Naturel/unNaturel for the purposes of theological writing. I will argue that Alain employs the same kind of ironic framing with grammatical metaphors as well. They are used

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[4] Some of Jordan's qualifications are the following: The voice of the narrator — whom I will continue to distinguish from Alan," p. 69.
—"we are informed by the narrator that the whole of the representation has been a dream," p. 69
—"If there are holes in the narration of the *integumentum*, as there plainly are, our first suspicions must fall on the narrator. Who is he? Where does he stand with respect to these unstitched patches?" p. 72.
—"On either demarcation of the dream, the *Plaint*'s didactic sections would be figures of our narrator's fantasy," p. 77.

differently from the mouth of the narrator than from the mouth of Nature, and in such a way that if we look for a univocal "meaning" of the grammatical metaphor in this text we can only arrive at incoherence. We will do better to examine when and where grammatical metaphors are used, to what end, from whose point of view. There are three moments in particular where Nature's grammatical metaphors are used in a more elaborate manner to designate sexual disorder. The first occurs in meter one, during the narrator's lament about human sexual disorder. He uses grammatical metaphors in the poetic mode. The second occurs in prose four, during Nature's taxonomic description of human sexual disorder. Here she uses grammatical metaphors in the descriptive mode. And the third occurs in prose five, during Nature's lesson to Venus concerning proper regeneration. Here she uses grammatical metaphors in the prescriptive mode, explicitly responding to the narrator's misuse and abuse of grammatical metaphors. I will discuss meter one and prose five since the two sections echo one another in telling ways.

De Planctu begins, much like its literary predecessor *De consolatione Philosophiae*, with the narrator-poet's lament, written in elegiac verse. He complains that the world has grown deaf to the laws of nature. His complaint seems to refer in particular to just one of Nature's laws: the law prohibiting sex between men. Since references to same sex desire are couched in a series of grammatical metaphors, Sodomy is never named as such:

> Actiui generis sexus se turpiter horret
> Sic in passiuum degenerare genus.
> Femina uir factus sexus denigrat honorem,
> Ars magice Veneris hermafroditat eum.
> Predicat et subicit, fit duplex terminus idem.
> Gramatice leges ampliat ille nimis.
> Se negat esse uirum Nature, factus in arte
> Barbarus. Ars illi non placet, immo tropus.[5]
>
> The active sex shudders in disgrace as it sees itself degenerate into the passive sex. A man turned woman blackens the fair name of his sex. The witchcraft of Venus turns him into a hermaphrodite. He is subject and predicate: one and the same term is given a double application. Man here extends too far the laws of grammar.

[5] All citations are from Häring's Latin edition, (1978, 797-879), and Sheridan's English translation, (1980).

> Becoming a barbarian in grammar, he disclaims the manhood given him by nature. Grammar does not find favor with him but rather a trope.
>
> (meter 1.15-22)

Here the narrator uses two grammatical metaphors. Each of these metaphors find their explanation within the poem in other lines. The first: "Actiui generis sexus se ... horret ... in passiuum degenerare genus" *(literally: the sex of the active gender shudders to degenerate into the passive gender*) enacts a series of conflations that have a powerful rhetorical effect. First, the locution *actiui generis* conflates the grammatical division of verbs into passive and active, with the grammatical division of nouns into the masculine and feminine gender (*genus*). The next line, "femina uir factus" (man made woman) explains the logic of the narrator's grammatical metaphor: "active gender" and the "passive gender" refer to man and woman, respectively. For a man to engage passively with another man is thus tantamount to becoming a woman. Moreover, to say "the sex of the active gender" conflates the biological division of the sexes (*sexus*) with the grammatical division of genders (*genus*). *Genus* in Medieval Latin was more of a linguistic category than a way to describe sexual difference in people. We need to see this conflation of *sexus* and *genus* as a grammatical metaphor, used by the narrator here for rhetorical reasons, to convince the reader that sex and language operate by the same set of rules.

The second grammatical metaphor: "Predicat et subicit, fit duplex terminus idem" *(He is subject and predicate (*literally: he "subjects" and "predicates"*): one and the same term is given a double ending*) conflates masculine and feminine declensions (*duplex terminus*) with nominative and accusative declensions, which indicate subject and predicate respectively. Thus when subject and predicate occupy the same position they become like a noun bearing both masculine and feminine endings simultaneously. His gloss explains that man corresponds to the subject position in a sentence, while woman corresponds to the predicate position. Man becomes a hermaphrodite ([illa] *hermafroditat eum*, literally is 'hermaphrodited' by Venus) when he acts sexually like a predicate. The hermaphrodite metaphor likens word endings to genitalia, and likens words and syntax, to bodies and sex.

The grammatical distinction passive/active is conflated with the heteronormative assignment of roles: active to male, passive to female. In fact, the metaphor implies an ontological claim: woman is passive in the world just as verbs can be passive in language. The metaphor assumes that language is of the same order as nature. If language and nature really do function according to the same laws, then same-sex intercourse violates the law that assigns an active role to men, sexually.

There are three problems with the narrator's grammatical lament, that Nature will later call him on: 1) His grammatical metaphors are suspect at the level of grammar. He invents categories that do not exist and neglects to mention the existence of categories (such as the neuter and deponent) that do exist. 2) It is not clear whether his use of grammatical terminology is intended to function as euphemism or as poetic enumeration. The comparison of word endings to genitalia and syntax to sex, opens up Pandora's proverbial box. While intended to limit perversity in the spirit of euphemism, his comparison opens the door for all kinds of linguistic perversions. 3) His use of grammatical metaphors assumes that language and nature are of the same order, an ontological claim which ultimately denatures nature. The following paragraphs will consider the latter problems in anticipation of Nature's own criticism of the narrator's grammatical lament.

Thus, at the level of grammar, the narrator makes a few mistakes. He invents categories that do not exist in Latin grammar. To say *actiuum genus* implies that nouns can be intrinsically active. It is true that nouns, insofar as they are marked by declension, can be designated as nominative or accusative and thus as the acting agent of a sentence or the recipient of action in a sentence. But all nouns, masculine and feminine, must be able to be used as both nominative *and* accusative for language to function. Thus there can be no such thing as an *actiuum genus* in Latin grammar. He also mentions active/passive and masculine/feminine as though no third category existed in Latin grammar, neglecting to include the deponent (in the case of verbs) and the neuter (in the case of nouns). In prose five Nature will mention the deponent and the neuter but with a strict warning to the reader

not to confuse perverse constructions such as the deponent and the heteroclite with normal constructions[6].

Is the narrator guilty by omission of practicing perverse grammar? Does his silence on the matter of deponents and neuters bespeak involvement in sodomitic modes of signification? He defines the sodomite as the one who stretches ("widens") grammatical laws too far (*gramatice leges ampliat ... nimis*) and yet his own use of grammar is abusive of grammatical laws and suspiciously wrought with poetic excess. It would seem that he, himself, stretches grammatical laws too far. Nature's lesson to Venus confirms this. She uses grammatical metaphors within prose, in a descriptive, denotative, pedagogical mode. Moreover, she justifies her use of these metaphors with an involved theory of euphemism. The narrator seems to use grammatical metaphor as an end in itself, for the sheer pleasure of its semiotic resonances, perverse as the consequences might be. His poetry is circular and self-referential as is suggested by the fact that he is caught repeating the same verses over and over (*cum haec elegiaca lamentabili eiulatione crebrius recenserem*) when he encounters Nature for the first time. It will help to decide whether his use of grammatical metaphor is more euphemistic or poetic by setting it against Nature's theory of euphemism.

Gilded Words: Nature's Theory of Euphemism

In effect Nature explains her use of grammatical metaphor as a way to clothe "monsters of vice" with beautiful words and fine rhetoric:

> In sequenti tamen tractatu, ne locutionis cacephaton lectorum offendat audium uel in ore uiriginali locum collocet turpitudo, predictis uiciorum monstris euphonia orationis uolo pallium elargiri
>
> It is my intention to contribute a mantle of fair sounding words to the above-

[6] philosophice etiam assertionis auctoritas maximarum plerasque diuersis facultatibus fateatur esse communes, quasdam uero ultra suarum disciplinarum domicilia nullam habere licentiam excursandi (10.73-75).

> mentioned monsters of vice to prevent a poor quality of diction from offending the ears of readers or anything foul finding a place on a maiden's lips.
> (prose 8.92-95)

Grammatical metaphors are supposed to be euphonious, beautiful, proper. They become necessary when the referent is so unspeakable that it can only be designated as a monster of vice. We understand, then, that the vice(s) in question must be so ugly that it would prevent proper diction, or in other words, that its hideousness would distract from the more important message of Nature's lesson that is her intended allegorical message. Euphemism, here, is justified on the grounds that her message would not reach the ears of her reader if she were to speak denotatively. Grammatical metaphors, in particular, have an air of denotativeness about them and thus distract from the monstrous referent without distracting too much from the intended allegorical meaning. Whether they succeed in functioning allegorically, though, is not clear. Euphemism might still suggest the outlines of the referent.

She admits that euphemistic speech is not always an appropriate mode of expression. Sometimes the form of expression should conform to the deformity of the subject (*rerum informitati locutionis debet deformitas conformari*) so as to put its hideousness on display. In other words, sometimes denotative reference will not distract from the allegorical message. Showing the monstrous referent as it is would horrify the reader enough to rebuke it, but would not horrify the reader so much that he could not take in the message. But homoeroticism is not one of these subjects that should be revealed denotatively. Paradoxically, to put its hideousness on display would prevent the message of its hideousness from reaching the ear of the reader. It is the sin whose ugliness prevents itself from being seen as ugly. And yet another way to say it is that this is the sin that cannot be seen, that could be described as blinding.

> [N]olo ut prius plana uerborum planicie explanare proposita uel prophanis uerborum nouitatibus prophanare prophana, uerum pudenda aureis pudicorum uerborum faleris inaurare uariisque uenustorum dictorum coloribus inuestire.
>
> [I] first of all refuse to explain my theme on the plain of plain words [...] but choose to gild things immodest with the golden trappings of modest words and to

clothe them with the varied colors of graceful diction.

(prose 8.183-186)

Hence Sodomy becomes the sin that is so ugly that its ugliness blinds the (denotative) reader from seeing it as ugly. Nature is obliged to describe it by gilding (*inaurare*) and clothing with colors (*coloribus inuestire*) her speech. Gold and colors, but especially gold, are the traditional metaphors used to describe rhetorical beauty. Gold in particular refers to a specific kind of rhetorical beauty that blinds the reader with its light, a beauty that distracts from the denotative referent of an argument or oration in such a way as to persuade even a staunch opponent to take one's position.

What is stunning, and I use this word deliberately, about the metaphor Nature uses to justify her use of euphemism, is the similarity between the structure of the referent (monstrous vices/Sodomy) and the euphemism employed to cover over the referent (golden words/rhetoric). Both Sodomy and rhetoric blind the reader into seeing them as something they are not, both Sodomy and rhetoric divert denotative reference through optical tropes (*ars illi [Sodomite/renegade grammarian] non placet, immo tropus*). And yet rhetorical language — gilded, troped, blinding — is the only kind that can be used to denounce Sodomy, since grammatical language — plain, denotative, transparent —would only let the blinding light of the referent in question shine through and seduce the reader. More stunning yet, then, is Nature's choice of grammatical metaphors to "gild" and "clothe with the varied colors of graceful diction" the monster of vice that is Sodomy. First of all, while rhetoric is linked metaphorically to gold in the Middle Ages, grammar[7] is linked to ideas of transparency and clarity[8]. The grammatical practice of reading was supposed to render the individual meaning of each word on the page with absolute transparency. Any ripple in the crystal clear *speculum* of grammatical reading would make it all the more difficult to

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[7] It is not exactly true in the case of Dante who describes grammar in *Il Convivio* as linked to the moon because of its opacity and materiality. He makes this connection because grammar, as concerned as it is with denotative reference, with connecting the world to the word, is more concerned with earthly things, more connected to matter.

[8] See Ziolkowski, introduction (1-12) and chapter four, "The Grammar of Theological Discourse" (117-30), and John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon*.

apprehend the text's allegorical significance in further stages of reading. Thus, when Nature "gilds" her speech with euphemistic grammar, the medieval reader, aware of the traditional metaphors used to describe rhetoric and grammar, should be puzzled. How is grammar golden? How will grammar succeed in preventing us from seeing these monstrous vices?

To put it briefly: grammar is golden to the extent that it is used to create an effect of denotative reference without actually functioning denotatively. Using grammatical terminology as a rhetorical device, and hence turning denotativeness into an effect, puts the denotative mode of reference entirely into question, and troubles the easy distinction between the grammatical and the rhetorical, the literal and the denotative, the transparent and the golden.

Thus Nature explains her use of euphemism as a last resort in response to a sin whose ugliness should not be revealed denotatively to the reader. Whereas most of the time "rerum informitati locutionis debet deformitas conformari," the sin of Sodomy is so exceptional that its representation must not conform to its reality. One could argue that Nature is in fact guilty of conflating the representation (golden rhetoric) with the referent (blinding Sodomy), but she does so self consciously, aware that there is no other way to represent the unspeakable sin without according it the power to blind, and perhaps even seduce, readers. The narrator, on the other hand, who is not nearly as careful, fails to issue such thorough disclaimers and in failing to mention perverse grammatical categories, such as the deponent and the neuter, incriminates himself by remaining silent. He also incriminates himself by pointing the finger, as it were, without being too clear about who exactly he is pointing at. He says:

> Ars illi non placet, immo tropus
> Non tamen ista tropus poterit translatio dici.
> In vicium melius ista figura cadit.
>
> Grammar does not find favour with him but rather a trope. This transposition, however, cannot be called a trope. The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects.
>
> (meter 1.22-24)

The narrator places himself on the side of *ars* (serious study) and the Sodomite on the side of *tropus* (linguistic play). The distinction between *ars* and *tropus* is that between language used to teach, transparent language, and language used as an end in itself for pleasure, gilded language. Thus Sheridan's translation of *ars* as 'grammar' works quite well, since the distinction being made is between a grammatical mode of reference and a rhetorical mode of reference. But although positioned as avatar of *ars* and grammar, the narrator himself uses tropes and figures in drawing the comparison between grammar and sex. Moreover, he accuses the sexual sinners of committing grammatical "vices" when he has just committed a series of grammatical errors himself, as I showed earlier. Finally, while accusing the Sodomites of a faulty transposition (*translatio*) the very terms of his accusation undergo a *translatio,* from calling the sin a trope, to calling it a transposition, then a figure, and finally a defect. The final term "vicium" puns on the moral meaning of word, still retained in the English word 'vice', and the grammatical meaning of the word, since it was often used in the Middle Ages to refer to grammatical errors. Calling a vice a vice brings nothing to the comparison except the pleasure of a pun, a pleasure gotten from the circularity of the expression. This seems more to be language for pleasure rather than language for pure denotative reference, exactly the kind of Sodomitic speech he denounces.

But perhaps his most egregious error is to have taken the distinction between grammar and rhetoric as simpler than it actually is. He believes the laws of grammar to be consonant with the laws of nature, and understands language and nature to be ontologically continuous. This belief, however, forces him to omit certain rules of grammar (such as the deponent and the heteroclite) that would either prove: 1) that language and nature are not ontologically continuous or 2) the laws of grammar and nature permit every perversion, every linguistic or corporeal coupling, under the sun. In other words, he either fails to see the fundamental perversity of grammar or deliberately ignores it. Whatever the case may be, the narrator is guilty by omission. Nature's lesson will

reeducate him in the subtle difference between grammar and rhetoric, and between Sodomitic grammar and "natural" grammar. As Jordan suggests:

> On analogy [to the *Consolation of Philosophy*], the *Plaint of Nature* would need to describe its narrator's reeducation in Nature's original purposes. This would imply that the narrator begins in a condition at least of forgetfulness, perhaps of perversion.[9]

Thus I will move to a reading of the next part of *De Planctu* where grammatical metaphor plays an important role, prose five. We will read prose five keeping in mind the narrator's misuse of grammatical metaphors and his confused understanding of the distinction between grammar and rhetoric. As Nature tries to reeducate him, though, we need also be attentive to the contradictions in her own discourse. While her grammatical metaphors are intended to "dazzle" the reader, distracting him from the blinding sexual referent, they nonetheless teach him something about language and sex. She tells him the story of the education of Venus in the laws of grammar.

Euphemism and the Perversity of Grammar

In prose five, Nature's lesson to Venus on the proper regeneration of humanity is uttered entirely in metaphors, moving up the *trivium* in order, from grammar to dialectic and finally to rhetoric. I will discuss the beginning of her lesson where she uses metaphors borrowed exclusively from grammar. She begins her series of grammatical metaphors with the gender of nouns, moving to adjective and noun pairs, then transitive and intransitive verbs, and finally active and passive verbs. As we will see, the order in which she presents her lesson is significant.

At first glance, her discussion of gender appears much less extravagant than the other grammatical metaphors she uses. It almost manages to pass as non-metaphorical. Nonetheless, a comparison is made. Gender is indeed a metaphor, one that will introduce the logic behind the metaphors to follow. She tells Venus to focus her labor exclusively on the

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[9] Jordan, p. 72.

"Naturel union of masculine and feminine gender." She explains:

> Cum enim, attestante gramatica, duo genera specialiter, masculinum uidelicet et femininum, ratio nature cognouerit.
>
> Since the plan of Nature gave special recognition, as the evidence of Grammar confirms, to two genders ... the masculine and the feminine.
>
> (prose 10.43-4)

Here she spells out the logic of her argument. The laws of grammar exist as confirmation of the legitimacy of natural law. Or in other words, language works in the service of nature. It is thus necessarily co-continuous with the world/nature/sexuality since its duty is to serve as evidence to the plan of nature. We should note that she employs the word *genera* rather than *sexus*. She uses a word from Latin grammar (*genus*) to refer to biological sex (*sexus*), and is thus already speaking metaphorically. In her continued use of the word *genus*, one must not forget, as she would like us to, that she is still speaking metaphorically. It will behoove us to pay attention to where she uses the word *genus* and where she uses the word *sexus*.

She then directs Venus to assign those of the "masculini generis" to the function of adjective and those of the "feminini sexus" to the function of noun, telling Venus to take special care that neither usurp the other's position. Since each requires the other, she claims, the adjective is attracted "by the law of urgent need" to the noun. The metaphor implicitly associates men and women with form and matter, respectively. Masculinity was associated with form through *genius*, the form giving principle in sexuality, represented as a pair of testicles in Bernardus Silvestris' *Cosmographia*[10], and as a priest with a writing pen in *De Planctu*[11]. Femininity was associated with matter through *silva* (or *hyle*), the formless matter

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[10] "Lest earthly life pass away, and the process of generation be cut off, and material existence, dissolved, return to primordial chaos, propagation was made the charge of two genii, and the act itself assigned to twin brothers. They fight unconquered against death with their life-giving weapons, renew our nature, and perpetuate our kind." *Cosmographia*, (Wetherbee, 126).

[11] "In his right hand he held a pen, close kin of the fragile papyrus, which never rested from its task of enfacement. In his left hand he held the pelt of a dead animal, shorn clear of its fur of hair by the razor's bite. On this, with the help of the obedient pen, he endowed with the life of their species images of things that kept changing from the shadowy outline of a picture to the realism of their actual being." *De Planctu* (13.12-18).

associated with the womb, represented as defective in the *Cosmographia*, and as a formless woman begging for "the mirror of forms" in *De Planctu*[12]. Matter and form are compared to noun and adjective, respectively, because adjectives in a sense give form to nouns by describing them. An adjective without a noun is like form without matter. Nature claims that nouns and adjectives are attracted by a "law of urgent need," referring to Aristotle's dictum that matter cannot exist without form, and form cannot exist without matter. Given that the metaphor refers to the proper union of "masculini genus" and the "feminini sexus," the reference to Aristotle implies that the law of heterosexual union is as fundamental and incontestable as the law regarding the union of form and matter[13]. Since Nature uses the laws of grammar to attest to the validity of her own laws, the law dictating that an adjective cannot exist without a noun is invoked as justification for the association of masculinity and femininity with form and matter. The law of adjectives is ultimately invoked to justify the conflation of the law of heterosexual union with the law regarding union of form and matter.

But in a strange way, the metaphor comparing men and women to adjectives and nouns, confers an unexpected stability and power to women. While neither form nor matter can exist independently of the other, according to Aristotle, a noun *can* exist independently of an adjective while an adjective *cannot* exist independently of a noun. Hence the logic of the metaphor (=you can't have one without the other) turns back on itself. If we take it to its logical conclusion, then, women can exist independently of men, while men cannot exist independently of women. It tells us first of all that Nature is concerned exclusively with male homosexuality after all. Lesbianism falls completely out of her radar because it is not threatening to the continuity of language and the world. Nouns (and in a certain way matter and femininity) have a kind of stability in the sense that they can float independent of other parts of speech. As Augustine argues in *De Magistro*, nouns are the part of speech with the

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[12] "cum Ylem formarum speculum mendicantem eternalis salutauit Ydea, eam Iconie interpretis interuentu uicario osculata," (9.95-7).

[13] The association of femininity with *silva* is further demonstrated by the use of the word *sexus* to describe women and *genus* to describe men. Women are thought of as biological (matter) while men are thought of as spiritual (form).

most important function in language, that of designation, index, reference.

Nature then moves on to instruct Venus to restrict her conjugations entirely to the "forward march of the transitive." Venus should strictly avoid the "stationary intransitive" and the "circuitous reflexive." Since transitive verbs express the direct action of subject on object, the implication of her metaphor is that men are like the subject of a sentence while women are like the direct object. Sexually speaking, the metaphor claims that men are agents of sexual action while women are passive recipients of sexual action. Intransitive verbs have no direct object while reflexive verbs refer back to the subject. The metaphor refers to same sex desire and masturbation, respectively. The association of intransitive verbs to homosexuality assumes, as Paul does, continuity between grammatical sameness and ontological sameness, but this time with more extreme results. The implication is that sex with someone of the same 'sex' is like sex without an object. The sameness in same sex desire is same to the point that the other of the same gender ceases to be other at all, becoming entirely assimilated into self. Thus, in the metaphor of the intransitive verb, there is not even the comforting otherness of a mirror image reflecting the same.

Nature continues, stating that her injunction against intransitives and reflexives implies, by extension, the injunction against confusing passive and active:

> ...ut genus actiuum in passiuum ualeat usurpata assumptione transire uel idem in actiuum sue proprietatis depositione redire uel sub passiui litteratura actiui retinendo Naturem sibi legem generis deponentis assumere.
>
> ...where the active type, by appropriating an additional meaning, goes over to the passive or the passive, laying aside its proper character, returns to the active or where a verb with a passive ending retains an active meaning and adopts the rules of deponents.
>
> (prose 10.69-72)

We are familiar with the implications of the association of active and passive to masculine and feminine. The association is made in the very first grammatical metaphor to appear in *De Planctu*, during the narrator's opening lament: *Femina uir factus*, man is made woman when he trades his active role in for a passive role. But Nature's lesson mentions something forgotten in the narrator's lament: the deponent verb. The law of passive and active verbs in

grammar would seem to legitimate the "natural" law relegating men and women active and passive roles. But Latin grammar has a third category of verb, the deponent, that is passive in appearance but active in meaning. With deponent verbs one could with equal ease make a grammatical argument against Nature, justifying homosexuality. Thus the existence of deponent verbs interrupts the supposed continuity between grammatical law and Natural law. Nature anticipates the possibility of such a retaliation and decides to nuance her lesson: while *some* of the laws of grammar apply to sex, others (such as deponent verbs) should be ignored and left to the discipline of grammar alone:

> Nec mirandum si plereque maxime titulo gramatice facultatis ascripte a Veneree artis domicilio paciantur repulsam, cum ipsa eas ... philosophice etiam assertionis auctoritas maximarum plerasque diuersis facultatibus fateatur esse communes, quasdam uero ultra suarum disciplinarum domicilia nullam habere licentiam excursandi
>
> It is no wonder, then, that very many far-reaching constructions labelled with the sign of the discipline of Grammar, suffer rejection from the home of Venus' art ... For statements with the authority of philosophy admit that many of the most far-reaching constructions are common to several disciplines *while some others have no permission to go beyond the abodes of their own discipline.*
>
> (prose 10.73-80)

Nature is obligated to make this clarification at this particular place in her lesson because the example of the deponent is the last grammatical metaphor she uses before moving on to dialectic and rhetoric. Without this corrective addendum to her lesson the metaphor of the deponent might prevent movement upward in the *trivium.* She will go on to talk about improper conversion in syllogisms (dialectic), and the danger of metonymy (rhetoric). But the example of the deponent verb interrupts the very first articulation of the *trivium.* If the narrator failed to mention the deponent verb in his passive/active metaphor, (again, the first grammatical metaphor in *De Planctu*) it is because the deponent poses a serious threat to the coherence of his complaint. Worse yet, it poses a threat to the coherence of the *trivium,* bringing into question grammar's claim on reference, and ultimately the anagogical claim of the seven liberal arts, which are supposed to function as an index pointing upward to God. The Sodomite might just linger long enough in his study of grammar to discover the

deponent and use it to legitimate his own laws or even to put Nature to the task of legitimating his sexual practice. But wouldn't this be akin to idolatry, finding a legitimating mirror for oneself in language? The deponent is a metalinguistic term, with no referent in the world. To linger in reflection on the deponent is to stay at one remove from language's referential function, to view language as an end in itself, or worse yet, to mistake language as an extension (or reflection) of self. The narrator warns against this.

He writes: "[m]an here extends too far the laws of grammar." The standard reading of this line understands the law of grammar and Natural law as being the same. It thus reads: *sexually disorderly man here breaks the laws of nature, just as one breaks the laws of grammar when one mistakes a subject for a predicate.* Except that the verb here is not *to break*, but rather *to stretch too far* (*ampliat ... nimis*). This is significant if we recall Nature's warning about the limits of the discipline of grammar: *some [constructions] have no permission to go beyond the abodes of their own discipline.* Stretching too far the laws of grammar might refer to the renegade use of a grammatical metaphor: say, for example, the use of deponent verbs to justify homoeroticism. In this case the grammatical metaphor becomes an egregious error. The Sodomite assumes mistakenly that the laws of grammar are continuous with the laws of nature. Instead of breaking the laws of grammar, sexually disordered man *mistakes* the laws of grammar for the laws of nature, and lives by the law of grammar as though they were of the same order as Natural law. He mistakes himself for a deponent verb and thus breaks Natural law by extending grammatical law too far.

But if the deponent is dangerous because it is metalinguistic and thus short-circuits language's referential function, the other grammatical terms Nature uses to describe orderly human sexuality threaten to be equally dangerous. Take, for example, the first grammatical metaphor in Nature's lesson to Venus: *genus*. Like the deponent, *genus* describes a function of language. Nature says that her plan gives special recognition to two genders, as the laws of grammar confirm. *Genus* refers metaphorically to *sexus*, to "biological" sexual difference. According to Nature, sexual difference is of particular importance because it has

an analogue in grammar with masculine and feminine nouns. This is the first metaphor she uses in the lesson, setting up a frame for the rest of the metaphors, all of which are concerned with matching gendered bodies to functions in language. If the *genus/sexus* metaphor were not convincing, none of the others would be either. While it takes some time to explain the comparison of men and women to adjectives and nouns, the comparison of *genus* to *sexus* requires no explanation.

Recall the narrator's conflation of *genus* and *sexus* in his opening lament: "actiui generis sexus". *The sex of the active gender*; the construction puts sex first, gender second, and passivity/activity third. It is somehow intuitive — intuitive to the point that Nature confuses them in her own discourse. We should be suspicious. She momentarily slips, at one point, and refers to women as *feminini sexus* while she refers to men as *masculini genus*. This is the only moment in Nature's use of grammatical metaphors where the metaphor does not remain strictly unilateral. Elsewhere the body is designated only through grammatical metaphors.

But can we be so sure that *sexus* is not itself a metaphor, even though the word is supposed to refer properly, denotatively, to biological reality? Recall the context of this slip, in the middle of Nature's metaphorical layering of oppositions: form/matter, masculine/feminine, adjective/noun. The triple metaphor implies, as I discuss above, that women are of the body (flawed matter) while men are of the mind (form giving idea). Nature's use of the word *sexus* to describe the feminine gender is a way to further justify the implication of her metaphor, that women are of the body and thus more like matter than form, or in 20th century terms, that women are "sexed" and not "gendered". Hence she uses the supposedly denotative word *sexus*, metaphorically. The order of the grammar/sex metaphor is inverted; this time Nature uses a word of the order of nature to justify a metaphor referring to a grammatical distinction. But this, only on one side of the grammatical distinction *masculine/feminine*. The reversal of the metaphor shows an asymmetry at work where the evidence of grammar should reveal perfect symmetry between

masculine and feminine. Grammar, rigorously understood, cannot legitimize an understanding of sexual difference which views women as inferior and thus in an asymmetrical relation to men. For this reason Nature must invert the terms and make a metaphor of the sexed body. The supposedly denotative word *sexus* will necessarily become metaphorical while it is tied up in the game of legitimizing the asymmetry of sexual difference. Thus the frame metaphor that supports all the other grammar-sex metaphors does not operate quite as we first think. The most denotative moment in the explanation of sexual difference turns, tropes, from a one-to-one metaphor to a chiasmus: man is to *genus* as woman is to *sexus*. This has an avalanche effect since now the purely grammatical distinction: masculine/feminine is inflected with the genus/sexus distinction such that the male body is of the order of grammar while the feminine grammatical marker is of the order of the body. Grammar is already infected with the body and the body with grammar. Nature's horror of the deponent, and the Sodomite, is also a horror of the feminine, horror of the body that infects grammar, of the *sexus* that infects *genus* in the foundational metaphor of sexual difference.

Thus, while Nature is more careful than the narrator about distinguishing between grammar and rhetoric, and between Sodomitic grammar and Natural grammar, she nonetheless slips up at the most crucial moment in her lesson. Her lesson promises to begin with the *most* denotative and to move up the *trivium* towards theological (allegorical) truth. Instead, the most denotative moment, the moment where masculine and feminine roles are to be doled out to humanity, turns out to be predicated on a trope, and a tricky one at that. The implications, at least by the logic Nature sets up in her discourse, are the following: 1) masculinity and femininity are linguistic perversions, 2) masculinity and femininity are each the perversion of the other, 3) masculinity and femininity are fundamentally perverse as a distinction.

Why does sexual difference in particular become the nodal point of articulation (and disarticulation) between the world and language, and ultimately between man and God?

Nature is explicitly figured as a God's intermediary to mankind. At the same time she is a figure for sexuality, and we have seen how sexuality threatens to interrupt mankind's connection to God. For this reason I suspect that we can read her as simultaneously intermediary and interrupting, bridging and blocking. Could this be why she must rebuke practitioners of homoerotic sex so forcefully, because Sodomy is, was always, there within her discourse? Nature's discourse is tautological and self-legitimizing as we have seen. The very discourse that accuses the Sodomites of treating pleasure, and their bodies, as tautologies, is itself an elaborate tautology. The very discourse that accuses renegade grammarians of ignoring the teleology of reference is ultimately unable to sufficiently designate its (sexual) referent. Is Nature somehow perverted at the core? Have the Sodomite and his perverse grammatical practices always been part of her discourse? The Sodomite renders her laws incoherent, without him Natural law would be inconceivable.

We are left questioning, in the end, whether the euphemistic grammatical metaphors do their job in this text. Just as Nature falters in her denotative allotment of masculine to man and feminine to woman, rendering the crucial foundational moment of her discourse nothing more than a linguistic trope predicated on a slippage, she falters in the opposite endeavor of inhibiting denotative reference. When she means to speak denotatively we find a rhetorical move, and when she means to speak rhetorically we find *malgré Nature* a denotative referent poking through her linguistic *integumentum*. The final consequences of this are nothing less than earth shattering, for it collapses the distinction between literal and allegorical textual meaning, a distinction that the text relies on heavily. While the allegorical continues to hinder readers from apprehending the literal (sexual) referent as this chapter has demonstrated, the sexual referent insists on maintaining a certain denotative power over the text, hindering readers as well from apprehending the allegorical referent of the text. In other words, the sexual referent short circuits the allegorical message in such a way that it never reaches us. Allegory is the privileged mode of reception of theological truth. When it fails to work, language fails in its anagogical

function, it fails to connect God to mankind. Thus if there is a theological truth to be drawn from *De Planctu* it is perhaps in the failure of both grammatical and allegorical readings to teach adequately about sex.

Chapter 4
Deviant Reading in the *Roman de la Rose*

Introduction: Sex and Allegory in the *Roman de la Rose*

In *De planctu Naturae* the project of reading sex *out* of pagan writing by reading it as a figure for a nobler truth becomes doomed to failure. The Christian reader tries to dispense with same-sex desire by turning it into a figure, but this figure finally mirrors his own desire back to him, a desire that appears uncannily sodomitic. Mirrored back to the allegorical reader, we see that the allegorical practice of ennobling sexual bodies stems from a desire to impress knowable form onto the unmeaning chaotic material world, a desire which is both castrating and decorporealizing. The *Roman de la Rose* elaborates on this notion that allegorical ennobling of the body castrates as it denatures the body. In the *Roman de la Rose* we will see the staging of a similar, but somewhat more complex, project of evacuating the sexual referent through allegorical operations.

A number of critics address the relationship between sex and allegorical reading in Jean de Meun's section of the *Roman de la Rose*, but the majority of these critics have focused on the question of authorial intent: does Jean de Meun write in the service of patriarchal normativity or does he write in order to subvert the patriarchal sex/gender system? Simon Gaunt, for example, claims Jean de Meun as a "queer writer":

> Jean's figurative language implicitly makes the repudiation of a 'proper' form of writing in favour of exuberant play and 'improper' allegory analogous to sexual drives. If the *Rose* exemplifies a form of writing that enacts a repudiation of the 'straight,' then it may not be anachronistic ... to claim Jean de Meun as a queer writer.[1]

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[1] Gaunt, Simon. "Bel Acueil and the Improper Allegory of the *Romance of the Rose*," New Medieval Literature 2 (1997): 65-94, at p. 86.

While I agree with Gaunt (and others[2]) that the *Rose* enacts a rupture of the "univocity of the true allegorical sign"[3] ultimately revealing the indeterminacy of allegorical meaning, I hesitate to valorize this rupture too quickly as "queer". Such readings still have a resolutely masculinist quality to them, in my view. We must be sure to understand the exact rhetoric of her argument so that we do not fall into the same trap Lady Reason does in praising the (disseminating and inseminating) power of the phallus — Reason's own cult of masculinity. Those critics who do celebrate the romance — and particularly the allegory of Saturn's castration, which will be our focus — as an allegory of semiotic fertility, "redeeming the castration of the symbolic father through a poetics of dispersal or dissemination"[4] are at risk of repeating the idolatrous gesture of phallus worship we will see enacted in the *Rose*. So, although it is critical, I believe we must suspend the question of authorial intent in the service of careful analysis of Reason's discourse.

Noah Guynn does caution us from dispensing too quickly with questions of authorial intent:

> Is it possible that the poem's fascination with its own lack of unity, *including its dislocation of the author* from his signature and poem, may actually serve to privilege antifeminist and heteronormative ideologies and shield them from attack, instead of exposing and unsettling the very foundations of medieval patriarchy? Does the *Rose* perhaps disrupt presence, self-presence, and intentionality in the authorial signature in order to prepare the ground for its

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[2] For two good examples of this reading, refer to:
Bloch, R. Howard, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1983).
Vance, Eugene, Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages (Lincoln: 1986).

[3] Bloch, p. 140.

[4] Guynn, Noah. "Authorship and Sexual/Allegorical Violence in Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*," *Speculum* 79 (2004):628-59.

> exuberant but also indeterminate displays of "priapic posturing and self-conceit"?[5] [emphasis mine]

Guynn suggests that De Meun's *Rose* rather than liberating the constraints of patriarchal reading, in fact, confirms the status of men as literary/sexual subjects and women as literary/sexual objects by allegorizing both authorship and desire." My own reading proposes to look more carefully at the relationship between sexual desire and the desire to allegorize sexual desire. For this reason I have bracketed the question of authorship while keeping Guynn's warning against celebrating the "dislocation of the author" in mind.

Jean de Meun's section of the *Roman de la Rose* picks up, in the narrative of the allegory, after a serious setback in the Lover's project to attain his beloved rose. Jealousy had ordered high walls to be built around the rosebush and mandated that Fair Welcome be locked up in a turret guarded by Rebuff, Shame, Fear, and Evil Tongue. While the Lover is lamenting his setback, and essentially resigning himself to death and despair, Reason reappears and attempts to convince the Lover, through intensive debate, to break his ties with the God of Love. This chapter will focus exclusively on the debate between Lover and Reason, tracing one very specific thread of the debate — the question of euphemistic courtly discourse — which is the most critical because it finally drives the Lover to part ways with Reason. I have kept the scope of the chapter rather limited and precise to allow for a more careful evaluation of Reason's discourse, which despite (or as I would suggest *because* of) its forcefulness and rhetorical efficacity, is also riddled with blind spots and slippages.

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[5] Guynn, 643.

Their debate, most generally speaking, concerns the classification and legitimization of different kinds of love. Reason deems the Lover's love (*fin'amors*) illegitimate for a number of reasons and attempts to convince him to break his ties with the God of Love. At one point, however, the debate on love turns into a debate on language. In the midst of her discourse on love, Reason refers to the pagan myth of the castration of Saturn. As she retells Saturn's castration, she pronounces the word *coilles* (testicles). The lover objects to this literal designation of sex and accuses Reason of uncourtly, unladylike speech. Between the Lover and Reason: two different modes of discourse oppose each other. While Reason believes that genitalia can and should be called by their proper names, the Lover, faithful to the commandments of the God of Love[6], believes that genitalia should be referred to only through euphemistic, veiled speech. This debate on literal versus euphemistic denotation of genitalia in turn gives rise to a more general debate on proper methods of reading and interpreting. Their debate therefore takes place on two fronts: love and language.

Lady Reason denounces courtly love as a deviation from the straight path of proper love and from the straight path of proper signification. This deviation from the straight path of proper love, she explains, brings the Lover dangerously close to the

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[6] The God of Love's commandment to speak euphemistically reads as follows: Apres garde que tu ne dies / Ces orz moz et ces vilenies. / Ja por nomer vileine chose / Ne doit ta bouche estre desclose: / Je ne tieng pas a cortois home / Qui orde chose et laide nome. / Toutes fames sers et honore / Et en aus servir poine et labore. / Et se tu oiz nul medisant / Qui aille fame despisant, / Blasme le et di qu'il se tese. [Next, be sure never to use rude words or coarse expressions: your mouth should never be opened to pronounce the name of anything base. I do not consider a man to be courteous if he names filthy, ugly, things. Serve and honour all women, toil and labor in their service, and if you hear any slanderer speaking ill of women, reproach him and tell him to be quiet.](lines 2107-17). All citations in French taken from (Strubel, Armand, ed. and trans. *Le Roman de la Rose.* [Paris: Le Livre de Poche: *Lettres Gothiques*]:1992). All citations in English taken from (Horgan, Frances, trans. *The Romance of the Rose.* [Oxford: Oxford University Press]: 1994) unless otherwise noted.

sodomites ("cil de male voie," line 4340) who are never on the proper path to begin with. Reason's discourse is thus haunted by the figure of sodomy, which, I will argue, arises as a figure for the deviation from both proper love and proper signification that she denounces in courtly love and that she seeks to correct. As we shall see, the deviation that sodomy figures in fact haunts both the proper sexuality and the proper mode of signification that Reason advocates.

A Summary of Lover and Reason's Debate on Euphemism

As Reason defines and classifies different kinds of love, she suggests that perhaps the most virtuous kind of love possible is the love for humanity, a love that does not value any single individual above others:

> Tu puez amer generalment
> Touz ceuls dou monde loialment.
> Aime les autant tous come.i.
> Au mains de l'amour du commun;
>
> You can love everyone in the world both generally and loyally. Love them all as one, at least with as much love as you have for mankind in general.
>
> (lines 5443-45)

This is the truest form of Christian love that, if practiced by everyone, would eliminate the need for law and justice. But since people choose to love in ways that value a single individual (or money or fortune) over the rest of humanity, there arose a need for judges on the earth:

> Et pour ce que ceste amour laissent
> Cil qui de mal faire s'engraissent,
> Sont en terre establi li juge
> Pour estre deffense et refuge.

> And since those who are eager to do evil abandon this love, judges are appointed on earth to serve as a defense and refuge[.]
>
> (lines 5455-58)

As Reason explains it, the birth of venal love signals the end of love for humanity and the beginning of the need for justice. To illustrate that the birth of venal love brings about the need for justice, she tells the story of Jupiter's castration of Saturn and the subsequent birth of Venus:

> Joustice qui jadis regnot
> Au tans que Saturnus regne ot,
> Cui Jupiter coupa les coilles,
> Ausi com se fussent andoilles
> — Mout ot cil dur fill et amer —
> Puis les gita dedenz la mer
> Dont Venus la deesse issi
> (Car li livres le dit issi)
>
> Justice reigned formerly, in the days when Saturn held sway, Saturn whose son Jupiter cut off his testicles as though they were sausages (a harsh and bitter son indeed) and flung them into the sea, whence sprang the goddess Venus, as the book says.
>
> (lines 5531-38)

In Reason's telling of the myth, the reign of Saturn was a period of indiscriminate brotherly love during which "Justice" reigned. Because this general love was itself pure Justice there was no need for a mechanism to enforce justice. It just was. At least it was until Jupiter supplanted his father's rule by castrating him. The violent end of this general love (and the end of a golden age of sorts) produces a by-product — venal love, a lesser sort of love which values a single individual over general humanity. The allegorical meaning of this Ovidian citation — at least the explicitly intended one — is that justice is derivative because it only arises out of the failure of Love (the nobler "general" love, that is). A secondary allegorical meaning — perhaps less intentional however — is that venal

love arises from an originary / foundational castration. More precisely, venal love is figured as the remainder (excess, "écume") of that foundational castration.

To Reason's assertion that love is more valuable than justice because justice is only necessary in the failure of love, the Lover responds that he does not understand: "Dame, je ne sai pas de quoi." She responds with a long discourse on the corruption of judges (the story of Appius and Virginie). While the Lover seems to accept everything Reason says about the corruption of judges, he cannot accept that she used the word *coilles*. Harkening back to the story of Saturn's castration, he tells her:

> Mais or vous oÿ nommer ci
> Si com moi samble, une parole
> Si esbalouvree et si fole
> Que, qui voudroit, ce croi, muser
> A vous enprendre a encuser
> L'en n'i porroit trover deffenses
>
> But it seems to me that I heard you use a word so shameless and outrageous that if anyone wished to waste his time in trying to excuse you, I do not believe he would be able to find any defence.
>
> (lines 5696-5701)

Lady Nature promises to respond to his accusation, but defers her response, insisting on continuing her lesson on love and fortune (love of reason versus love of fortune). She asks him to remind her ("Sil te plaist a ramentevoir") later, once she has finished her lesson. He is at first worried that reminding her would require him to repeat the word, since the God of Love explicitly forbade him from using speech that even approaches vulgarity. But he decides that he can repeat the word since he is not its original creator ("faisierres") but only the reciter ("reciterres") of the word:

> Par tel mot com vous me deïstes.
> Si m'a mon maistre deffendu
> —Car je l'ai mout bien entendu —
> Que ja mot n'isse de ma bouche

> Qui a ribaudie s'approuche.
> Mais puis que je n'en fui faisierres,
> J'en puis bien estre recitierres;
>
> My master, as I have clearly understood, has forbidden me to allow any owrd which is in the least indecent to fall from my lips. But since I am not the perpetrator [lit. *the creator*], I may certainly repeat [lit. *be the reciter*] the word.
> (lines 5708-14)

Then Reason goes on to elaborate more lessons on love and fortune, passing through the stories of Nero, the story of Cresus and Phanie, and Manfred and Conradin — all repetitions in various ways of the story of Saturn's castration. Finally Reason arrives at an ultimate plea for the Lover to join her camp. The Lover refuses, vowing eternal fealty to the god of love, mainly on the grounds that Lady Reason had violated the codes of courtly love in pronouncing the word *coilles* instead of using a euphemistic expression ("quelque courtoise parole") to refer to Saturn's testicles:

> Si ne vous tieng pas a cortoise
> Quant vous m'avez coilles nommées,
> Qui ne sont pas bien renommées
> En bouche a cortoise pucele.
> Vous, qui tant estes sage et bele,
> Ne sai com nommer les osastes,
> Au mains quant le mot ne glosastes
> Par quelque cortoise parole
> Si com preudefame en parole.
>
> Also, I do not think it was courteous [lit. *courtly*] of you to pronounce the word "testicles": no well-bred [*courtoise*] girl should call them by their name. I do not know how you dared name them, you who are so wise and fair, without at least glossing the word with some courteous utterance [*quelque cortoise parole*], as a virtuous woman would when speaking of them.
> (lines 6924-32)

She responds that she should lose no respect in naming a beautiful thing by its proper name and goes on to discuss why testicles are beautiful (for the moment delaying explanation of why proper naming without glossing is important for her).

Biaus amis, je puis bien nommer
Sanz moi faire mal renommer
Apertement par propre non
Chose qui n'est se bonne non.
N'encor ne faz je pas pechié
Se je nomme les nobles choses
Par plain texte sanz mettre gloses

Fair friend, I may certainly and without harming my reputation name openly and by its proper name anything which is good. Indeed, I may safely speak in the correct terms about evil, for I am not ashamed of anything that is not sinful. But there is nothing that could make me do anything involving sin, for I never sinned in my life. And it is not sinful of me to name, in plain and unglossed language [...] noble things.

(lines 6941-47)

For her, as long as the referent is itself a "noble chose" then it should be referenced openly and with its proper name. She needs then to assert why it is that testicles are in fact a "noble chose". So she continues elaborating on the beauty and nobility of testicles. Essentially they are beautiful because God endowed them with the power of generation. As such, they are to be revered because they are like a lesser emanation of divine creation.

A soustenir nature humaine
Qui sanz euls fust or casse et vaine.
Car volentiers, non pas enviz,
Mist dieus en coilles et en viz
Force de generacion [...]

[Testicles are that] by which human nature is sustained and without which it would now be empty and decayed. For it was by his own will rather than against it that God in his wonderful purpose put the generative power into the testicles and penis [...]

(lines 6959-63)

This reference to the sacredness and nobility of the "force de generacion" harkens back to an earlier discussion in which Reason warns the Lover of the danger of venal love, which like sodomy, takes pleasure as an end in itself.

According to Reason, not a single person is exempt from love — "touz le mondes va cele voie" — and any person who loves will be tempted to deviate from the path of "proper" or "reasonable" love. The God of Love becomes a figure for this deviation. And the only ones he cannot deviate from the path of "proper" love are the sodomites because they were never on the right path to begin with:

> C'est li dieus qui touz les desvoie,
> Se ne sont cil de male voie
> Que genius escommenie,
> Pour ce qu'il font tort a nature.
>
> For he is the god that leads everyone astray except those excommunicated by Genius because their evil ways are an offence against Nature.
>
> (lines 4339-42)

The association of *fin'amors* with sodomy therefore suggests that *fin'amors*, like sodomy, is deviant to the extent that it takes pleasure as an end in itself. Lady Reason makes it clear that the consequence for taking pleasure for an end in itself is a dramatic interruption in the succession of generations, which amounts ultimately to a kind of death. Any man who sleeps with a woman should have the will to continue the divine being in man:

> Quiconques a fame geüst,
> Et soi garder en son samblable,
> Pour ce que tuit sont corrumpable,
> Si que ja par succession
> Ne fausist generacion.
>
> Anyone who lies with a woman should wish to the best of his abilities to perpetuate his divine essence and to preserve himself in a creature like himself (for all men are subject to decay), so that the succession of generations should not fail.
>
> (lines 4402-6)

Reason accuses those who engage in sexual activity without explicitly wishing for the continuity of generation of both deviating from the straight path and having deviant thoughts and intentions.

> Sachiez que nus a droit n'i va
> Ne n'a pas entencion droite
> Qui sanz plus delit i convoite
>
> You should know that no one can love as he ought [lit. *goes on the straight path*] or with the right [lit. *straight*] intentions if he desires only delight.
> (lines 4418-20)

In the terms she has set up so far, everything that is at stake in the question of "proper" love can be summed up in the word *droit. Droit* refers literally to the maintenance of a straight line or path, which harkens back to the metaphor Reason creates referring to love as a path and to sodomy and "improper" love as deviations ("desvoie" or "cil de male voie") from that path. The notion of a straight line or path refers to the linear succession of generations and to the notion of "proper" love as one that keeps the lines of genealogical succession "straight," without interruption or deviation.

This lecture against the dangers of sodomy underpins the debate on *coilles* in which she re-dignifies testicles, elevating them to embody the "force de generacion". The implication, of course, is that in his horror at the word *coilles* the Lover is implicitly guilty of sodomy. In refusing even to utter the word *coilles* the Lover refuses to participate in the straight path of sexuality. Because he does not refuse the word alone but also the thing it designates (i.e. *coilles* as an instrument of procreation) his disgust is thus tantamount to disgust for regeneration itself.

To this implicit accusation the narrator responds: it's not the thing itself he finds so repulsive as much as it is the word, which he finds to be full of vulgarity:

> Car tout ait dieus les choses faites,
> Que ci devant m'avez retraites,
> Les moz au moins ne fist il mie,
> Qu'il sont tuit plain de vilonnie
>
> Even though God may have made the things you have just told me about, at least he did not make the words, which are altogether vile.
>
> (lines 6979-82)

She responds arguing that since words aren't naturally bound to the things they signify he is indeed disgusted by the thing itself and not the word for it. The response develops into a general discourse on the nature of linguistic signification beginning with her theory on the origins of language. God gave Reason the power to invent speech (i.e. speech is reasoned) and she invented both proper and common nouns ("A mon plaisir, et les nommasse / Proprement et communement / Pour croistre nostre entendement ..."). While God did not create words, he authorized and oversaw the assignment of words to things. She finally concludes that there is no natural connection between a word and the thing it signifies. Therefore the Lover's claim to be offended by the word and not the thing is an invalid one. To illustrate this further she argues that she could have assigned the word *couilles* to signify *relics*. Would he still hate the word if it signified something as noble and worthy of adoration as holy relics?

> Que je, quant mis les nons as choses,
> Que si reprendre et blasmer m'oses,
> Coilles reliques apelasse
> Et reliques coilles nommasse,
> Tu, qui si m'en mors et depiques,
> Me redeïsses de reliques
> Que ce fust laiz moz et vilains.
> Coilles est biaus nons et si l'ains.
> Si sont par foi coillon et vit,
> Ainc nus plus biaus gaires ne vit
> Et quant pour reliques m'oïsses
> Coilles nommer, let mot prisses

> Pour si bel et tant le prissasses
> Que partout coilles aorasses
> Et les baisasses en eglises
> En or et en argent assises.
>
> [If], when I gave things the names that you dare find fault with and condemn, I had called testicles relics and relics testicles, then you who thus attack and reproach me would tell me instead that relics was an ugly, base word. "Testicles" is a good name and I like it and so, in faith, are "testes" and "penis"; none more beautiful have ever been seen. And when you would have heard me name relics testicles, you would find the word so beautiful and would value it so much that you would be worshipping testicles and would be kissing them, plated in silver and gold, in churches all over the land [translation mine]
>
> (lines 7105-7120)

She insists that his disdain for the word has everything to do with his disgust for the thing. If the word for testicles had been *relics* he would be horrified by the word and if the word for relics were *balls* he would find himself praising the beauty of the word and would be found worshiping and kissing gilded "testicles" in churches all over the land. The image of the Lover kissing and worshiping gilded testicles, while it is meant to simply illustrate her argument, has powerful residual effects. With this example she corners him. The Lover either has to accept that 1) he has disdain for the very principle of re-generation that God endowed testicles with and thus by extension for God himself, or 2) that there is no reason to be disgusted by the proper naming of testicles. But to accept this would be one step closer to abandoning the linguistic codes of courtly love, which forbids such literal denomination of genitalia.

The courtly lover is not convinced by Reason's argument to abandon his courtly repugnance for direct literal reference to *coilles*. He reasserts that *coilles* are acceptable as long as they are referred to beneath a veil of euphemistic metaphors. In other words, he upholds a decidedly figural way to refer to sexual referents in lieu of the direct, literal reference that reason proposes.

Confronted with the Lover's resistance, Reason adds one more turn to her argument. Since the Lover operates on a decidedly figural level, she attacks him on this front. The Lover claims that *coilles* should never be named literally. They can only be referred to indirectly, through a veil of figures. Reason claims that *coilles* can be named literally. This does not mean, however, that *coilles* cannot have a figural status in a reasonable and proper discourse. And, indeed, it is such a status that they acquire in Reason's speech.

At the end of her speech, Reason claims that she uttered the word *coilles* in an attempt to use the myth of Saturn's castration as an allegory concerning the nature of true love. Reason reminds the courtly lover that the word *coilles* appeared in an allegorical context (the birth of Venus out of Saturn's castration) and that it was therefore intended as an allegorical signifier:

> Si ne doit on mie tout prendre
> A la lettre quanque l'en ot.
> *En ma parole autre sen ot,*
> Au mains quant des coillons parloie,
> Dont si briement parler vouloie,
> *Que celui que tu i veuls mettre.*
> Et qui bien entendroit la lettre
> Le sen verroit en escripture
> Qui esclarcist la fable oscure. [emphases mine]
>
> And not everything one hears should be taken literally. My words, at least when I spoke of testicles, which I wished to mention briefly, had a different meaning from the one you want to give them, and anyone who understood the text properly would find a meaning in it which would clarify the obscure discourse. The truth concealed within would be clear if it were explained.
>
> (lines 7158-66)

As Reason explains, in this explicitly allegorical context, the word *coilles* had another meaning than its literal meaning ("en ma parole autre sen ot"). It had an allegorical or figural meaning. Reason, however, does not explain what this "other", figural meaning is.

Her point here seems to denounce the blindness of the courtly Lover who fails to see the word's allegorical significance, so stuck he is on the literal name. His repugnance for literal designation blinds him, in her view. The courtly lover is so shocked by the literal naming of *coilles* that he cannot see that the word functions as an allegorical signifier in her discourse and hence fails to take in the intended allegorical meaning of Saturn's castration. Ironically, his resistance to *literal* designation prevents him from understanding the *figural* quality of Reason's discourse. Because of his repugnance for literal designation, he is a bad reader of allegory.

The argument that finally concludes the debate thus centers around proper reading method and specifically on the movement from literal to figurative meaning in allegorical interpretation. Throughout this debate, Reason has indeed been the advocate for the literal. Reason indeed represents a school of thought that understands language to be subject to the rules of logic. The relationship between words and things is governed by Reason, and not Nature. For her it is possible in any instance of communication to communicate "the thing itself" as though language were perfectly transparent. In fact, not only is transparent literal designation possible, it is also necessary if one is to engage into proper allegorical figuration. Indeed, throughout the debate, Reason is especially insistent on the importance of transparent literal signification for a proper mode of allegorical signification. Literal meaning must first be transparent so that it can later be elevated to a spiritual/figurative meaning. One must, for instance, understand the literal meaning of the word *coilles* before one can use this word with allegorical intent, as she claims to have done in her rendition of Saturn's castration. The same move from literal meaning to figural meaning should guide the proper path of interpretation. Reason insists that one

must first understand the literal meaning of a word before one can be allowed to see its spiritual, or figurative, meaning. The courtly Lover is a bad reader of her allegory because he short-circuits this progression from the literal to the figurative. He does not gain access to the figural meaning of Reason's discourse because he has not allowed the word *coilles* to signify literally. If he cannot allow the word to signify literally he won't be able to take in the allegorical meaning of the myth.

At the end of the debate, Reason thus advocates a proper sequence of reading from literal to figurative. She in fact defends a "straight" way of reading as she earlier defended a "straight" way of loving. The word *droit,* which earlier referred to the straight path of sexuality, now refers to the proper methods of disengaging truth from a text. In this usage *droit* references the notion of reading as a practice driven by R/r-eason, who guarantees textual truth as long as one adheres to proper exegetical method in the unveiling of that truth.[7] Fittingly, the notion of "proper exegetical method" references the move from literal to figurative meaning, which is necessary for truth to emerge from the reading of any text. The move from literal to figurative meaning, like the move between generations, has to happen without interruption, without deviation. Reason advocates straight reading — "lecture droite." Both sex and language are supposed to be the means to an end (in the former, regeneration, in the latter, God's truth). Reading, like love, has to follow the straight path. And for reading to be straight (i.e. advancing straight to the truth) it must, as we saw, posit a moment of straightforward literal denomination before moving on to figuration.

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[7] See the entry on *droit* in Greimas: adj. 1. Qui suit la ligne droite. 2. Qui est du côté droit [...] 4. Vrai, digne de foi, véridique [...] n.m. 1. Ce qui est juste, justice [...].

While Reason argues that things can and must be named in order to become readable figures in the service of truth, the courtly Lover argues that things, and especially sexual referents, should never be properly named — they should never be referenced literally. The *coilles* should not be literally named but should instead be covered with figures, draped in euphemistic metaphors. While reason insists on the importance of literal reference, courtly love insists on figurative euphemistic reference.

Reason argues that the courtly lover's resistance to the literal meaning of the word *coilles* prevents the word from becoming an allegorical signifier. The horror that the courtly lover demonstrates when the sexual body is named literally thus indicates a resistance to the process of figuration that Reason upholds. By refusing literal designation of the body, the courtly lover refuses to allow the body to be figured, thus jamming the sequence whereby it is elevated to the spiritual. His horror at any proper literal designation of the body, which leads him to cover the body in euphemism, is a way to hold onto the body by preventing its very corporeality to be first signified and then figured or spiritualized — that is decorporealized. In other words, the horror at any literal designation of the body does not mean that the Lover is horrified by the body itself, but rather that he refuses to move beyond the body to the spiritual. By refusing to name the body, by covering this body with euphemisms, courtly discourse would in fact protect the body from being made to signify in the service of a higher truth. Thus when Reason opposes the meaning she intends for *coilles* ("en ma parole autre sen ot") to what she deems the Lover's intended, or as she puts it *desired*, meaning ("celui que tu i veuls mettre") she is referring to his desire for the body to remain corporeal — intractably unmeaningfully corporeal.

This refusal to put the body in the service of a higher and spiritual truth can then be implicitly denounced as sodomitic. As we may remember, Reason has already accused the courtly Lover of being sodomitic. Reason at first accuses the Lover — in his prudishness at not wanting to utter the word *coilles* — of having disdain for the principle of generation that the testicles embody. This makes him implicitly a sodomite since, for the sodomites, the body is not a means to an end (procreation) but an end in itself. The courtly Lover's disdain for the principle of procreation that the word *coilles* indicates suggests that, like the sodomite, he disregards the teleology or "straight path" of sexuality in favor of a non-teleological pleasure. But the courtly lover is sodomitic in still another way. He not only disrupts the teleology of sexuality, but also disrupts the teleology of meaning. By speaking figuratively, by refusing to first signify on the literal register, courtly discourse interrupts the straight path of signification (from literal to figurative) as it interrupts the straight path of procreation. It short-circuits the "natural" teleology of meaning and is thus tantamount to sodomy.[8] This metaleptic short-circuiting of the teleology of pleasure and meaning constitutes a deviation which sodomy indeed figures. According to Reason, then, courtly love is "like" sodomy to the precise extent that it encourages a deviation from the "proper" (that is teleological) path of generational transmission and the transmission of meaning.

Reason thus advocates a strictly teleological understanding of sex and language. According to her, both sex and language must be means to an end (in the former, regeneration, in the latter, God's truth). Just as sexual pleasure should be the means to the end of reproduction, so should signification (i.e. the material — phonetic and graphic —

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[8] See the 2nd Alan of Lille chapter on this. Lady Reason essentially ventriloquates Alan's Lady Nature. The argument is structured essentially the same so I won't repeat it here.

quality of the signifier) be the means to the end of linguistic reference. The comparison suggests that to take pleasure in the materiality of signifiers, as one might, say, with courtly poetry, is the same as taking sexual pleasure for an end in itself, as the sodomites do. The Lover's refusal to allow the signifier *coilles* to elevate to the spiritual is sodomitic, according to Reason, to the extent that it implies a metalepsis of signification. In addition, since the referents in question (testicles) are corporeal, the Lover's refusal to name them literally implies a metalepsis both of the body and of language. Taking the body to be an end in itself the sodomite fails to allow the body to be elevated to a higher "spiritual" meaning. The courtly Lover refuses to put love in the service of procreation and language in the service of God's truth. He refuses to use love and language as means to an end. This suggests that both sex and language can become ends in themselves. Both sex and language, as means to an end, can potentially become their own ends. This metalepsis of the body and of language, as we will soon see, in addition to being sodomitic, is also the very definition of idolatry.

Gilding Testicles: On the Sophistry of Reason

Reason wins the debate insofar as the Lover concedes that her argument is unbeatable, but loses in a way because he ultimately chooses to part ways with her in order to remain faithful to his original master, the God of Love. Thus while on one level her argument leaves no room for the Lover to respond, on another level her argument fails to persuade him. This failure, I believe, stems from the fact that Reason's argument slips away from her control. Reason argument ultimately slides into *unreason.* As much

as she would like to control the signification of the lesson she is teaching the Lover, her argument seems in fact to spin out of control and comes, in the end, to embody a discourse that is sodomitic in a number of respects, which I will try to highlight.

Throughout the debate Reason is the advocate of the literal. She holds that proper literal denomination is possible and that the literal level of signification can and must be distinguished from the figural level of distinction. But is literal signification as literal as she claims it to be? Returning to the example of *coilles*, we find reason to doubt her conviction on this matter. According to Reason, *coilles* does not just name male genitalia. The word *coilles* refers to male genitalia which are construed as "beautiful" and "noble", because God endowed them with the power of generation:

> A soustenir nature humaine
> Qui sanz euls fust or casse et vaine.
> Car volentiers, non pas enviz,
> Mist dieus en coilles et en viz
> Force de generacion [...]
>
> [Testicles are that] by which human nature is sustained and without which it would now be empty and decayed. For it was by his own will rather than against it that God in his wonderful purpose put the generative power into the testicles and penis [...]
>
> (lines 6959-63)

As such, they are to be revered because they are like a lesser emanation of divine creation. As much as Reason insists that *coilles* must have a literal meaning, she does not allow the supposedly literal meaning of *coilles* here to signify the bodily referent (i.e. the fleshy sac attached to a male body). Rather, the supposedly literal meaning she constructs is in fact already an ennobling figure: Reason indeed "elevates" the testicles by claiming that they are the embodiment of a divine-like "force de generacion".

She first restricts the literal meaning of *coilles* to one meaning — testicles as an organ of procreation, an instrument for the perpetuation of the species and not an organ of pleasure to be used by an individual — and then claims that this procreative power of testicles is supposed to be *like* the divine power to create (which makes it a figure, a simile). Since procreation is like divine creation it can be ennobled as such, predicated on a likeness. So at the moment she most forcefully asserts the importance of literal signification, the literal meaning she puts forward is already a figure.

In making the supposedly "literal" testicles signify the divine-like power of generation, Reason not only elevates and spiritualizes them, she also in a way severs them from the body. This might explain the apparent contradiction in Reason's discourse: the *coilles* which supposedly signify the generative power of sex are supposed to function as an allegorical signifier in a myth which stages their castration. There is an apparent contradiction between the literal meaning of the *coilles* ("force de generacion") and their allegorical presentation as being cut-off (and thus no longer generative in the usual way). This allegory of castration suggests, however, that the elevation of the *coilles* to the status of figuring divine power of generation is the result of a castration of sorts. Indeed, when Reason says "en ma parole autre sen ot" her "other meaning" (*allegoria* = speaking otherwise) refers to the allegory of Saturn's castration. The elevated meaning she claims her use of *coilles* to have is precisely a reference to testicles as the product of a castration.

We might then say that the literal castration of Saturn allegorizes the cut Reason performs in removing these *coilles* from the body. The literal cut that severs the *coilles* from Saturn's body allegorizes the cut that takes place in Reason's discourse when she claims that *coilles* can only mean "force de generacion". Indeed, this elevation of *coilles*,

in elevating them also removes them from the body. Once they are elevated to the status of meaning (and only signifying the power of generation that allows for uninterrupted genealogical continuity) they take on a phallus-like status and are then no longer corporeal genitalia, but rather are only *like* literal genitalia. Like Jupiter's who founds all of history and genealogy (and also language, in a sense), on the castration of his father's testicles, allegorical meaning is also founded on a cut from the primal, pre-discursive (self-same, etc.) body.

We might then say that the myth of Saturn's castration allegorizes Reason's linguistic practice. Ironically, the more she claims to be in control of the allegorical meaning, the more the accurately this allegory seems to reflect her own ennobling linguistic practices.

But this is not, however, the only passage of her discourse that allegorically mirrors her linguistic performance. As we shall see, another passage functions as an allegorical mirror. One that will reflect yet another aspect of her linguistic practice: Reason's quasi-sodomitic veneration of the word *coilles*. When Reason claims that *coilles* literally mean "force de generation", she implicitly proposes them as an object of veneration. They are to be revered because they are like a lesser emanation of divine creation. This veneration is, as it were, brought to the foreground in one section of her discourse where it takes on a distinct sodomitic connotation.

Let's return to the section where Reason tries to persuade the courtly Lover that by refusing to utter the word *coilles*, he shows his contempt not just for the word but for the thing itself. The courtly lover tries to exonerate himself from this accusation by reiterating that he does not object to the thing but to the word alone. He claims, in other

words, to be able to isolate the signifier from its signified, to be able to evaluate its value independently of its function within the sign. If we take his assertion seriously, then, it would be possible for there to exist "bad" words such as *coilles* assigned to "good" things. These "bad" words should not be pronounced although they refer to things that are in themselves "good."

The Lover here advocates a theory of language according to which words can be disconnected from the things they signify. However, Reason claims that when he qualifies certain words as "laiz et villains", he implicitly reintroduces the connection that he claims to have severed. If he judges certain words to be "laiz et villains", it is because of their connection to the thing, she argues. In other words, while proclaiming his belief in the disconnection between words and things, the Lover still maintains a belief in their connection. And it is this connection that enables the Lover to determine the aesthetic value of words, to judge if a word is either "vilains" or not.

But while courtly love devalorizes certain words because of the thing they signify, Reason for her part seems to believe in a theory of language dictating that words and things are *disconnected.* She thus attempts to refute the Lover's assertion that the word *coilles* offends him more than the thing. In order to do so, she proposes to switch signifiers:

> Que je, quant mis les nons as choses, [...]
> Coilles reliques apelasse
> Et reliques coilles nommasse,
>
> [If] when I gave names to things [...] I had called testicles relics and relics testicles.
>
> (lines 7105-8)

The intended humor of her illustration lies in using a signifier that conventionally

designates an object of veneration (relics) to designate an object that courtly discourse presumably views as abject (testicles). The point of this switch of signifiers is to demonstrate that if the word *relique* meant *testicles* and the word *coilles* meant *relics*, the courtly lover would find the word *relique* ugly ("laiz moz et villains") because it designates testicles. In other words, he does not object to the word but to the thing and he would find any word used to designate sex "ugly". Thus, by the same token, if signifiers were switched and the word *coilles* were used to designate *relics*, he would then have to find the word *coilles* beautiful because it designates *relics*. Reason thus traps him, in his own faulty reasoning, into admitting that he in fact does see words as connected to the things they signify.

But as Reason tries to denounce the Lover's linguistic practice, she ends up unknowingly allegorizing her own linguistic practice. This becomes evident as we critically reexamine Reason's supposedly random choice of *reliques* as substitute signifier for *coilles*. The choice of *reliques* as the particular signifier to switch with *coilles* is, I would suggest, by no means an innocent, or arbitrary selection. On one level, these two signifiers are chosen as polar opposites. Testicles are opposed to relics as a venerated object is opposed to an abject object. On another level, the choice of *relics* to name *testicles* suggests a certain likeness between them. Relics, from *reliquor* (to remain)[9] were most often parts of the body (teeth, toenails, hair, foreskin) that were, like Saturn's testicles, cut off and cast away only to end up producing a whole new set of meanings (by-product, excess, foam). Relics are parts of the human body that are removed and elevated to have a higher meaning.

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[9] **Reliquae** [...] **1** That which remains after some process of reduction or elimination, the remnants, remains. [...] **2** The remains or relics of a dead person. (Glare, P.G.W., ed. *Oxford Latin Dictionary.* [Oxford: Oxford University Press]:1982)

Defined in this way, relics, I will argue, point to the process that produced the word *coilles* in Reason's discourse. *Coilles,* in her discourse, designates a body part that has been cut from a silent body, resistant to meaning, that is then impressed with an elevated meaning — i.e. "force de generation" — once separated from the body. The substitution of the signifier *reliques* for *coilles* thus indicates that the *coilles* in Reason's discourse already function like relics. These particular *coilles,* like relics, are a debased body part that has been separated and then elevated in order to be endowed with a higher meaning.

The substitution of *coilles* for *relics* points out another aspect of Reason's so-called literal denomination. Reason claims that if the word *coilles* were used to designate *relics*, the courtly lover would find this word so beautiful that he would find himself worshipping testicles and kissing them in church:

> Et quant pour reliques m'oïsses
> Coilles nommer, let mot prisses
> Pour si bel et tant le prissasses
> Que partout coilles aorasses
> Et les baisasses en eglises
> En or et en argent assises.
>
> And when you would have heard me name relics testicles, you would find the word so beautiful and would value it so much that you would be worshipping testicles and would be kissing them, plated in silver and gold, in churches all over the land [translation mine]
>
> (lines 7115-7120)

Reason conjures up the image of the Lover worshipping and kissing testicles. This is unmistakably an image of sodomitic pleasure, the same kind of pleasure Reason has already implicitly accused the Lover of indulging in. Although this uncanny image is supposed to serve as a diagnosis (or accusation) of the Lover's condition, it far exceeds its intended meaning and ends up diagnosing Reason's speech instead. The uncanny

image exceeds the logic of her argumentation, which will begin to spin out of control as we bear out its implications.

According to the logic of her argument, the Lover should find the word *coilles* beautiful because it designates relics, an object of veneration. It does *not* logically follow from the premises of her argumentation however that he should find the word *coilles* so beautiful that he would adore and kiss testicles as though they were relics exposed in a church. The sodomitic image is the by-product of an illogical, unreasonable mode of argumentation which can be reconstructed as follows: The word *coilles* is attached to the thing *relics*. Since the thing *relics* is an object of veneration, the courtly Lover should find the word *coilles* beautiful because it is now attached to the object *relics*. He should love this word because of its connection to the thing *relics*. Up to this point, Reason's argumentation is still reasonable. She is in effect saying to the Lover: "If you hate the word *coilles* because it designates *testicles*, a thing that offends you, then you should, in a symmetrical move, love the word *coilles* once it is made to refer to a thing of value, for example, *relics*." Reason, in effect, takes the Lover's position to the point of absurdity in order to force him to acknowledge that it is unreasonable to hate or love a word out of hatred or love for the object it designates. If he maintains that a word derives its value from the value granted to the thing it designates, then the Lover would have to imagine himself "loving" the word *coilles*.

Clearly, Reason counts on the fact that the courtly Lover will be unable to perform this linguistic exercise. But why? Because she knows he will be unable to detach the word *coilles* from the thing that it conventionally designates. As he pronounces *coilles* to designate *relics*, this word will call to mind the image of the offensive object:

testicles. Reason should rest her case at this point of the argumentation: she has proven through this linguistic exercise both that the Lover derives the value of the word from the value of the thing and that he is incapable of detaching a word from the thing it signifies.

But we should note at this point that while the courtly Lover proclaims his horror at certain words such as *coilles*, he does not however declare his *love* for any other word. The Lover never declares his love for any particular word at any point in their dialogue, but Reason in fact does declare just such a love. It is she, and not the Lover, who utters the phrases: "coilles est biaus nons et si l'ains / ainc nus plus biaus gaires ne vit." ("Testicles" is a good name and I like it and so, nothing more beautiful has ever been seen") In other words, the love for the word *coilles* that she provocatively attributes to the courtly Lover in order to debunk him stages in fact her own love for the word. It is Reason, not the Lover, who loves the word *coilles* because it names a "good thing": testicles endowed with the power of generation.

This love for the word generates the next move in her argumentation, a move which is excessive because it is illogical, unreasonnable. Reason attempts to expose the absurd foolishness of loving or hating any given word on the basis of the thing to which it is connected. Reason proclaims that the Lover who loves the word *coilles* because it is attached to the object *relics* should, in order to be consistent with his own logic, proceed to kiss and worship *coilles* as though they were *relics*.

The image of the Lover kissing and worshipping testicles indeed conjures up the specter of sodomy. Reason's use of this image implicitly accuses courtly discourse of being like sodomy. But how precisely does the image function as an implicit accusation? Presumably, a courtly lover who intensely hates certain words will, in a symmetrical

manner, intensely love, "adore" other words (whence the symmetry of Reason's example). And as she suggests, he will adore these words because of their connection to the things they designate. So to love certain words intensely is actually to love intensely the things they designate. To love the word *testicles* would then point to the sodomitic desire of loving the thing it names. Even to utter the word would be tantamount to trying to kiss the thing it names.

In this way Reason is thus able to attribute sodomitic desire to the Lover. But as we've already begun to see, this sodomitic desire in fact figures *her own* desire — she is the one who explicitly says she finds the word *coilles* beautiful and that she loves the word because it names a "noble" thing. In other words, the image of the courtly lover worshipping testicles reflects back to Reason her own potentially sodomitic love for the testicles. Reason would in fact be projecting her anxieties about her own (sodomitic) linguistic practice onto the Lover.

Now, in addition to the creating the image of the courtly Lover kissing and worshipping testicles, Reason's switch of signifiers creates the image, more precisely, of the Lover kissing them "as though" they were relics. This metaphor (*as though* they were relics) specifies the nature of Reason's own sodomitic linguistic practice. To begin with, this image breaks with the logic of Reason's own argument. The image of a sodomitic Lover worshipping testicles as if they were relics cannot be deduced within the parameters of her argument. Since the word *coilles* no longer designates testicles but now designates *relics* instead, to love the word *coilles* is not the same as loving the thing it previously designated ("testicles") *as though* it were relics. The image of a lover

worshipping testicles as if they were relics introduces a comparison between *coilles* and *reliques* that both exceeds and undercuts the logic of her argument.

This abusive assimilation of *coilles* to *reliques* indicates the precise nature of Reason's own sodomy. Although she claims to denounce the Lover's sodomitic linguistic practice, Reason in fact unveils the sodomy of her own speech. The choice of *reliques* as a substitute for the word *coilles* already suggests an implicit comparison between the two things. It suggests that the word *coilles* in her discourse functions as relics do in a church. At this point we should examine in more detail the function of relics in this comparison to Saturn's testicles.

To begin with, the testicles in Reason's discourse function like relics because they are cut from the body and endowed with a noble meaning that elevates them. The word *coilles*, uttered in this context, severs the body part it names precisely by endowing this body part with a "noble" meaning. For this reason, what Reason holds as the literal meaning is never allowed to signify literally in the first place; it is in fact already a figure, an allegory of sorts. The word *coilles* in Reason's discourse does not just name the fleshy sac attached to a male body: it names male genitalia as endowed with a "force de generation" similar to divine creation.

Now, because they are endowed with such a noble, metaphorical meaning, *coilles* can be turned into an object of worship. And as we have seen, it is not the courtly Lover who loves testicles so much that he worships and kisses them like relics, but rather Reason herself, who proclaims her intense love for this word ("Coilles est biaus nons et si l'ains [...] Ainc nus plus biaus gaires ne vit"). If she loves the word so much, declaring its superlative beauty, it is only because the "literal" meaning she has given to this word (a

divine-like power of generation) is in fact a figural, ennobling meaning. This ennobling cut of this figuration turns the thing to which the word refers (testicles) into an object of worthy of veneration: an object of worship. In other words, the thing *testicles* is not a "good" thing in itself. It is constructed, allegorized, as a valuable thing in the very process of being named, of being made to "literally" signify: a "force de generation" akin to God's power.

Coilles, in Reason's discourse, also functions like relics in another sense. The way relics are supposed function in a church is, they must point to a higher truth, namely to God. In other words, these noble objects are not supposed to be venerated in and of themselves. They are supposed to lead to the veneration of God/divine truth itself. To venerate them in and of themselves would constitute idolatry, which is defined as a *rupture* in the teleological movement whereby relics point to and thus guide the worshiper to God.

In the same manner, *coilles* as the signifier of human re-generative power, analogous to God's generative power, are not supposed to be venerated in and of themselves. One does not love human testicles because they procreate but because this power of procreation resembles divine creation. (The reader might recall that the distinction between divine creation and human regeneration is evoked by the Lover's scrupulous distinction, "I am not the creator of the word *coilles*, only its re-creator"). We can revere divine creation through the veneration of the human power to procreate. But, as with relics in a church, we must beware the danger of idolatry. It would indeed be idolatrous to love these ennobled testicles in and of themselves, to interrupt the teleological movement

that would make of human sexual reproduction a metaphor for the divine creation of the God the Father. This idolatry would be tantamount to sodomy.

It is precisely this kind of idolatry that is staged in Reason's speech: the Lover is shown worshipping *coilles* as holy relics, but holy relics that no longer refer to a higher and divine Truth. We should recall at this point that while Reason claims that *coilles* functions as the allegorical signifier of a divine truth she *never*, at any point, reveal the higher truth that they supposedly allegorize. At no point does she explain the kind of higher Truth that the appearance of the word *coilles* in the myth of Saturn's castration is supposed to allegorize.

Reason's discourse exemplifies the danger that by ennobling the literal, as she does with the testicles, one threatens to turn the literal into its own end. In so doing, her discourse becomes sodomitic: it interrupts the teleological movement of signification that she claims to defend. These testicles, which are supposed to lead to divine Truth, get *so* ennobled, *so* loved as a result of this ennobling meaning that they block the teleological movement of proper allegorical signification.

Ironically, then, the myth of Saturn's castration in fact allegorizes this allegorical dysfunction. Testicles in Reason's discourse are cut off from the body because they are endowed with meaning. They are ennobled because of their metaphorical link to the generative power of the Father. This ennobling meaning turns them into an object of veneration, of worship. But this veneration always threatens to go awry and turn into idolatry; Idolatry would consist in worshipping the testicles as ends in themselves, interrupting their teleological function as a reference to the divine power of generation. Such idolatry is tantamount to castration: To idolize the testicles as an end in itself would

mean that Reason would refuse to restore the testicles to the divine Father by making them ultimately mean his divine power to generate, his higher truth. This is in a sense paralleled in Jupiter's gesture of castrating his father and then throwing the testicles into the sea. These testicles allegorically thus signify the *failure* of allegorical meaning to provide an adequate, that is, "straight," teleological path from the testicles to God. These gilded testicles ultimately allegorize their own resistance to allegorical meaning.

The lack of an ultimate revelation of Truth points to the fact that Reason has precisely done that. We never access the higher, divine meaning of *coilles*, but rather are left with the idolatrous worship of gilded testicles. The desire to make sex "mean," to make it signify within a system (and allegory is the most obvious in its desire to give form to otherwise formless, meaningless, things), ends up mirroring that very desire back to the allegorist.

Conclusion
The Body of Euphemism versus the Body of Allegory

This dissertation has argued that allegory relies on a body that is paradoxically both stable and unstable — grounded and ungrounded, feminine and masculine — in order to produce meaning. In response to this paradox, the sodomitic body arises as a focal point on which anxieties regarding both the threat of allegory's ungroundedness and the interruption of allegory's anagogical function can be projected, possibilities that are *necessarily* built into allegorical meaning in order for it to function. But, as the dissertation's title — The *Letter* Killeth — suggests, it is the question of literal meaning and its groundedness in the body that has most occupied the dissertation's imagination and that of the authors in question as well.

This emphasis on the literal body, I would suggest, stems from a shared preoccupation among these works with the act of naming, of literal denomination, perceived to be threatened by sodomy and speech used to refer to it. Sodomy poses a more serious challenge to literal naming during this particular historical period — the Third Lateran Council ushered in an era of institutionalized hushing — as it is around this time that sodomy becomes constituted as the unnamable vice. Sodomy is not once properly named in any of these works, but is rather designated through periphrastic expressions or euphemistic metaphors. Alan's Nature plays the most with tropes of unspeakability, referring to sodomy as the "unspeakable monstrosity" (*monstrum nefandum*). For Nature, sodomy is so unspeakable that referring to it by name as "the unmentionable vice" more than suffices to designate the precise referent. As sodomy undergoes a process of becoming designated as the unnamable sin, these allegories reveal

the dangers of such a refusal to name. They ask: if allegorical meaning is grounded on a body that must be named in order for allegorical meaning to be grounded in the first place, what should allegory do with bodies that cannot or must not be named? It would mean that all of the cherished works of the pagan writers, and most particularly Ovid, could no longer be read as Christian allegory because they contain all sorts of sodomitic bodies. In the works this dissertation has focused on, the linguistic practice that refuses to name the body — which we can call euphemism — is opposed to the allegorical practice of naming a body literally so that it can be elevated to have figurative meaning. Allegory and euphemism are thus opposed as two different linguistic practices that have distinct ways of designating the body. Oddly, though, the metaphors used to describe the process of euphemistic covering, as a veil or as clothing, are the same as those that describe allegory's veil of figures (*integumentum*, *involucrum*, etc.). Both linguistic practices aim to "cover" the literal body in a way. But do they cover the body to the same end?

To take an example from *Roman de la Rose*, in which these two linguistic practices are most saliently personified in the figures of the courtly Lover (euphemism) and Reason (allegory), we might ask: what is the difference between the situation of the corporeal referent in Reason's discourse (*coilles*) and the position of the corporeal referent in courtly (euphemistic) discourse. How do their positions differ in regards to the relation between the body and literal meaning? Reason provides a so-called literal meaning (which is in effect a figure) for the sexual referent. What does euphemism do differently in claiming to "hide" the referent, never to name it literally? Is there something different about the way the two rapports to the body operate?

I would suggest that, if we want to understand the specific threat that euphemism poses to allegorical meaning, we find a clue in examining the relationship between desire — that is, courtly love as personified in the figure of Venus — and the drive to hide the sexual referent in euphemistic figures.

In the myth of Saturn's castration Venus, or desire, is produced from the foam, or excess, released in the act of cutting the father's testicles from his body. The testicles must be cut from the primal father's body in order for desire to be born. Desire is necessary to the process of generation. This cut of the testicles from the father's body is thus necessary, it seems, to the maintenance of genealogical continuity. The son must take them away from his father in order to desire and ultimately procreate. But this desire is not to be confused with the animal urge to procreate. She is born out of an excess marked as the product of linguistic operations. That is to say, she is born out of the cut which language operates in appropriating body parts as linguistic signs, in making a *penis* into a *phallus* (this, I argue, is what the castration of Saturn allegorizes). For this reason Venus is also associated with the denatured "nature" of human desire, its resistance to strictly generational accounts of human desire and its tendency to stray from the path of its supposed aim.

To that extent, Venus's birth accounts for what Reason considers the disorderly nature of courtly love. The euphemistic Lover, as a personification of courtly love, is a follower of Venus. Reading Saturn's castration as an allegory of the cut whereby language appropriates the body into meaning, the birth of Venus out of this cut suggests that we read desire as born from — and henceforth inhabiting — the gap between language and the body. Desire is only possible in the disjunction or gap between body

and language and can only arise in the severing of the primordial body from the body's (already fantasmatic) image produced by its appropriation into a system of meaning.

The euphemistic Lover's approach to the body focuses his attention on the gap between the pre-discursive body and the body inscribed in language while Reason posits an *already figural* body as the ground for allegorical signification in such a way as to elide the gap on which the Lover is focused. She operates as though the linguistically inscribed body were the only body, disavowing the possibility of a gap between the body and language, denying the silent and resistant materiality of the body.

As the birth of Venus suggests, this gap is a source of pleasure. To focus on it as the Lover does tacitly acknowledges the gap, even if it is only "felt" in vaguely erotic intuitions. It is the source of desire and the reason for why desire cannot by definition be satisfied.

In his *Le plaisir du texte*, Roland Barthes considers two distinctly different ways of relating to the body, which signal for him two distinct modalities of reading, that resemble what we have been looking at as the euphemistic mode in contrast to the allegorical mode. As with allegory and euphemism, the metaphor of clothing and unclothing is central to his conceptualization of these distinct modalities:

> Ce n'est pas là le plaisir du strip-tease corporel ou du suspense narratif. Dans l'un et l'autre cas, pas de déchirure, pas de bords : un dévoilement progressif : toute l'excitation se réfugie dans l'espoir de voir le sêxe (rêve de collégien) ou de connaître la fin de l'histoire (satisfaction romanesque). Paradoxalement (puisqu'il est de consommation massive), c'est un plaisir bien plus intellectuel que l'autre : plaisir oedipéen (dénuder, savoir, connaître l'origine et la fin), s'il est vrai que tout récit (tout dévoilement de la vérité) est une mise en scène du Père (absent, caché ou hypostasié) — ce qui expliquerait la solidarité des formes narratives, des structures familiales et des interdictions de nudité, toutes rassemblées, chez nous, dans le mythe de Noé recouvert par ses fils.[1]

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[1] Barthes, Roland. *Le plaisir du texte*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973.

This passage refers to the second of two different orders whereby the figured body of the text (naked truth) reveals itself, in other words, two different kinds of pleasure to be had from reading. The first order of pleasure he describes is simultaneous and constitutive to language itself, what he calls "intermittence." It is the gap between writing and its referent, between the material and the ideal, always there, "là où le vêtement bâille" in any kind of writing. The particular pleasure one garners from this gap (it is not a revelation because it is immediate, always part of meaning itself) Barthes describes as perversion. The perverse reader fixates on: "la peau qui scintille entre deux pièces (le pantalon et le tricot), entre deux bords (la chemise entrouverte, le gant et la manche), c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit." So this order of pleasure is simultaneous, immediate, and perverse while the other order of pleasure is sequential, mediated and intellectual (oedipal). The first order of pleasure is built on the body of the mother (impossible to sublimate) while the second is built on the (necessarily sublimated) body of the father. The gap itself is erotic and glimmering, we might even say *gilded*, in the first case, while the hope for a naked body to be revealed (coupled with a fear of this same body) is what becomes erotic in the other. Euphemism is this perverse modality which eschews sequential unveiling in favor of intermittence.

Barthes' articulation of these two orders of pleasure, here, can help us reconsider the allegorical description of Lady Nature's dress in *De Planctu Naturae*. On the one hand her dress is described layer by layer, down to her underwear, in a sequential striptease of sorts that keeps promising to reveal more. On the other hand she is described as already violated. Her dress is torn in one spot. And this tear, we are led to believe, is

caused by mankind's sexual sins (i.e. perversions). Thus Nature's body is revealed to the reader in two ways: one that is sequential, associated with narrator's desire to know the true nature of things, a gradual unveiling. This is the pleasure that Barthes calls properly intellectual or oedipal. It has a distinct schoolboy sex fantasy ("rêve de collégien") quality to it. The narrator has to imagine how the gentle curve of her flanks looks beneath her robe and continues to imagine her more private parts.

> As for the other things which an inner chamber hid from view, let a confident belief declare that they were more beautiful. For in her body lay hidden a more blissful aspect to which her face showed the introduction. However, as her contenance revealed, the key of Dione's daughter had not opened the lock of her chastity.

The narrator's reverie on Nature's genitalia corresponds precisely to what Barthes describes as the "espoir de voir le sêxe". The sight of her face promises something more, a "blissful aspect" hidden in her body. In other words he dreams of seeing her genitalia while at the same time acknowledging that they must remain hidden. And like Barthes in his description of reading as a striptease, Alan of Lille intends Nature's striptease to describe the pleasures of (allegorical) reading. The pleasure comes from imagining (in *De Planctu* the word is actually "believing") the "more blissful aspect" whose existence is pointed to by the sight of the face. Nature's figured virginity creates a temporal (narrative) difference between the nature we can see and the nature hidden away by the lock of chastity, between nature clothed and nature unclothed, between a nature mediated through figures and a literal (i.e. naked) nature. Although it promises, or points to, the revelation of a final naked truth, this mode of unveiling can never fully unveil the true "nature" of Nature because nature is always already mediated by language. This "always

already" mediatedness is the full meaning of her figured virginity. Nature describes it herself:

> In all these things [seasons/aging] the effects of my power shine forth to an extent greater than words can express. However, for many I have decided to cloak my face in figures in order to protect my secret from being cheapened, lest, if I should grant them an intimate knowledge of myself, what at first had been held in honour by them because they lacked knowledge of it, should when known be regarded as of less value.

The value and potency of knowledge requires that total knowledge (likened to the unveiling of Nature's true sex) always remain in a state of deferral.

But Nature's body also glimmers out of the tear in her dress, the gap between the material and the ideal, a gap that is constitutive to the very possibility of upholding the idea of "nature". The pleasure garnered from contemplating this tear is what Barthes considers a perverse pleasure, what Lady Reason considers a sodomitic pleasure. Lady Reason is suspicious of euphemism because, in refusing to name the body, in refusing literal designation, it holds the body in a state of unmeaningness. Euphemism thus opposes itself to the intense logocentrism of allegory (which is oedipal, sequential, etc.) in favor of a mode of corporeality that refuses to sublimate as allegory does.

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