

#### CHAPTER IV

# The Grammar of the Sexes in Medieval French Romance<sup>1</sup>

*Michelle Szkilnik*

Cross-dressing seems to be common practice in medieval romance by the end of the thirteenth century. Heroines who either need to escape a dreadful fate or look for more freedom often dress as men and with apparently few problems adjust to their new identities, behaving in perfect accordance with the roles they have chosen: knight, minstrel, hermit. We find fewer examples of men dressing as women, but they do exist and are all the more interesting for being scarce.

Yet, if the characters do not seem to experience many difficulties<sup>2</sup> in pretending to be what they are not, what about the writers? How do they deal with the change of sex befalling their creatures? What kind of grammatical consequences does such a practice involve? Forced by the very nature of language to make choices, writers might indeed seize the opportunity to raise questions about gender identity, unless they are only betraying their own prejudices about gender roles.

Michèle Perret has shown how cross-dressing is an opportunity to hint at homosexuality—a taboo so powerful that we find very few examples of texts dealing frankly with it<sup>3</sup>—and also an opportunity to reflect on what is innate or acquired in sexual identity (329). Looking at a different corpus, I came to many of the same conclusions that Perret drew from hers. Yet I also found texts that staged new configurations,

which brought me to nuance some of Perret's statements. Cross-dressing is indeed a topos and a popular one from the thirteenth century on, but it is also such a sensitive one, because of the issues involved, that it allows for a wide range of reactions. A close examination of the grammatical solutions medieval writers adopt from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century reveals on the one hand a strong awareness that while it is a topos, cross-dressing still deserves extra-careful handling each time it is used. On the other hand, it shows a progressive reconsideration of the practice: suggesting at first the fluidity of gender boundaries, the topos later serves to reinforce their rigidity, implying that there is an essential, a natural difference between men and women.

There might be at least one point on which all the medieval writers would agree: it is not the same for a man to dress as a woman as for a woman to dress as a man. Ambroise Paré reminds us that:

"Nous ne trouvons jamais en histoire véritable que d'homme aucun soit devenu femme pour ce que Nature tend toujours à ce qui est le plus parfait et non au contraire faire que ce qui est parfait devienne imparfait" (30)

(We never find in authentic stories that a man became a woman because Nature always tends towards what is the most perfect and does not, on the contrary, make imperfect what was perfect.)

For a man, to dress as a woman is to debase himself. Licorus, a character from the *Roman de Cassidorus*,<sup>4</sup> forced to wear a woman's dress, feels greatly ashamed and is relieved when he can take it off (Vol. 2, 431 and 449). Cross-dressing shows some kind of flaw in his character, raises some doubts about his virility. Licorus' embarrassment might actually be a reflection on his past behavior, and his cross-dressing clearly echoes that of the main character in this part of the romance: Helcana, the empress of Constantinople who, as we shall see, is forced to dress up as a hermit and, mistaken for a man, is accused of having seduced a young lady. In reality the lady, furious at having been rejected by Helcana, convinces Licorus to sleep with her and, once pregnant, blames it on the supposed hermit. Is not Licorus's forced cross-dressing a kind of penance

for his own misbehavior as well as for the mistreatment that others inflicted upon Helcana?

Narratively, this unsympathetic conception of male cross-dressing has two consequences: first the disguised male character, contrary to the female one, cannot be the hero. He might play a major role, but he is not the model proposed for the reader's identification. Second, the episodes of male cross-dressing are necessarily short, even if in the romance's fictive temporality, the character has possibly been mistaken for a woman for years. While female cross-dressing and the problems it raises can be the matter of a whole romance or at least of very large sections, male cross-dressing does not generate abundant writing. Is it because the medieval writers here studied react simplistically to what they all see as a weird practice? Their reaction seems to be: only not quite real men can indulge in cross-dressing and this abnormal alteration of their appearance deserves to be mentioned only as some sort of strategic narrative device or as an illustration of the catastrophic consequences of such a practice.

In the *Roman d'Ysaïe*<sup>5</sup> and in *Valentin et Orson*,<sup>6</sup> the dwarves Tronc and Pacolet both dress as women to seduce and trick their enemies. But they are barely men. Ugly, deformed, gifted with magical powers, they are usually mistaken for devils. They indeed constitute a third gender: sexually male but female in the way they manipulate others. That they use tricks to solve their problems befits the characters' ambiguous nature. They show by their cunning that they already partake in a female understanding of the world. Tronc, for example, explains to the vile knight he intends to deceive with his cross-dressing that women must play with their appearance, must put on a front in order to get what they want.

Vous sçavés que de tant que le femme se tient fiere, de tant plus est l'homme engrans de lui aler autour, s'il l'aime; et de tant c'on tient les denrees quieres samblent elles milleures a assés de gens. (61)

(You know that the prouder the woman, the more attracted the man is to her if he loves her; and the more expensive the goods, the better they appear to a lot of people.)

This manipulative behavior, presented as a law of the market, might be only a necessary strategy, to which women are forced to resort.<sup>7</sup> Yet according to Tronc, that is how all women, beautiful as well as ugly (and even more so the ugly ones) are expected to act. And the *vous sçavés* (you know) shows that Tronc's statement is likely to sound reasonable to his interlocutor. So if cunning, in this instance, is not ascribed to female nature, as it often is in the medieval misogynist tradition,<sup>8</sup> it is nonetheless a device quite favored by women—and magicians—for its efficacy.

In the episode from *Valentin et Orson*, the writer hesitates between *he* and *she* when referring to the dwarf Pacolet. Or rather, he uses *she* when Pacolet, looking like a pretty and easy young girl, becomes an object of desire for the men who meet him and who are aroused by his beauty. But when Pacolet, who ultimately is in control of the situation, is seen as a subject, the writer reverts to *he*. This subtle grammatical play is especially striking in the final scene. Pacolet's enemy, Adramain, who happens to be a magician himself, is in bed, full of desire and expectation. Pacolet joins him and is referred to as *la fille* (the girl). When he casts a spell on Adramain, he is called Pacolet, which means that he is again the dwarf magician of ambiguous nature. But he then inflicts on his enemy a punishment that stresses his own male nature: by beheading Adramain with a sword, the knight's weapon *par excellence*, Pacolet reclaims his virility. If he does not experience a literal change in his sexual nature, the instability of his linguistic nature nonetheless implies that he does indeed belong to this third category, neither male nor female, a category that obviously provoked fear and repulsion.

In the episode from *Ysaïe*, the writer never lets the reader forget that the strangely ugly lady is the dwarf Tronc in disguise. He always uses masculine nouns or pronouns. There is only one inconsistency in a dialogue: instead of the expected *fait il* (he says), we find *fait elle* (she says). In a text very carefully written, as we shall see when we analyze another example of cross-dressing, we cannot write it off as an insignificant slip. What it suggests is that dressing as a woman might make you, linguistically at least, a woman. Not only is it debasing but it is also dangerous. That might explain Licorus' relief when taking off the woman's dress he was forced to wear. This is a strange dress indeed since it had made him believe he was a woman or rather made him see the

world through a woman's eyes, while still retaining his personality (and his masculine grammatical marking). In this instance, the character is grammatically and sexually male but psychologically female, a change he had to undergo in order to be admitted to the all-female world where he will find the object of his quest (Helcana's son, who will then reveal who the young hermit really is). Licorus' strange experience, the inconsistency in *Ysaïe*, and Pacolet's objectification under the male gaze all reveal that wearing feminine clothes is much more than merely playing with appearances. It raises questions about the character's actual gender and suggests that gender categories are not as fixed as one might think.

The most extreme example of this ambiguity is in the *Roman de Silence*. The queen's lover, a man dressed as a nun,<sup>9</sup> whose deception Merlin denounces at the end of the story, never retrieves his masculine grammatical marking. Grammatically speaking, he remains a *she*. Merlin never says that the nun is a man:

Rois, cele none tient Eufeme.  
Escarnist vos ses dras de feme.

.....

La nonain qui n'a soig de halle,  
Bize, ni vent, ki point et giele,  
A vesteüre de femiele. (vv. 6531-2, 6538-40)<sup>10</sup>

(King, this nun holds Eufeme.  
His/Her<sup>11</sup> female clothes deceive you.

.....

The nun who is not eager to get a tan  
nor to be exposed to north wind, or any biting and freezing wind  
wears female clothes.)

While Merlin clearly reveals that Silence is a woman and uses feminine nouns or pronouns to refer to the heroine, he merely says that the nun wears female clothes (which is obvious) and deceives the king, but how? He does denounce the love affair between the queen and the nun but without actually stating that it is an heterosexual relationship. When talking of how both Silence and the nun have deceived the king, Merlin employs the feminine plural pronoun *eles* (v. 6550). Of course, the nun

is then stripped of her clothes, and her real sexual nature becomes obvious to the king and his court but not to the reader, because here again the text only says that they found Merlin has told the truth.

Et dont a fait avant venir  
 La nonain, sil fait despollier, . . .  
 Et Silence despollier roeve.  
 Tost si com Merlins dist les trueve. (vv. 6570-6573)

(The king bids the nun to come forward,  
 has her stripped.  
 And he commands that Silence be stripped.  
 He finds that they are exactly as Merlin had told.)

Even at the time of her death the nun is still denied a male sexual identity. This grammatical consistency in calling the nun *she* is remarkable. Undoubtedly, for medieval readers as well as modern ones, there is no ambiguity: the nun is really a man. Yet the text never states it explicitly; by choosing this debasing outfit, the queen's lover seems to have definitively lost his masculine sexual identity.

Male cross-dressing thus seems a means of hinting at taboos, exploring sexual identity, suggesting the existence of other gender categories but in an oblique, non-threatening way. Cross-dressed male characters cannot be heroes and remain marginal, suspect, even when they play positive roles; hence the possibilities of alternative behaviors that they embody also remain marginal and suspect.<sup>12</sup> In other words while allowing for flexibility in gender identity, writers nonetheless denounce this blurring as dangerous.

As for female cross-dressing, it does not easily foster consensus among medieval writers, maybe because on the one hand, deceiving people by pretending to be what you are not can never be totally forgiven. On the other hand, dressing as a man, if it does indeed change the nature of woman—at least her literary nature—upgrades her, if we are to believe Ambroise Paré. So there seem to be two lines along which medieval writers divide themselves. Yet, however complex and rich the game of gender exchange, at the end the status quo is always reinforced, as Perret rightly insists.<sup>13</sup>

Two texts suggest that women indeed undergo a dramatic change in their nature, psychological as well as physical, when dressing like men: the *Roman de Silence* and the *Roman de Cassidorus*. Silence, the heroine of the romance which bears her name, excels in male arts and easily surpasses all the other knights.<sup>14</sup> In *Cassidorus*,<sup>15</sup> the empress of Constantinople, Helcana, who had to flee her enemies, takes refuge with a hermit Ydoine, and to avoid the threat of being recognized, dresses herself as a male hermit. She then proves to be a disciple even more saintly than her master and is granted divine favors that the holy Ydoine had been denied. Both texts use masculine grammatical markers throughout. It is as if by dressing as a man, the female character not only acquired all the masculine qualities but also became the best among the "most" perfect.

There is yet one aspect in which the character remains female: her body. The problem arises when a woman, the queen in *Silence*, a young lady in *Cassidorus*, falls in love with the hero/heroine. Perret has shown how the writer of the *Roman de Silence* in this embarrassing situation coins ambiguous phrases that allude to the double nature of the protagonist,<sup>16</sup> but continues to use masculine pronouns and endings, thus confusing the syntax. In *Cassidorus*, Helcana, once she has changed her name into Helcanor, is always referred to as *he*, even in the scene of seduction. There is only one allusion, and a very veiled one, to the fact that what the young lady wishes is against nature: "Se vous saviez qui je sui, ja de moi ne vous prendroit envie, tant fussiez esprise de mauvaise volonté." (v. 375; If you knew who I am, you would not desire me, however spurred on by evil intentions.)

Helcana is a woman, but she is also the empress of Constantinople and a holy hermit. What does she mean then when she tells the young lady: "if you knew who I am"? What does she consider most important at the time: her sexual identity, her social status or, very likely, her sainthood? What is sinful about the young lady's proposition? That it is misdirected towards another woman or that she is trying to seduce God's servant? Would it be more acceptable if she were to love Ydoine instead? Both *Silence* and *Cassidorus* seem to avoid dealing with the actual homosexual quality of the relationship. These scenes of seduction after all are common: hagiographic texts propose numerous temptations of the

kind Helcana/or is submitted to, and since the story of Joseph and King Potiphar's wife, examples of kings' wives attempting to seduce their husbands' knights abound. By calling the reader's attention to the impropriety of lusting after God's servant or, for a queen, after her husband's vassal, these texts divert us from fully assessing the situation. It is as if the writers were toying with the idea of homosexuality but could not bring themselves to name it, even less to describe the consummation of the act.

Another scene in *Cassidorus* suggests the same mix of fascination and repulsion but in an almost exact inversion of the one just analyzed. When the old hermit Ydoine first meets Helcana, the dejected empress of Constantinople, he pities her; when asked by none other than an angel to keep her with him, agrees charitably. He then suggests that she wear the hermit dress: no one will recognize her nor blame Ydoine for keeping a woman with him. So far he does not seem to have noticed her beauty. However the minute she puts on the dress of a hermit (and so is no longer the inaccessible empress), Ydoine is struck and embarrassed by her beauty, although, says the text, everybody would have thought that she was a fourteen-year-old boy (339). Of course, Ydoine knows Helcana's real sexual identity, but nonetheless it is when she looks like a boy that he is tempted.<sup>17</sup> He then changes her name to Helcanor and, from then on, the text and Ydoine himself will always refer to the former empress as *he*, Helcanor. But that is the exact point at which the text starts narrating Ydoine's temptation and his stoic resistance. Whereas in the case of the young lady's improper desire, the romance was describing as heterosexual a relationship that was in fact virtually homosexual, it now describes as homosexual one which is in reality heterosexual. But it is precisely because it is in fact heterosexual that the romance can afford to keep referring to Helcanor as *he*.<sup>18</sup> The different permutations that female cross-dressing favors undoubtedly shake the traditional gender distinction and allow writers to broach sensitive topics such as homosexuality. But as was the case with male cross-dressing, the attempt remains cautious. If medieval writers are fascinated by the possibilities opened to them by the linguistic game, most of them seem to draw the line at what is after all only a grammatical gender.

The position taken by the romances *Silence* and *Cassidorus*—that dressing as a man somehow alters woman's literary nature—quickly becomes uncomfortable. However admirable, these women are embarrassing. They are too good at being men. For having distinguished herself among King Ebain's knights, *Silence* is then distinguished by the queen. The gifts with which God has endowed *Helcana* make her much too attractive. The protagonist in a romance *must* be the best in his/her category. If he is a man, he will thus be the best knight; if a woman, she will be the most beautiful and courteous; if a transvestite, she will have to combine all these qualities, becoming indeed a monster: a perfect woman surpassing man in all his male prerogatives. Moreover, if women can indeed change their "nature" and perform as well as men, as these romances seem to suggest, if gender boundaries are fluid, it might mean that there is actually no female "nature," nor is there a male "nature," outside of the biological differences. In the words of Roberta Krueger, "'Nature' is the justification of how 'culture' constructs women (117)". Consequently women's inferior social status, ordinarily justified by their different (and inferior) "nature", can be called into question. What women have attained in these romances is social equality with men. Although the writers carefully emphasize how exceptional these women characters are and, consequently, imply that the social order is not in jeopardy since most women are of the more ordinary type, they are nonetheless trapped by the ideals they have set up. They must put an end to their experiment.<sup>19</sup> *Silence* and *Helcanor* will eventually revert to their former gender and be socially recognized as women.<sup>20</sup>

*Silence* and *Cassidorus* were both written towards the end of the thirteenth century, at a time when the topic of cross-dressing was still new and being explored with fascination. But by the end of the fourteenth century and certainly by the fifteenth, writers were using the topic in a much less sympathetic way, not to question gender identity but to reinforce stereotypes about women.

The *Roman de Perceforest*,<sup>21</sup> dating from the beginning of the fourteenth century, already bears some traces of this evolution. In its third part, this romance develops two parallel stories of women disguised as men, the story of Malaquin/Carce and that of Cueur d'Acier/Néronès. Both women, dressed as squires, accompany their lovers on their adventures.

The writer treats the stories very differently however, in order to illustrate the two predominant attitudes towards female cross-dressing.

The first woman, Malaquin, whose real name is Cerse, is a Roman noblewoman. She dresses as a man and escapes her father's home to follow her lover, who had been sent to the northern regions to besiege a rebellious city. Unlike Silence or Helcana, she is not forced by some danger to take up a disguise. She chooses to do so in order to gain freedom. Reunited with her lover, she keeps her male dress so that she can stay with him while no one suspects who she is. This is clearly not a period of sexual abstinence in her life.<sup>22</sup> Although she asserts that her first lover kept her like his sister (291), the narrator comments: "Au regard de moy, je l'en croy ainsi comme l'en peut croire femmes en tel cas! (291; As for me, I believe her like you can believe women in such cases). When Malaquin later elopes with another man, it is also very clear that the two quickly become lovers. What is most unusual about the presentation of this undoubtedly flawed character (who will play a terrible part later in the story), is that initially the reader does not know that this person is a woman. Bethidès, the hero of the episode and Malaquin's future lover, is challenged by a young knight, who knows Bethidès' high reputation and is eager to learn more about jousting. The two fight and despite his strength and his skill, the young knight is easily unhorsed. Stunned by the shock, he lies unconscious for a while. His pants are torn off and fall down to his ankles, showing his body up to the waist and revealing a skin *plus blanche que une fleur de lis* (289; whiter than lilies). Fascinated by the whiteness of this flesh, Bethidès stares in amazement until he finally notices that it is the body of a woman. Up to now, and even in the description of the body with its white flesh gleaming under the sun, the writer has always used masculine pronouns and endings, even in sentences such as: "[Bethidès] n'avoit oncques veu plus blanche char porter a chevalier." (289; he had never seen a knight wearing such a white skin). The revelation of the true sexual nature of his opponent is delayed by very convoluted sentences, still replete with masculine forms, that suggest the truth but also maintain the ambiguity of the experience. After all, Bethidès, as well as the reader, thought the young knight was a man but was nonetheless seduced by the quality of his skin.

Et lors, ainsi que Nabel (i.e. Bethidès) regardoit la blancheur du chevalier, il perçoit que Nature n'avoit point failly en sa personne qu'elle n'y eut fait et forme et cognoissance naturelle pour jugier s'il estoit homme ou femme. Mais Nabel eut vergongne de le veoir en tel estat descouvert, sy mist pié a terre et print la chemise du chevalier, qui estoit belle et blanche, et le couvry pour ce principalement que c'estoit une femme. (289)

(And then, while Nabel was looking at the knight's whiteness, he discovered that Nature had not forgotten to give him shape and natural sign that would indicate if he was male or female. But Nabel felt ashamed to see him uncovered in such a way, he dismounted and took the knight's shirt which was beautiful and white, and covered him, principally because this was a woman.)

What makes this description remarkable is the contradictory messages it sends to the reader: white flesh, refined clothes evoke a woman to any reader familiar with the canons of feminine beauty. But the consistent use of masculine markers prevents any easy conclusion. These ambiguous sentences bring back to mind the case of the nun in the *Roman de Silence*. Although we are told that *Nature* has sexually formed this body in an unmistakable way, although Bethidès (like the king and his court in *Silence*) sees the uncovered/discovered sex, we readers still do not know at first if it is a man or a woman.

On realizing his mistake, Bethidès, suddenly ashamed, stops staring and the text immediately uses feminine pronouns, putting an end to the ambiguity. One might wonder what exactly Bethidès is ashamed of. In the dialogue that follows, Bethidès addresses the lady as *belle damoysele*, and then *belle*, stressing her gender but also the right he has gained over her by discovering her secret. He tells her that he will not betray her but that she must remember him. This sounds like blackmail: what he has discovered looking at the white flesh is not only that she is a woman but also what kind of woman she is, and he intends to take advantage of his knowledge. The dialogue reinstalls a reassuring, if more conservative, relation between the sexes. The two then depart. The young lady having rearranged her outfit and remounted her horse, regains her previous status,

and the text again uses masculine forms, nonetheless calling the lady *chevalier fendu* (290; split knight) to allude to her true "nature."

In medieval French, *fendace*, a derivative of the verb *fendre*, refers to the female sex. The allusion to Malaquin's actual female parts, which Bethidès has seen and clearly desires, reduces her to her female body, precisely when the text pretends to reinvest her with her former status. Soon, while the *chevalier fendu* reflects on her situation and decides to give her love to Bethidès and while Bethidès too falls in love with the lady, the text reverts, this time for good, to feminine forms. From then on, even though Malaquin will keep her male dress to follow Bethidès, feminine forms will always be used.<sup>23</sup> There is no more ambiguity. On the contrary, by acting as she did, Malaquin has proven that she indeed fits a certain stereotype about women. Unfaithful, driven by sexual impulses, she will later in the romance show the depth of her disloyalty by betraying Bethidès who has finally married her and by bringing about the downfall of his kingdom. The name she gives herself while she is disguised, Malaquin, also indicates her wicked nature: had Bethidès known how to decipher it, he might have avoided her altogether. The other character who bears this name in the romance is the son of the dreadful and treacherous magician Darnant, who was killed by Bethidès' father at the beginning of the story and whose violence against women was notorious. By taking this name and dressing as a man, Malaquin/Cerse, far from acquiring some virile qualities, is siding with the evil male power embodied in Darnant and his lineage.<sup>24</sup>

The case of the other transvestite in *Perceforest* is much more complex and her story developed at much greater length. Abducted, tortured and finally buried alive,<sup>25</sup> Néronès, after escaping from her tomb, is rescued by a kind old woman who advises her to dress as a boy and gives her a new name, Cuer d'Acier (Steel Heart). The name hints at her remarkable resistance, especially under torture. As in the case of Helcanor or Silence, the male disguise is forced upon her by threatening circumstances. However, once secured in her male dress, Cuer d'Acier seizes the opportunity it gives her to go freely in search of her *ami*, Nestor. She becomes squire for a knight who will turn out to be Nestor himself. Cuer d'Acier's problem now is not to hide her identity and her nature but on the contrary to reveal it to Nestor. Dressed in a sheep skin,

her face darkened by nettle juice, living a harsh life, she does not look like the beautiful woman Nestor loves. For Nestor, she is his squire, undoubtedly faithful and skilful but not an object of sexual interest. Trapped by the disguise that had protected her and allowed her to find her beloved, Cuer d'Acier is at a loss as to how to regain her femininity, which accounts for the very confusing and complex syntactic treatment she receives. The first scene in which she appears dressed as a young shepherd recalls the episode where Bethidès meets Malaquin, in that the reader is not told who the boy really is. Although we have already heard of Néronès' dreadful adventures, like Nestor, we do not know yet what happened to her after she escaped from her tomb. When Nestor meets the young shepherd hidden under a skin that makes him look like one of his own sheep, we do not pay much attention to the character; neither does Nestor, nor apparently the writer who, using masculine nouns and pronouns, does not hint at the boy's identity but actually misleads us into thinking that the supposed mother of the child is much more important than her son. Nestor leaves, not knowing that he has just spoken with the woman he is desperately looking for. The reader does not know it either. Only in the next chapter will we learn that the shepherd was Cuer d'Acier.<sup>26</sup> But why would the writer want to mislead the reader? In the case of Malaquin, we have seen how his strategy was a means of suggesting an ambiguous fascination, a homosexual impulse in Bethidès. As for the scene with the shepherd, it will be told four times from four different perspectives, each time reinterpreted and its symbolism enriched. In this first instance, the reader, adopting Nestor's point of view, is blinded as well. But the writer is also playing with the readers, denying them full knowledge, as if to emphasize his own power: he is the one who gives gender identity to his characters, and if the fictive Nestor can be deceived, so can the reader.

When Cuer d'Acier becomes Nestor's squire, the syntax again is confused. Whereas, as soon as it has been revealed that Malaquin is a woman, the text uses only feminine forms, the syntax is far less consistent with Cuer d'Acier. Most of the time, masculine pronouns are used but occasionally feminine forms appear too. It might be that Cuer d'Acier having definitely exhibited male qualities, like Silence and Helcanor, deserves to be presented as a man most of the time. But in some instances

her “female nature” comes forward again. For example, when her beloved is engaged in fierce fights, overwhelmed by fear and love, Cuer d’Acier loses her strength and is perceived as a woman again. This accounts for such strange sentences as:

*Il redoubtoit trop la bataille pour les perilleuses aventures qui en pouoient advenir, combien qu’elle avoit tres grant reconfort a ce qu’a son advis le Chevalier Doré en avoit le meilleur. (305, my emphasis)*

*(He was extremely fearful of the fight and its possible dangerous consequences, although she was greatly reassured to see that the Chevalier Doré—Nestor—seemed to her/him to be the best.)*

When love speaks, *elle* comes back. Another sentence illustrates even more skillfully the way in which the writer uses the syntax to show the double nature of the character: “Adont Cuer d’Acier, a qui Amour avoit *le cuer atenry*, sailli avant pour son chier amy qu’elle veoit en ce dangier . . .” (306; Then *Steel Heart*, whose *heart* had been *softened* by Love, jumped forward to help *his/her* dear beloved that *she* saw in this danger . . . [my emphasis]).

Cuer d’Acier has earned her nickname by displaying qualities of strength and resistance that are properly masculine, but love can melt her steel heart and make her into Neronès again. However sympathetic to Cuer d’Acier, the writer’s description of her feelings betrays a prejudiced expectation about supposed male or female behaviors and relies on the idea that there is indeed a female nature different from and inferior to male nature.

The situation becomes even more complex later when Cuer d’Acier would like to reveal her secret to Nestor but, ashamed of her situation and full of modesty as a woman should be, she cannot speak frankly. She then imagines a complicated scenario. She pretends to have dreamed about Néronès and basically retells her story giving herself away to Nestor. In the dreams, told by Cuer d’Acier in the first person, the play on pronouns makes the reader dizzy: the young shepherd reappears and is referred to as *he*, Néronès herself is of course a major character in the dreams and is referred as *she*, and Cuer d’Acier, the dreamer but also an actor in the

dreams, refers to him/herself as *I*. The three characters being the same person, all equations are permitted: he is she who is I who is you.<sup>27</sup> No wonder Nestor is so totally confused that he does not see the truth and can only answer: “les fais sont tous veritables, mais en la fin ilz se cloient tousjours en ung impossible.” (347; all the facts are true but they always end up in some impossibility).

Nestor clearly expresses what all these stories of cross-dressing essentially imply: there is no easy way out of this situation. One is trapped in this game of permutations that threatens logic and shakes the foundation of language.<sup>28</sup> Only a non-verbal experience can put an end to the grammatical confusion and reconcile syntax and visual evidence. More than a clear, grammatically correct statement which Cuer d’Acier is unable to utter, what Nestor needs to recognize Neronès in his ugly dark squire is to see her naked.

In a second attempt to reveal her identity, at the court of Nestor’s mother, the fairy Queen, Cuer d’Acier sings her own story. At first she distances herself from the narrative using the third person when referring to Neronès and even to Cuer d’Acier. Yet progressively, she involves herself in her story. Cuer d’Acier appears first as *il*, then as *elle*. Finally, she speaks in the first person and unequivocally reveals that Cuer d’Acier and Neronès are one and the same (v. 657) and that she, the performer, is Neronès/Cuer d’Acier.<sup>29</sup> Although very surprised, Nestor still fails to recognize her, despite visual signs that his mother has already pointed out to him, for example the young woman’s breasts which raise her shirt when she takes off her sheep skin. Nestor will need to see her in her bath, her skin again *plus blanche que nesge et nette comme perle* (366; whiter than snow and smooth as pearl) and to hear the story one more time while gazing at his beloved to realize his mistake. So even when the woman is telling the truth about her nature, somehow she cannot overcome the visual prejudice as if language by itself were insufficient to dissipate ambiguity. What has been told must be confirmed by what is seen. But how can it be done if sight is most often blurred, deceived by nettle juice and male clothes? In his eagerness to set things straight, to reestablish the distinction between sexes threatened by a practice such as cross-dressing, the author of *Perceforest* brings forward what certainly seems to him the ultimate true sign of femininity, its essence: white flesh. Only flesh can,

in its bareness, dispel falsehood and exhibit reality. Its whiteness is evidence of its purity, the purity of an unalloyed nature.<sup>30</sup> Whiteness is also a guarantee of woman's malleability, receptivity. Like fresh snow untouched by footprints, the white flesh has not yet been inscribed. It is a blank surface which man will now be able to mark as his. Reduced to her white skin, the once talkative, creative Cuer d'Acier who could invent her own scenarios, write and rewrite, in prose and in verse, her own story, is from now on deprived of her voice. Indeed it is the fairy queen, Nestor's mother, who will first imagine the bath scene, retell the young woman's story and finally open her son's eyes.

With its two examples of transvestism, *Perceforest* is at the crossroads of these two lines defined earlier; still interested in reflecting upon what makes sexual identity but already denying women the high status Helcanor or Silence had gained. Neither Malaquin nor Cuer d'Acier excel in typically male occupations. Though jousting like a knight, Malaquin is not allowed by her first lover to take part in real fights. Cuer d'Acier's exceptional qualities do not earn her more than squire status. Moreover, cross-dressing is seen either as a trick that wicked women play on men or as a trap that does not really benefit "good" women.

This is the mood that permeates the second example of cross-dressing in the *Roman d'Ysaïe*. While sympathetic to Marte, the cross-dressed heroine, the romance nonetheless constantly casts suspicion on her practice. Marte is Ysaïe's *amie*.<sup>31</sup> Desperate because she has not heard from him for months, she escapes from her uncle's castle and, dressed as a man, goes in search of her lover. Her male clothes are, typically, a means of gaining freedom of motion. Transvestism does not bring any change in her personality. She remains fully a woman and neither the narrator nor the reader ever forgets it. Unlike the heroines we have seen so far, Marte is not given a male name, although she might adopt another female one (Betris or Chrestienne) when hiding only her identity and not her gender. Moreover, the text throughout uses the pronoun *elle* to refer to her. Only in cases of direct or indirect discourse does it use masculine forms, which is to be expected since the other characters do mistake her for a man and she wishes to be so mistaken. In contrast to *Silence* or *Perceforest*, grammatical confusion does not pervade the narrator's discourse but arises from the juxtaposition of three discourses (the

narrator's, Marte's, the other characters'), each of which is in itself perfectly consistent. In effect, the male disguise, being at odds with the feminine marking in the narrator's discourse, stresses even more Marte's real gender in that it manifests a nature supposedly exclusive to women. In what is by now a familiar adventure, Marte, disguised as a male minstrel, becomes the object of a noble lady's love. The lady confesses her feelings to Marte and presses her to return them. Although embarrassed and uncomfortable, Marte wisely pretends to share the lady's feelings because:

... elle scet bien et congnoist vollenté de femme, sy prent par son cuer l'autrui, et pense, s'elle ly refuse, que dire pora tel chose a son chevalier, combien que nient ne soit voirs, que grant maulx l'en poroit venir. (179)

(. . . she knows well the female will; through her own heart she understands the other's and thinks that if she refuses her love, the lady might say something to her knight that will bring trouble even if it is not true.)

Marte has probably read many romances and knows the traditional plot invented (or at least reenacted) by angry and disappointed women. So instead of doing what the others have done before her, she stages her own intrigue, a farce rather than the usual drama.

One day when the two ladies are alone together, the noble *Dame*, noticing that Martè does not have any hair on her chin, questions her about her age. Marte reveals that she is not "condicionés comme hons, ainchois [a] deffaly a toutez naturelles oeuvres et autressy sont [s]es freres que [lui]." (179; equipped as a man and does not perform what Nature requires and neither do [her] brothers). The lady recoils in horror and when her knight comes back asks him to dismiss the minstrel. This amusing episode closes the homosexual interlude, clearly described as such since there was much kissing and hugging taking place, and the narrator used feminine pronouns to refer to both women.

This scene calls for several comments. First, the way it broaches the topic of homosexuality is very different from that of *Silence* and *Cassidorus*. Whereas these two romances tried to hide their fascination for

potentially homosexual relationships but actually betrayed it by the ambiguity of their presentation, the *Roman d'Ysaïe* shows upfront the writer's opinion: homosexuality is ludicrous. One can only talk about it in a derisive way, and that is why the writer sets up a situation that is pure *fabliau*. Second, the lady's revulsion for eunuchs is the "normal" reaction, the one Marte (and the writer) expects to provoke. As in the case of the dwarves, if writers acknowledge that there are beings neither male nor female, they dismiss them as abnormal. Finally, by explaining that she was not "equipped as a man," Marte is merely telling the truth about her nature, but in such a way that the lady understands something quite different. Using the truth to trick people is a skill women in medieval literature seem to have mastered as we all know from Iseut's example.<sup>32</sup> Despite her masculine dress, Marte does not lose any of her feminine qualities. On the contrary, her transvestism has made them even more useful. Her cunning shows as well in situations where she is known to be a woman, for example, when sailors who had taken her with them on their boat thinking she was a male minstrel discover that she is a woman and want to rape her. She pretends to be eager to sleep with the captain because she has been deprived of men since she caught a strange disease from her godfather. Needless to say, the captain is eager to get rid of her!

Gifted with an amazing ability to invent stories, Marte is a representation of the writer. But what kind of writer? Her "prose-work" is akin to the farce or the *fabliau*, with characters from plebeian social backgrounds—the castrated brothers and the merchant father, the godfather who could well be a pimp—and with the woman playing stereotypical roles. But Marte is also a poet. As a minstrel, she delights her audience with the songs she performs while playing the harp. What she sings is her own story: her love for Ysaïe, her painful quest, her fear of having been forgotten. Dressed as a man, she nonetheless sings in the first person, using feminine forms, referring to *mon amy*, so that there is no doubt that the narrator within the song is a woman. She does not even disguise her voice. A knight hearing her sing in the forest rightly thinks at first that he has heard a lady but on meeting her he realizes his "mistake," trusting his eyes more than his ears.<sup>33</sup>

Marte's voice and performance are unanimously praised by all her different audiences. Everybody is curious to learn who composed such

beautiful songs. Referring to herself in the third person, she explains that Marte is the author. Here again she tells the truth in such a way that she convinces her audience, but nobody suspects she is Marte. To the reader, the situation seems almost unbelievable: here is a woman who must look somewhat like one with her smooth chin and her beautiful soprano voice, who sings, as a woman, love songs. But no one guesses that she is a fraud. Either the writer is extremely awkward, or the character is extremely skilful. Dangerously skilful indeed since she seduces her audience and makes them believe the opposite of what she sings, even the opposite of what some of their senses perceive. Marte is able to say exactly what she wants, to confess her love, her despair, her hopes. Like the buffoon who, as long as he is dressed as a buffoon, can freely speak the most unpleasant truths, Marte, as long as she is dressed as a man, or at least as a minstrel, can reveal that she is a woman going on her own in the forest or on the sea, exposing herself to all kinds of dangers. But by revealing everything about herself she is actually shielding herself most efficiently. Her supreme trick is to use the truth to mislead people and protect herself.<sup>34</sup>

One might object that the clever Marte actually projects a positive image of woman. Trickery and manipulation are devices that men use as well, and in their case it serves as proof of their superior command of the world in which they live, proof that they can control their own destiny.<sup>35</sup> Is it not the same for Marte? Like Lienor in the *Roman de la Rose ou de Guillaume de Dole*,<sup>36</sup> Marte is an active heroine who intends to control her life. As a poet she takes part in the creative process that produced the text we read.

However, this positive reading is seriously undercut by the general tone of the romance. Without being blatantly misogynistic, the *Roman d'Ysaïe* nonetheless indulges in statements tainted with antifeminism. Several major female characters are presented as manipulative,<sup>37</sup> and male characters often comment on their "natural" ability to deceive, their selfishness that prevents them from seeing beyond their immediate personal interest.<sup>38</sup> The most damaging statement is uttered by the dwarf Tronc at the time when Marte and Ysaïe are about to be reunited at last. Marte has sent a poem to Ysaïe, who asks Tronc to read it. The complex allegorical poem, clearly influenced by the *Roman de la Rose* (by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun), charms but also amazes the

audience. Ysaïe exclaims: "Comment peut corps ne ceurs de femme ce conchevoir ne penser?" (245; How can a female being, a female heart, conceive and elaborate such a thing?) Tronc answers:

... je n'en suis pas esmaris, quant son cuer s'y adonne et son vouloir s'y assent, et especiaument puis que c'est a venir a amour terrienne, car engien de femme est plus pres et plus vif a che que ne soit l'engien de l'omme, car elle ne pense a el pour oultrier completamente se vollenté, car elle prent en che faisant deduit en lui meismes, et pense en che faisant: "Beaux Sire Dieux, se je pooye estre sy heureuse que avoir peusse, par fait ou par parolle, celly que j'aime, rien ne me porroit faillir en cest monde!" Mais ne pensés qu'elle penseche a quel bout elle en puist venir! Et se c'estoit pour venir a l'amour de Dieu, nullement ne se saroit entremettre. (245)

(I am not surprised when she puts her heart and her will to it, especially since she aims at earthly love; for this purpose women have better and more adequate skills than men. And they use them to get what they want. They indeed take pleasure in the process and think: "Sweet Lord, if I could be happy enough to get the one I love, either by act or by words, I would not lack anything in this world!" But do not think that they meditate on the possible consequences. And if the goal was God's love, they would be unable to pursue it.)

Both comments are misogynistic but in different ways, Ysaïe's because it implies that women are unable to write anything subtle, Tronc's because it suggests that on the contrary women are dangerously *soutive* (subtle) and that their cleverness is used to promote selfish interests. That Tronc, himself a trickster, who does not hesitate to dress like a woman, as we have seen, should be the one who expresses antifeminist opinions is paradoxical only on the surface. Like Marte, Tronc manipulates language, stages situations, thus taking an active part in shaping the romance. That these two figures of the writer should clash comes as no surprise. Marte's story and Marte's poems represent an alternative text (thus justifying the title of "Roman de Marte" for this part of the *Roman d'Ysaïe*), a text written by a woman, focusing on a woman and subverting literary traditions: Marte's last poem (which counts more than one thousand lines)

rewrites the *Roman de la Rose* with a female subject at its center, thus undermining the misogynist tradition in its own fortress. Tronc's violent diatribe against women straightens things out. While conceding that women can write with great subtlety, a subtlety even greater than men's, he also states that the sphere of their *engien* is limited, that they are driven by wrong notions. Their idea of self-interest, for example, deceives them since they do not realize how much more important loving God is. In order to get what they want on earth, they disregard their own salvation. As for Tronc, his goals are much higher: devoted to Ysaïe and later to Ysaïe's son Marc, he does not pursue his interest but assists his masters in their struggle to restore peace, justice, and courtly values.

Concluding Marte's adventures, Tronc's contemptuous, dismissive opinion about women invites a rereading of the cross-dressing episode. Marte's skilful schemes, and chief among them her male dressing, are akin to her artful poetry: seductive, efficient to a certain extent but deceptive and dangerous for the victims as well as for the woman who conceives of them.

There is one more instance of cross-dressing involving Marte later in the romance, though a pitiful one as if the writer wanted definitively to ridicule the device and to show that after Tronc's denunciation, it cannot deceive anymore. Believing that Ysaïe is in danger (because she sees him surrounded by knights), Marte dresses as a knight herself and aggressively rides towards Ysaïe and his companions. All the knights wonder who could be foolish enough to attack them. Marte assails two of them but is finally caught and stripped of her helmet. Ysaïe recognizes her, blames her for her foolishness, sends her back home, and full of shame, does not reveal to his companions who this *estourdi* (dolt) really is (261). In the only instance when Marte tries to emulate men in their most masculine role, she makes a fool of herself. The time has passed when women dressed as men could prove themselves better than the best knights!

Tronc's comment and Ysaïe's reaction bring Marte back to the feminine world where she belongs and which she should never have left. Marte's brilliant performance—as a minstrel and as a writer—proves to be only a performance, without substance, without any real impact on the course of the narrative; a game at which women are especially good, indeed, just a woman's game. Marte's skilful manipulations which blur

people's sight as well as judgment and the grammatical confusion that they generate, betray the feminine "nature" of the performer.

From Silence in search of her gender identity to Marte who never questions hers and even flaunts her femininity the better to deceive, we have seen a wide range of possibilities as well as an evolution towards less ambiguous, more assertive (if less sympathetic) ways of defining femininity. By the fifteenth century, the topos of cross-dressing is either a commodity, as in *Buefves de Hantonne*, in which the heroine in male disguise remains so much a woman, that the writer himself seems to forget his pretense,<sup>39</sup> or an opportunity for the heroine fully to accomplish her female destiny, as in *le Roman du Comte d'Artois*, where the heroine tricks her husband in order to recover him.<sup>40</sup> It is as if medieval writers, at first interested in trying out different combinations, had later become scared by the consequences of their boldness, scared by the ease with which their heroines were undertaking male tasks and being too good at them, scared by the troubled waters they had stirred by touching on the sensitive topic of homosexuality. It was much more comfortable to fall back on old prejudices and to treat cross-dressing as yet another female trick, though a purely practical one that would not jeopardize the fundamental distinction between the sexes.<sup>41</sup> The later texts imply that gender identities are the products of biological difference. This evolution of the topos may be indicative of a general trend towards a more rigid differentiation between men and women.

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## NOTES

1. I am very thankful to E. Jane Burns for her numerous comments and suggestions which helped me reshape this paper. My thanks also to John Tolan for his careful reading and to Douglas Kelly for his suggestions.

2. They do occasionally! See Silence's confusion and the numerous debates between *Nature* and *Norreture* in the *Roman de Silence*.

3. A fascinating exception is the story of Agriano in the *Roman de Berinus*. See Perret and Marchello-Nizia. For a discussion of homosexuality, see Boswell.

4. Part of the cycle *Les Sept Sages de Rome*, this romance was written around 1270, according to its editor, Joseph Palermo.

5. Tronc's transvestism is narrated on pages 59-61.

6. There is no modern edition of this fifteenth-century prose romance. The text survives in three incunables from the 1489 edition published in Lyon by Jacques Maillard. Pacolet's transvestism is found in chapter XXXI.

7. On deceitful behavior that women are forced to adopt (often because of men), see Baumgartner.

8. For the medieval misogynist tradition, see Bloch.

9. The nun first appears on page 222. See also note 10.

10. In *Silence*, the following is a list of the lines referring to the nun: 6248 (une none), 6249 (cele), 6250 (fait ele), 6256 (la nonain), 6418 (la nonain velee), 6438 (li none), 6475 (la nonain), 6493 (la none), 6511-13 (Et li none en sera honie/Qu'ele n'est pas par tolt onie/As aultres nonains par le mont), 6528 (la none), 6531-2, 6538, 6550 (eles, i.e., Silence and the nun), 6571 (la nonain), 6655 (I fu la none donc deffaite).

11. The French possessive adjective maintains the ambiguity that has to be resolved in English.

12. Douglas Kelly pointed out to me that Achilles does cross-dress and yet remains a hero. This is actually the main storyline of what is left of Statius' *Achilleis*. This text was well known in the Middle Ages since it is preserved in 85 manuscripts. See Stace, *Achilleide Achilleidos* (my thanks to Francine Mora for providing information on this text). However the texts dealing with male cross-dressing (with the possible exception of *Floris et Lyriopé*) do not follow Achilles' model. Is it precisely because the *Achilleis* episode was embarrassing, even demeaning for the great hero who, forced by his mother Thetis to take up this disguise, ends up using it to deceive and seduce the woman he loves?

13. Perret, 329.

14. The *Roman de Silence* has justly attracted much scholarly attention lately. See, in particular, Gaunt and Kreuger, especially chapter 4 "Women Readers and the Politics of Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*."

15. This long episode is narrated in vol. 2, pp. 334-491.

16. Perret 335; *le vallet ki ert meschine*, v. 3704, for instance. See also vv. 3763, 3785, 3871.

17. This example brings me to modify somewhat Perret's assertion that what is in question is always feminine homosexuality (329).

18. See also *Floris et Lyriopé*, a thirteenth-century romance by Robert de Blois, in which a young man, Floris, exchanges his clothes with his twin sister in order to come near Lyriopé, his sister's girl friend. Lyriopé is not aware of the substitution but finds herself strongly attracted towards her companion. The writer alternatively uses *he* or *she* when referring to Floris. See Kreuger 170-176.

19. Concerning the ambiguous way Heldris puts an end to Silence's cross-dressing, see Kreuger, especially 124-6.

20. In some texts, the problem is solved by an actual change of sex. This happens to Yde/Ydée (in the *Chanson d'Yde et Olive*, part of the *Huon de Bordeaux Cycle*, end of the XIIIth century, beginning of the XIVth) and to Blanchandine (in *Tristan de Nanteuil*, mid-XIVth century). See Perret 330-1. On the high status transvestites can achieve, see also the story of Pope Joan, which first appears precisely around 1240-1250. According to the definitive version of the legend (end of 13th c.) a young girl disguised as a man came to Rome where she distinguished herself so brilliantly and lived a life so edifying that she was elected pope. However that pious life was maybe only a façade: Pope Joan revealed her true nature by giving birth to a child when riding in a procession. See also d'Onofrio.

21. This huge romance has been partially edited. Malaquin's and Cuer d'Acier's stories are narrated in vol. 2 (1991).

22. Contrary to what Perret says (329), during the time the woman is in disguise, she can have quite an active sex life. By contrast, men in disguise, like Pacolet, Tronc, and Licorus, might remain chaste and deliberately so, for all their feigned attempts to seduce.

23. There is, however, one instance when the text uses *he* again, but I cannot account for it other than invoke grammatical agreement which is a weak explanation! Here is the passage: *Atant il (Bethidès) se bouta en la forest avecq Malaquin son escuier, dont il estoit en grant soussi ou il le pourroit mestre, qu'il fust honnestement en aucun chasteau jusques a ce qu'il avroit esté a la court, car il ne lui vouloit point mener. Et pour le mettre en aucun secret lieu s'estoit il party des chevaliers* (339).

24. See my article, "Aroès l'illusionniste."

25. She is thought to be dead.

26. This episode, like the one with the young knight Malaquin, brings me to correct the idea expressed by Perret (334) that the text never tries to hide the real gender identity of the character.

27. "*Ja soit ce que tu te faces nommer Cuer d'Acier, toutesfois le sers je qui suis Neronés . . .*" p. 346.

28. See Leupin, especially chap. III, on the "scandal of sodomy" (62).

29. Another twist makes this revelation even more dizzying. In the song, Nestor becomes the shepherd and Cuer d'Acier the sheep: *Cy poutez avoir grant merveille,/ Car le bergier quiert son oelle/ Et l'oelle le sieut derrier . . .* (vv. 681-3; You can marvel for the shepherd is looking for his sheep and the sheep is following him). The reader must remember the strange outfit the young shepherd

was wearing when Nestor first met him, an outfit that made him look like an animal. Cuer d'Acier always wears a sheep skin that she will take off only before performing her song.

30. This contrasts with the duality still suggested by the description of Cuer d'Acier crying before the fairy Queen until her face is streaked with white and black (*tavellee de blanc et de noir* p. 363). Although the text says that at this moment the queen knows that Cuer d'Acier is a woman, it is also when she tells the young woman: "*Beau sire, je ne sçay se vous estes homme ou femme, mais dittes moi ce qu'il en est, car je vous voy d'autre couleur que nature ne vous a donnee, dont je suis en soupeon.*" ("Fair sir, I do not know whether you are a man or a woman, but tell me which you are, for I see that your color is different from the one Nature gave you, which makes me suspicious.") It is quite interesting that the fairy Queen despite her quasi-certitude still needs a clear confession from Neronès, as though the text were constantly going back and forth between language and visual experience, never trusting the one or the other.

31. What has sometimes been called "Marte's romance" is narrated on pp. 166-188.

32. It might rightly be argued that what is at stake in Iseut's case is not to show the depth of women's guile. Nonetheless Iseut's skilful manipulation of language is in a sense a precedent. At the end of a chain of numerous similar examples, and in a context somewhat misogynistic (after all the lady in love with the heroine is cheating on her knight), Marte's twisting of the truth clearly illustrates the female ability to outdo even the guile of other women. Men can also manipulate language in a similar way. See the oath Lancelot takes just before fighting Meleagant in *Le Chevalier à la Charrete*, vv. 4971-3; Lancelot swears that Keu has not slept with the queen. He can rightly do it since *he* spent the night with her. Yet Lancelot is only hiding part of the truth.

33. On the superiority of sight over any other senses, see Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* (Certior aure / arbiter est oculus, 272-3), as quoted in Leupin 33. See also Leupin 155.

34. It is a dangerous one, however, that can turn against the person who uses it: singing in front of her own lover, Marte will neither recognize nor be recognized by Ysaïe.

35. For examples of male manipulation see Kreuger, chap. 3.

36. For this romance, see Kreuger 143-153.

37. See, for example Orimonde, who, scorned at first by Marc, Ysaïe's son, tries to have him killed and thus puts in jeopardy the truce just signed between Saracens and Christians (255, 259-60); Piralius' wife, who betrays her husband and sleeps with Marc, thus showing that *femme ne sera bien gardee se elle ne veut*

*se garder* (439; a woman will not be safely guarded if she does not want to be); Orphée who will enchant Marc and bring Tronc to declare: *femmes pour avoir leur entente se vent trop de malice et de tours trouver* (448; women know where to find too many malicious tricks to get what they want).

38. See for example: *Merveilleuse nature est de femme, que elle ne vise point que a sa plaisanche; point ne considere ne commencement, ne moyen, ne fin, ne bien commun, ne singulier, ne s'elle est amee ne se elle aime, mes que se volenté soit faite* (451; How strange is woman's nature, for women only aim at their pleasure; they do not take into consideration the beginning, nor the means, nor the end, nor the common interest, nor the personal one, nor whether they are loved nor whether they love, as long as their will is granted.)

39. The heroine, Josianne, is in search of her husband Beufves. She is accompanied on her travels by Beufves' infant son and by an old knight who has rescued her earlier. The three arrive in a city where Beufves, having married the queen, is now enjoying a comfortable position. It is not clear when Josianne decides to dress as a man. It seems that for most of her traveling she has not been disguised, since she was not by herself. By the time she suspects that the king of the city is her husband, she dresses as a man first not to be recognized (but nobody knows her in this city and her husband has somewhat forgotten her), then to attract Beufves' attention: on the market place, pretending to be a minstrel, she sings her story when Beufves passes by. Not only does the writer always use feminine forms to refer to her, but she is actually singing with her baby in her arms; not a very masculine presentation! Beufves then calls the minstrel to court where he still does not recognize his wife in the dark fellow (nettle juice again) who is talking to him. Josianne, now convinced that Beufves still remembers her, changes back her clothes and reveals her identity to everybody, including her landlord, who apparently did not know that she was a woman, although she had gone in disguise *after* having established residence in his house. This slip underlines my assertion that cross-dressing in this text is no more than a commodity. Also note that the landlord realizes that the beautiful lady into whom Josianne has turned, and the poor wretched man are one and the same when hearing her voice. Either she had a baritone voice or these medieval characters definitely never trust their ears!

40. Abandoned by her husband because she has not given him a child, she must carry out three tasks to win him back: conceive a child with him and obtain from him his precious diamond and his white horse, all of these without his knowledge. Dressed as a man, she will become her husband's squire and accomplish through some tricks these seemingly impossible tasks, thus recovering her former position.

41. By the end of the fifteenth century and in the sixteenth century, female transvestism was strongly condemned by reforming preachers, linked to sodomy and interpreted as a sign that the coming of Antichrist was near. See Rossiaud, p. 149 and p. 113 on earlier reactions to female transvestism.