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The Point of Education: Views from Medieval France and England

by Nicole Clifton

Old French romances were mainly composed for aristocratic audiences by poets who may have been clerics; a number of more or less contemporary treatises on education, written by clerics or canon lawyers, similarly address noble courts. Yet the attitudes toward education in these two genres differ radically despite the similarities of author and audience. Of course, neither the treatises nor the romances give a perfectly accurate picture of medieval education, although the treatises, as nonfiction written in Latin, appear more authoritative. The treatises, which regard education as a relatively unproblematic good, express ideals more or less closely followed by some of their readers, while for others they may have been no less fantastic than the romances. In contrast to the treatises, the romances address their readers' anxieties about education as a force ultimately weaker than "nature," anxieties that the treatises might have raised or exacerbated. This expression of anxiety explains the divergent ideologies in the two types of texts.

In this paper I will discuss three romances originating in twelfth- or thirteenth-century France, all of which circulated in France and England into the fifteenth century, and three treatises, originally intended for French court audiences, from the thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries, which likewise extended their influence beyond their original milieu. The twelfth-century romances are *Floire et Blancheflor* and *Partonopeus de Blois. Floire* was translated into Middle English around 1300, *Partonopeus* around 1425-50; both are extant in multiple manuscripts in both languages. Heldris de Cornualle's thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence*, extant in a single manuscript, was kidnapped during the Hundred Years' War and took up residence in England. The treatises I consider are Vincent of Beauvais's florilegium *De Eruditione Filiorum Nobilium*, composed in the mid-thirteenth century for Saint Louis's queen, Marguerite, and the royal tutor; Philippe de Novare's vernacular work *Les Quatre âges de l'homme*, also from the thirteenth century; and Pierre Dubois's *De Recuperatione Terrae Sanctae*, from 1309.

It is hard to judge the audience, even the intended audience, of the romances. While romance prologues often begin with an address such as "Seignors" or "Lordings," this should not be taken too literally. A romance author may assume the pose of a lovesick poet appealing to his lady, but this does not mean that the lady—if she existed—was his only audience. Rather, such poses and invocations form part of the fictional world of the romance. Certainly romance readers came from the upper echelons of society, ranging from the wealthy bourgeoisie to aristocratic courts. We can imagine a household audience, extending to at least upper servants and attendants, and including children. Such an audience is occasionally inscribed in romances themselves, as for example in Chrétien's *Yvain* (and its Middle English translation, *Ywain and Gawain*), where a girl of fifteen reads aloud to her parents. Secular reading may even be depicted as an exclusively youthful pastime in the romances where reading Ovid together causes young people to fall in love (*Floire et Blancheflor*, *Floris*

et Liriope). These romances question their own moral value, but might still have had particular appeal for children and young adults because of the youth of the protagonists. Some Middle English romances appear to have been edited for an audience of young boys (Shaner 5).

I expect, then, that both boys and girls did listen to and appreciate the romances I discuss in this paper, all of which have youthful protagonists.[1] But in contrasting romance ideologies of education with pedagogical ideologies, I have in mind a romance audience consisting of parents and tutors, those who were responsible for choosing the family library and forming the minds of the next generation.[2]

It is these parents and tutors whom the treatises address. The works show a certain range of ideas about appropriate education and activities for children. Written by churchmen and lawyers, they assume the importance of pious instruction; likewise, they all focus on literacy and branches of learning dependent on literacy. Their assumptions about boys' education are similar; when it comes to girls, opinions vary. Pierre is convinced that with the help of concrete examples and detailed explanations, girls can learn the same material as boys, whereas Philippe believes that a girl should learn to read only if she is to be a nun, for reading is a dangerous skill for girls. All three view girls' education as preparation for marriage (unless a girl chooses the convent) and see those marriages being planned by others.

Philippe deals with his own observations of the stages of life, but Vincent and Pierre have theoretical programs to put forth, one religious, the other political (Gabriel 55). Vincent's mission is to provide principles for the education of the royal children, while Pierre plans how education can be used in the crusade to regain the Holy Land for western Christendom. All three believe that education is necessary and desirable, that it should be based on moral tenets, and that its purpose is to improve the character, abilities, and status of the student. That is, education may serve to advance the student from the professional classes or gentry, while royal students must live up to their social position by cultivating admirable moral and intellectual traits.

Philippe's writings reflect his experiences as a member of the aristocracy. He was an Italian who emigrated to the Frankish kingdoms of Outremer, where he joined the service of the king of Cyprus, after fighting at Damietta in 1218. He was known as a distinguished jurisconsult, who wrote in the vernacular on the laws of Cyprus and the kingdom of Jerusalem, as well as on the history of the Cypriot war against Frederic II (Fréville iii-vi). Late in life he composed *Les Quatre âges de l'homme*, which is not, strictly speaking, an educational treatise, but a discussion of the "ages" of man's life. However, in the section on "anfance" (childhood or youth), he discusses what young people should learn. Philippe's views are interesting for two reasons: first, he writes as a layman with considerable practical experience of the world, in contrast to clerics whose views on education might be considered more theoretical than practical; second, his outlook is decidedly conservative, even—in discussing girls' education—repressive. He believes that children's education should begin early, with prayers and Creed; that it is important not to spoil children; and that "clergy and knighthood are, of all professions, the two highest and most honorable to God and in the world" (10). About girls, he advises that they should be taught some occupation to keep them busy, such as spinning and sewing, but that they should not think too much: "A woman should not be taught letters or writing, unless it is specifically so she may be a nun; for through women's reading and writing much evil has occurred" (16). Philippe stresses physical chastity, saying that women may easily preserve their honor simply by being chaste, while a man's honor requires courtesy, generosity, strength, and wisdom (20).[3]

Whereas Philippe drew on his own experience, Vincent's treatise on education stitches together quotations from various sources with his own commentary. This format allows him to avoid taking a definitive stance on potentially controversial topics. Like Philippe, Vincent stresses feminine chastity and obedience. He heads his work with a quote from Ecclesiasticus: "Do you have sons/children? educate them; do you have daughters? preserve their bodies and do not show a cheerful countenance toward them" (1:1).[4] He repeats this admonition at the beginning of the section on girls' education (42:2-4), which draws heavily on patristic sources such as the letters of Jerome.

Vincent writes in Latin for the queen; his audience thus includes an educated woman who had a daughter as well as sons. Unlike Philippe, Vincent urges reading as a pastime, one that will help women avoid the sins of the flesh (43:5-7). He also has his courtly audience firmly in mind, as he warns about the distractions of court life and the dangers of secular literature. There is a whole chapter on avoiding superfluous ornament, for instance (44). In discussing how to keep girls chaste, Vincent says that they ought not to go *without discrimination* to dances, plays, and social gatherings.[5] But his disapproving attitude toward the distractions of court life is clear. At the end of a chapter on chastity he adds, "As for some girls, city or court life very frequently makes them insolent, wanton and dissolute" (46:119-21).[6] While discussing boys' education, he says that the classical poets should be avoided because they are a waste of time and may encourage sin (5:57 ff), although Vincent himself often quotes from the classics, including Ovid. Vincent's anxieties about the effects of court life on girls remind us of the pictures of court life so vividly portrayed in romances, and of the "wanton and dissolute" actions of their heroines, who generally choose their own husbands and often sleep with them before marriage. We may also remember the help heroines get from their confidantes

when Vincent, quoting Jerome, warns against allowing girls to have secrets with their companions: "But what is said to one, let all know it" (45:10).[7]

Finally, Pierre's *De Recuperatione terrae sanctae* (dated 1309) is innovative, even radical, in its treatment of boys' and girls' education. Pierre addressed it first to Edward I of England, and, after revision, to Philippe IV (Le bel) of France; apparently neither monarch attempted to put it into practice. The treatise is unusual in its attention to pedagogy, as well as in its advocacy of similar education for boys and girls. Although he suggests that girls' instruction should be "as far as possible more perceptible to the senses and plainer and easier because of the weakness of the sex" (trans. Thorndike 148), Pierre advocates that girls, "like the males, be instructed in Latin grammar, afterwards in logic, and in one other language, later in the rudiments of natural science, finally in surgery and medicine" (Thorndike 148).[8] Pierre wishes instruction to begin at the age of four or five, and the main body of his intended students is not to be noble, since he wishes to add "nobles of either sex, if and in so far as they shall be found" to his school of those with the "natural disposition" for philosophical studies (Thorndike 139).[9] He also explains carefully how children are to be introduced to Latin (he speaks here of boys, but later says that girls are to learn in the same way):

> Let him first hear the teacher read, then another pupil repeat, after whom he shall immediately repeat as many times what he seems to know. Let declensions and rules of voices be first told him, afterwards let him quickly repeat as he is asked for each. . . . But when they have begun to make a little headway, they are always to speak Latin, accustoming themselves to this at all times and in every place. (Thorndike 142)[10]

For Pierre, education is an investment in the future of Christianity. He shows that he believes in the efficacy of education: children with the native ability to learn, no matter what their social status, can be educated as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and missionaries, and girls, though somewhat inferior to boys, nevertheless are quite educable.

Clearly, the treatises privilege literacy (rather than other types of education). They are written, usually in Latin, for a reading audience, and they stress the benefits reading can bestow. At the same time, their authors' main interest is in producing moral, Christian adults suited to their roles in society. Marriage is thus an important theme in the treatises, which stress obedience to parents in the choice of spouse. The romances I have chosen to study likewise privilege literacy, by making it an important plot element, and of course marriage is also an important issue in these texts. But while Philippe's, Vincent's, and Pierre's attitudes toward literacy and marriage are quite clear (Philippe against female literacy, Vincent and Pierre for it as preparation for marriage), the romance authors' views are harder to determine. In each of these romances, education allows at least one woman to choose her own husband, while two heroes rebel against suggested marriages and remain faithful to their educated lovers. Still, these "rebellious" partnerships are finally shown to be suitable, after all, and meet with approval from parental figures. The heroines—unlike Chrétien's Enide—are then silenced by marriage; only the wicked queen Eufeme, in *Silence*, retains some freedom of action after marriage.

Certainly these romances open spaces for resistant readings. *Silence* is the most susceptible to such readings; Anita Lasry claims that it "impl[ies] that women are perfectly capable of assuming a masculine conduct and they ought to be encouraged to do this" (234). Matilda Bruckner notes the "assumption of male prerogatives" by Melior in *Partonopeus de Blois* (123), and Joan Ferrante perceives "a distinctly feminist tone" to Melior's judging the beauty of her suitors ("Voice" 15). *Floire et Blancheflor* depicts women banding together to resist masculine power, as Nikki Stiller points out in her consideration of the Middle English version (100-4). More generally, Jane Burns outlines (in *Bodytalk*) a strategy for interpreting resistant female voices in medieval narrative. She stresses that hearing "bodytalk" is a readerly choice, not inherent in the text itself (7); thus any work can be read "against the grain."

Although I find such readings compelling, the contradictions in these romances' treatment of women and education need closer attention. The ultimate closure of possibilities, the lack of scope for using one's education in marriage, show the agreement of these romances with the predominating aristocratic ideologies of marriage (for political and economic advantage) and education (as preparation for marriage). Even so, as a general rule, medieval French and English romances do not stress the influence of education on their protagonists. Although skills or branches of learning are often listed as part of their formal portraits, this learning plays little part in the subsequent development of the romance. When heroes of romance spend time in disguise, among common people, this sojourn does not render them common. Rather, their noble lineage, their nature, reasserts itself despite their nurture. When romances do stress education, it is because some exigency of plot or theme demands more explanation than a reference to a character's inherent nobility—in other words, because a character's actions need to be naturalized in the terms of the patrons, writers, and audiences of medieval romance.

The first romance I will consider is *Partonopeus de Blois*. A variant of the Cupid and Psyche story, it relates the adventures of the young hero, beloved by the enchantress Melior, Empress of Constantinople. Since her barons will not accept such a young boy as her husband, she proposes to enspell Partonopeus for two years so that he is invisible to her people, and they to him, until he is fifteen and can be knighted. But

if Partonopeus sees her before the time is up, all will be lost. The two live together happily until Partonopeus becomes homesick and makes two trips home, during which he fights bravely for the French king and confesses his secret love to his mother, who fears he has fallen into the hands of a demon. She provides a magical lantern, with which Partonopeus surprises Melior. The enchantment is broken, and she dismisses him from her presence. The heartbroken young man nearly dies of misery in the forest before he is found by Melior's sister, Urraque, who nurses him back to health and plots to reconcile the estranged lovers. Melior's barons have become insistent that she marry; Urraque arranges to have Partonopeus compete in the tournament that will choose her husband. On his way there, Partonopeus is imprisoned by a knight named Armaunt, but on Armaunt's departure, his wife releases Partonopeus. A number of knights perform equally well at the tournament, so the final decision is made by Melior in a male beauty contest. Of course she picks Partonopeus, and the story ends happily.

Education in *Partonopeus de Blois* is a female attribute. The romance ignores the hero's education, although it shows he has learned hunting and jousting. Ferrante believes that in *Partonopeus* "we are meant to root for the brilliant heroine" ("Education" 35). But an intelligent reader or listener could hardly fail to notice the mixed message of *Partonopeus*: no matter how educated a woman is, a man can remove the advantages of her learning, and reduce her to the status of an ordinary woman. Partonopeus's disobedience robs Melior of her magical abilities, and thereafter the rest of her education seems to be of little use to her. From an active heroine who chooses her own lover, she becomes a passive prize in a tournament. It is her sister (of whose education we know nothing) who plans how Melior can manipulate the events of the tournament to further her ends.

Ferrante suggests that Melior fears "that men are put off by too much learning in a woman," since she only details her education when she is about to dismiss him ("Education" 33). It seems to me that since Partonopeus has benefitted for two years from Melior's learning, her abilities magnify her desirability. In describing her education, she points out to her lover the magnitude of his sin, his loss of her, and her loss of her skills:

> I had masters of all knowledge, sometimes more than 200 of them. God gave me the grace to learn and to understand writing well. First of all the seven (liberal) arts I learned and knew perfectly. Afterward I learned all medicine: Whatever value is in herbs and roots, and spices; then all the cures, and the cause and the nature of chills and fevers and all ills; there is no ill medicine can heal that I don't know everything about. Then I learned divinity so that I know a great deal about it, both the old law and the new that produces all the meaning in the world. Before I was fifteen I had surpassed all my masters. Afterwards I learned experiments, necromancy and enchantment. (ll. 4591-4612)[11]

There are other romance heroines who know the seven liberal arts, medicine, and theology, but Melior's magical training is both the most important aspect of her education to the plot and also what she herself values most highly. She presents it rather as science than as magic, however, explaining that anyone who learns "augury and foretelling, science and astronomy, and necromancy" can perform great marvels; this is how the pagan idol Mahons produces the effects that make people take him for a god. Melior seems to enjoy producing marvels, but her most important use of magic ensured that her lover and her subjects would remain invisible to each other. When Partonopeus disobeys her command never to try to see her, she loses her magical powers. Thereafter she doesn't care about the rest of her education: "I know very well all the arts, and all devices and all tricks; I know all my branches of knowledge very well, but I don't care about any of these if I can't perform the marvels that I learned through so many vigils, through fasts and work: I've lost it all by your assault" (ll. 4665-72).[12]

And in fact she does not use any of her other learning during the rest of the romance; we do not even see her reading, or nursing wounded knights. The only apparent use for her education is to enable her to choose her own husband, to sleep with him before marriage, and to keep the liaison secret. Her lover's gaze, even though he is younger and less learned than she, is sufficient not merely to break the spell but also to deprive her of her abilities. It is possible to interpret Melior's reduction from quasi-fairy mistress to definitely human woman as a demonstration that educating women destined for secular life is a waste of time, because once married (or sexually active) they will not be able to use their skills. Women may also use their learning for wicked purposes, as Philippe de Novare fears, and as Melior has done by veiling her lover (and thus her sin) in invisibility. From this perspective, Partonopeus's transgression is an attempt to restore the "proper" order of things, as shown by the fact that his mother and the bishop urge this deed (ll. 4467-84). Still, *Partonopeus de Blois* shows that education has important effects, whatever its ultimate value: temporarily at least, it does give Melior great powers and freedom. It allows her to do things and develop characteristics discouraged by the treatise writers: she chooses her own lover, she keeps secrets, she becomes proud.[13]

Floire et Blancheflor also gives a good deal of attention to education. The plot is briefly as follows: a Spanish king takes a French duke's daughter prisoner and gives her to his wife as a slave. The two women give birth to a son and a daughter who are brought up together, receiving the same education. As the children's mutual love develops, the king becomes alarmed and schemes to separate the children. His wife persuades him

not to kill but to sell Blancheflor, the slave girl, though they tell Floire that his beloved is dead. But Floire, inconsolable, threatens suicide; his frightened parents reveal the truth and fund his quest to find Blancheflor. Disguised as a merchant, Floire stays with several sympathetic bourgeois hosts before ending his search in Babylon, where, hidden in a basket of flowers, he infiltrates the harem of the Emir who purchased Blancheflor. The lovers are discovered and the Emir plans to execute them, but his court, moved to pity by the children's beauty, insists on first hearing their story, which finally softens the heart of the Emir. He marries the young lovers, but at the wedding feast news comes of Floire's parents' death. Floire and Blancheflor return to take up their thrones and convert their kingdom.

Unlike Partonopeus and Melior, the hero and heroine of *Floire et Blancheflor* receive precisely the same education, which is in all respects clerical; they do not learn gender-specific skills like jousting and sewing. Instead, Floire's father arranges for Gaidon, a learned relative, to teach his five-year-old son and the slave girl Blancheflor, since Floire insists that he cannot learn without his companion. The poet lavishes detail on their school days, when they learn to love one another "par amours":

> They had good abilities for learning, and better memory for retaining. They read pagan books where they heard love spoken of. In this they greatly delighted, in the practices of love that they found there. These books made them hasten to love each other in another way than with the affection of siblings that had occupied them. . . . And when they came to school, they took their tablets of ivory. Now you should have seen them write letters and verses of love in the wax! Their styluses were of gold and silver, with which they wrote adroitly. They composed letters and greetings about love, about birdsong and flowers. They have no wish for anything else, for they have a most glorious life. In just five years and two weeks, they were both so well taught that they knew well how to speak Latin and write well on parchment, and take counsel in Latin (when other people were listening) so that no one understood them. (ll. 229-38, 257-72)[14]

The poet stresses that they are naturally suited to this sort of education, just as Pierre Dubois insists on picking children with a "natural disposition likely to make progress in philosophical studies."[15] The romance poet does not explain why his protagonists are so well endowed for learning, though their quickness to seize on the examples of love in their pagan books (Ovid, in MS B) suggests that they are aided by sanguine humors, whose effects on learning are described by a fourteenth-century German cleric: "those of sanguine temperament . . . seem to pick things up quickly as if it were play. . . . But wantonness often seduces these" (Thorndike 224). Or perhaps Ovid's influence is to blame. At least one other set of twelfth-century romance lovers are inspired by Ovid—Floris and Liriope are reading the story of Piramus and Thisbe when they succumb to passion (Robert de Blois ll. 971-1048).

The details of Floire and Blancheflor's education generally conform to the historical record. Their ivory tablets and gold and silver styluses are no doubt far more elaborate than were commonly used, but wax tablets were the notebooks of the Middle Ages, used even after paper became available, as the wax could be re-melted indefinitely to create a new smooth surface for writing. Writing on parchment is a special skill, distinct from writing on wax; it requires great manual dexterity and patience. That the children's ability not only to read but also to speak Latin should be noted implies that this is an unusual skill. It may have been less so in the twelfth century than later, but certainly by the fourteenth century, educators find it necessary to stress practice in speaking Latin, as we have seen in Pierre's treatise.

Despite the apparent accuracy of these educational details, the children's learning has only one function in the romance: to explain their attachment to each other.[16] There is only one further allusion to study, and that one is a lie. After Floire has found his kidnapped lover in a Babylonian harem, she fails to turn up to serve the harem's Emir one morning because she is still in bed with Floire. Her friend Gloris excuses her absence by telling the Emir, "All night she read in her book in order that you might live in joy, so that she scarcely slept all night; near dawn, she fell asleep" (ll. 2535-38).[17] In general, hero and heroine do not use their early training. Possibly it helps Floire in his arguments with his parents, prior to setting out to seek his lost love, or in his account of himself and his adventures before the Emir's court. But the poet says nothing of these possibilities. Rather, it is always Floire's love for Blancheflor that spurs him on, that inspires him to manipulate the adults around him. Adults take pity on the boy and help him because of his beauty and devotion, not because of his eloquence. The influence of the children's shared education on their love is forgotten, as in the end, nature proves to be at least as strong as nurture.

The poet finally reminds us that Blancheflor is a duke's daughter, and so not unsuitable as a wife for Floire, particularly once he converts to Christianity. Nature asserts itself in one more way: though Floire, in keeping with his clerical education, has been notably peaceful throughout the romance, never picking up a sword, once he assumes his throne he also assumes his father's bloodthirsty tactics, and converts his kingdom by force: "Whoever refused baptism and didn't want to believe in God, Floire had them flayed, burned at the stake, or cut to pieces" (ll. 3323-26).[18] Somehow Floire has learned to do what rulers do in this romance: to rule by violence rather

than by reason. Since he has had no training in warfare, either he has learned by example or he responds to the promptings of Nature.

This question of heredity vs. education is a central theme in *Le Roman de Silence*, which explicitly raises questions left implicit in other medieval romances. These include the content of women's education, the effects of educating women, and their ability to use their education after marriage, as well as the relative importance of Nature and Nurture, who appear as allegorical figures. The *Roman de Silence* explores these questions through the actions of three women: the heroine, Silence, raised as a boy so that she can inherit family lands; her mother, Eufemie; and their queen, Eufeme. (We should note that there is a fourth educated woman in the romance: the unnamed paternal cousin who becomes Silence's nurse and first teacher.) Although the romance does not provide definitive answers, that it raises these questions shows a sophisticated awareness of the issues that lurk under the surface of *Partonopeus de Blois* and *Floire et Blancheflor*.

The *Roman de Silence* opens with a quarrel over women's property rights that leads to the death of two knights. The English King Ebain declares that henceforth, no woman shall be allowed to inherit. The king's nephew, Cador, falls in love with the only daughter of the Duke of Cornwall, Euphemie, an accomplished physician. She heals him of a wound acquired when he killed a dragon for the king; for their services, the king rewards them by allowing each the choice of marriage partner. When they choose each other, he further awards Cornwall to Cador, effectively allowing Euphemie to inherit. Cador and Euphemie agree to raise their first (and only) child as a boy, naming the little girl Silence and raising her in isolation so that her sex will remain a secret. When Silence reaches adolescence, worried about her future, she runs away with two minstrels, who teach her their skills. Upon her return to court, her father sends her to serve King Ebain as a knight. But his wife, the wicked queen Eupheme, falls in love with Silence; when she does not respond to the queen's advances, the queen accuses Silence of rape. King Ebain sends Silence on a mission to the French court, where she is knighted and wins a tournament. When war breaks out in England, Silence is recalled; at the head of a troop of knights, she performs valiantly. Queen Eupheme once more plots against Silence, this time persuading the king to send her on an impossible quest: to bring back Merlin, of whom there is a prophecy that he can be caught only by a woman. Silence, of course, succeeds in capturing Merlin, who reveals to Ebain's court that Eupheme is committing adultery with a cross-dressed nun, and that Silence is also cross-dressed. Ebain puts his wife to death and marries Silence, decreeing that henceforth women will once more be able to inherit land.

The conflict between lineage and education, marked by debates between Nature and Nurture, is particularly important. In describing Silence's secluded upbringing, the narrator explicitly associates education with the unnatural, and nature with ignorance: the seneschal in charge of the child has her learn letters as soon as possible, as a way of keeping her inside, "So that he shouldn't take his childishness where the child, through ignorance, would disclose his nature to people, thus giving the lie to Nurture" (ll. 2371-74).[19] At the same time, however, the narrator insists that it is the child's good nature that makes her educable: "The child is very happy with this instruction, for good nature makes him this way" (ll. 2383-84).[20] In sympathizing with Nature's objections to raising Silence as a boy, the narrator notes that it is possible for Nurture to overcome Nature *for a time*: "We have seen many men driven by nurture into good habits for a year, or two or three or four, whether their base nature wills it or not. . . . And many hearts noble by nature get much worse through nurture" (ll. 2313-16, 2325-26).[21]

Nurture acknowledges Nature's primacy with statements such as, "For one bad by nurture, there are a thousand bad by nature" (ll. 6027-28). Nature's power is extensive partly because of the variety of meanings attached to her name; she can lay claim to a wide range of "natural" behaviors and attributes. Roberta Krueger has distinguished these meanings as

> ranging from biological sex (the female "nature" that Silence hides), to moral temperament (one's personal "nature"), to class-bound character (what we might translate as the good breeding that accompanies noble birth), to the status quo of gender roles (the "natural" domain of women, as determined by social conventions and political order). . . . The Nature/Noreture conflict opposes not sex to gender, but two models of gender to each other; one is "natural" because it is socially acceptable, and one is unnatural because it goes against the grain. (*Readers* 117)

All of these definitions must come into play in any consideration of "nature" in the *Roman de Silence*, but the ones that most interest me for the moment are "moral temperament" (inherent in Silence herself) and "class-bound character" (inherent in Silence as a member of her social estate)—in other words, those aspects of "nature" that make it possible for Silence to learn to deny her biological "nature."

Since Silence, her mother, and Eufeme are all aristocrats, they ought to share the same "class-bound character." If good breeding is limited to behaving well in public, then they do share this type of nature. But it seems that "class-bound character" also influences, if it does not determine, "moral temperament." Here, Eufemie and Silence share character traits depicted as desirable for women: obedience, discretion, and chastity. Eufeme, however, proves deceitful, false, and unchaste.

In other words, Eufeme corresponds to the medieval negative stereotype of women. We do not learn of Eufeme's

early training; her education shows only when she forges a letter to the king of France, ordering Silence's execution. In this episode, however, she shows that she not only can read but also can compose diplomatic prose, as well as having mastered the craft of writing, for her forgery raises questions only about its content, not its style or appearance. We also know that her marriage, though thinly cloaked in the language of love (ll. 179-85), was made for political reasons, to bring peace between King Evan and her father. It is possible to see her subsequent unfaithfulness and scheming as resulting from an unhappy marriage. Yet when the narrator comments on Eufemie's behavior, he uses it as the occasion to defame women generally: "For a woman is not slow to change her love like this [to hate]. Her love is not at all stable, rather it is very irrational and unstable. There is great immoderation in woman when anger overcomes and conquers her" (ll. 3901-2, 3909-10, 3918-19).[22]

Silence's mother, Eufemie, appears as the antithesis of Eufeme. She is introduced as Cador's beloved, handmaiden to the queen, the most beautiful girl in the world, learned in the seven liberal arts (ll. 395-404)—all appropiate attributes for a romance heroine. Her education has included medicine, for she is able to cure Cador of a terrible wound; the king rewards her with her choice of marriage partner. For Eufemie as for Melior, education leads to choice in marriage. But, again like Melior, Eufemie finds that love encumbers her thoughts: "Love has put me in a state of collapse; neither art nor cunning can help now. I give medicine to others, but whatever I know how to say and sing, it's not worth a fig to me" (ll. 787-91).[23] After her marriage, we hear little more of her. She becomes pregnant, agrees to her husband's plan to raise the coming child as a boy even if it is a girl, and suffers in labor. When Silence reappears after traveling with the minstrels, we are told that joy was expressed by "the father, all the inhabitants of the land, and the mother" (ll. 3655-56); Eufemie's identity is now only that of mother to Cador's heir.

Silence is also noted for her beauty (Nature creates the most beautiful girl in the world when she makes Silence [ll. 1799-1807, 1907-57]), but what chiefly interests the narrator is how Nurture overcomes the child's "nature" as a beautiful girl. The child's father entrusts her education to a widowed cousin and to his seneschal; the seneschal directs her education and himself conducts her physical training, but it is the lady who teaches Silence her letters and deportment (ll. 2175-2202, 2363-81, 2469-74). Though furious at being thus set aside, Nature does not counterattack until Silence is twelve. At this point, Nature appears to Silence and says, among other things, "Go in a chamber and sew; this is what the custom of nature demands" (ll. 2528-29). This is the only activity that Nature ever recommends for women, although she issues negative injunctions about not riding in the sun and wind, hunting, and so on, and points out that Silence's posing as a boy will confuse normal sexual practice when women find her attractive.[24]

Despite Nature's idea of appropriate activities, neither Eufemie nor Eufeme ever appears sewing or doing any sort of traditionally feminine work. Possibly sewing is used metaphorically to suggest work that can be done indoors; when Silence runs away with traveling minstrels to learn music, she rationalizes this decision as follows: "If you're slow at chivalry, minstrelsy will be useful for you. And if it happens that the king should die, you'll be able to amuse yourself in a chamber. You'll have your harp and vielle in place of what you don't know about embroidering in gold or working fringes" (ll. 2863-69).[25] Silence sees music as a pastime for bad knights as well as for women.

Like her mother, Silence is silenced by marriage, or perhaps simply by "becoming" female. Silence does not speak after she has been dressed as a woman. Her last speech is to King Evan, when he tells her women will be able to inherit again: "by his acts one sees what a lord is" (l. 6646). This remark is ironically ambiguous, followed as it is by the drawing and quartering of Queen Eufeme. But however thoroughly marriage subsumes and silences her, Silence's masquerade has brought into play forces that cannot be easily recontained. Her upbringing has shown how powerful, dangerous, and subversive education can be. If education can indeed make it possible for a girl to be the best boy, for a woman to be a superlative knight, then both education and gender roles must be rethought. Perhaps, after all, Silence can be silenced but not contained.

Le Roman de Silence brought about no educational revolution in the Middle Ages; it exerted no traceable influence on any extant romance; aside from its seizure during the Hundred Years' War, it seems to have led a quiet existence (Thorpe 1, 10-12). Its treatment of education/nurture vs. lineage/nature, however, clarifies treatments of the same themes in other romances. Howard Bloch claims that in *Silence* "there is no essential contradiction between heredity and environment" (85); the social order is preserved despite Silence's gender switch. Restoration of that order is also crucial in other romances where education has explained an "unnatural" development: Partonopeus is revealed as the best and most beautiful knight, as well as the nephew of the king of France, at the concluding tournament. Far from being an upstart, he is worthy of the hand of Empress Melior. The worthiness of both Floire and Blancheflor has been apparent to the audience, if not to his parents, throughout the romance; all that remains is to allow the lovers to marry and succeed to the throne. Whatever the interruptions and eruptions caused by education, these romances assert, the social order can absorb and contain them, for its nature is ultimately stronger than nurture. The *Roman de Silence* seems an exception to medieval romance's usual nonchalance about education because in it

education is as important as lineage, but in fact this apparent exception proves the rule that the function of education, in romances, is to naturalize the unnatural.

We must remember that the aristocracy also had a stake in insisting on the importance of bloodlines in defining noble status; as a result, aristocratic audiences would find of vital interest the Nature/Nurture question so important in *Silence*. Audiences from lower social ranks—that is, merchants or professionals—who hoped to rise in the world would instead be attracted to the suggestion that education can improve one's status, and would be less concerned with demonstrating superiority through birth. But if they hoped to marry their daughters well, they would also be interested in the effects of education on girls, who would be educated to the standard of the class they were to marry into.

Sylvia Thrupp shows that a small but significant percentage of London merchants' daughters married into the gentry; among orphan girls for whom city officials arranged marriages, five out of sixty-three, or eight percent, married gentlemen in the years after 1360. In the fifteenth century, two merchants' widows among thirty-seven, or five percent, married knights as their second husbands (28). These numbers may seem small, but we must keep in mind that "the merchant class" included a broad range of activities, wealth, and social standing; the higher echelons of the merchant class frequently married into the gentry. Thrupp states that "about a third of the marriages made by daughters of fourteenth-century aldermen [the city's "aristocracy"] were to gentlemen . . . in the fifteenth century more than half the daughters' marriages were to gentlemen" (266).

Middle English romance manuscripts are less impressive than Old French ones, only lightly decorated, and do not invoke patrons or a courtly ambiance; this suggests that their owners were among the rising middle class, rich merchants or professional families who had developed a taste for reading but who preferred to read in English rather than in French (Guddat-Figge 19, 54; Pearsall and Cunningham viii). In this light, the changes made in the Middle English translations suggest different attitudes toward the education and marriage of daughters. The Middle English Melior is more Christian than her Old French counterpart, but also more explicit about the effects of love on her education, asking God, "Why sufferyste þou euer wommanys þoghte / Wyth mannys loue encombred for to be?" (ll. 6013-14). Written for a pious, non-noble audience, the Middle English romances show girls' education in a more positive light than do their Old French counterparts, since their original readers were more interested in improving their status than in defending their lineage.

The marriage strategies of the patrons of these works undoubtedly contribute to the ideologies expressed in them. The aristocracy tried to marry off all its daughters but only the oldest son (or as many as the family could provide with acquired lands) (Duby, *Marriage* 11, "Les 'jeunes'" 217-19; Rosenthal 81-83, 139; Mertes 164). This meant that many aristocratic girls married beneath them; in the romances, this pattern appears in the topos of the "Fair Unknown," of whom Partonopeus is an example—the young, untried, unknown knight who wins the heroine and subsequently proves after all to be noble. In practice, this likelihood of marrying down would reinforce the necessity of stressing humility and obedience in girls' education: a young wife should not be haughty toward her husband because she is of more noble birth than he, nor add pride in her learning to pride of birth. Given the cultural context at work here, the romances' ambivalence toward female education in particular is understandable. On the other hand, the treatises have few doubts about the value of education, even for girls, so long as it is appropriate. Perhaps their prescriptive nature makes it easier for them to define "appropriate education" than it is for romance authors. All three treatise writers see education as a positive advantage for boys, and Vincent and Pierre believe it can be good for girls as well. For Vincent, education helps prevent sins that women are prone to; though Pierre believes that women are weaker than men, he places less emphasis on avoiding sin and more on the positive effects that female education may have for Christendom. The divergent ideologies of treatises and romances remind us that genre may play as large a part as author, audience, and larger social environment in determining what trends in education—or, perhaps, in other areas of life—a given work will reflect.

NOTES

[1]Manuscript evidence suggests at least one youthful reader for the Middle English *Partonope of Blois*; see my paper "Rawlinson Poet. 14 as Children's Literature," on the drawings and addenda, apparently by a child's hand, in the margins of Rawlinson Poet. 14 (Bodleian Library).

[2]Although the treatises are not clear about the age at which girls' and boys' educations diverge, other sources from both France and England suggest that at the elementary level, girls and boys commonly learned together. The *Ancrene Riwle* (circa 1215) forbids anchoresses to take students: "An anchoress must not turn into a school-mistress, nor turn an anchor-house into a school for children. Her maiden may give lessons to some other girl, if it were not satisfactory for the girl to have lessons with men or boys, but an anchoress ought to give her attention to no one but God, though she may, on her director's advice, give help and guidance in learning." ("Ancre ne schal nawt forwurDe scolmeistre ne turnen ancre hus to childrene scole. hire meiden mei learen sum oDer meiden pe were pliht of to leornin among wepmen oDer bimong gromes. ah ancre ne ah to Zemen bute godd ane. pah bi hire meistres read ha mei sum rihten and helpen to learen" (*Ancrene Wisse* 216-17; trans. Salu 188). Such a text testifies that only in special circumstances is it unacceptable for a girl to learn along with boys and men. In fourteenth-century France, Jean Froissart reports that when he attended school, "there were little girls, who in my time were quite pretty," and that he sought their favors by bringing them small gifts (ll. 35-42). In 1380, twenty-one Parisian schoolmistresses are listed in public records, as against forty-one masters; a French ordinance of 1357 implies that children should not learn from teachers of the opposite sex (Thorndike 239-41). For such a rule to be necessary, some teachers must have had pupils of the

opposite sex. In England, unlike France, there appear to be no ordinances prohibiting mixed schools. Although Nicholas Orme finds little evidence for girls' formal education, neither he nor Jo Ann Moran reports objections to girls' education, and Orme admits that among the aristocracy, women would have more time for leisure pursuits such as reading than men (*Schools* 53; see also "Chaucer"). Moran has found evidence for far more schools in Yorkshire than Orme counted, and cites specific references to girls' education in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (70). Perhaps a scarcity of teachers necessitated mixed classes under any available educator, despite a belief that segregation of the sexes was desirable when possible.

[3]Philippe's treatise appears to have been fairly well known in the Middle Ages, as at least five manuscripts have survived. One, BN ff. 24431, includes other secular vernacular literature: a *Chronique de Normandie* and *Le roman de la poire*. Written in the vernacular, the *Quatre âges* would have been accessible to nobles and bourgeoisie who might not have been able to read Latin comfortably. Its precepts might have been of some help to those with children to bring up, although they are not particularly detailed. Since Philippe does not advocate women's education, his intended audience would have been male.

[4]"Filii tibi sunt? erudi illos; filiae tibi sunt? serva corpus illarum et non ostendas hilarem faciem tuam ad illas." Citations from Vincent are given by chapter and line number. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

[5]"*Non passim* ad choreas vel spectacula vel convivia evagentur" (42:6-7, emphasis added). Compare Tertullian in *De Spectaculis*: "Omne enim spectaculum sine concussione spiritus non est," "for no public entertainment is lacking in danger to the spirit." The comparison is Tobin's (72), and the translation is hers.

[6]"Quarundam puellarum urbanitas sive curialitas facit eas plerumque procaces atque lascivas et dissolutas."

[7]"Sed quicquid uni loquetur, hoc sciant omnes."

[8]"Modo quo fieri poterit sensibiliori, planiori et faciliori, propter sexus fragilitatem. . . . ut mares, in gramatica latina instrui, postmodumque in logicalibus, et alio ydiomate uno; postmodum in principiis naturalibus, ultimo in cerurgia et medicina" (70).

[9]"Nobiles utriusque sexus, si et quatenus invenientur" (50).

[10]"Audiat primo doctorem legentem, post aliem repetentem; post quem statim toties repetat quod scire videatur; declinationes et regimina vocum dicantur eidem primo, postmodum repetat cito super quolibet interrogatus. . . . quod cum aliquantulum facere ceperint, semper loquantur latinum, se in hoc omni loco et tempore assuefacientes" (59).

[11]"Maistres oi de tos escïens / Par foïes plus de deus cens. / Dex me dona grasse d'aprendre, / Et d'escriture bien entendre. / Les set ars tot premierement / Apris et soi parfitement. / Aprés apris tote mecine: / Quanqu'est en herbe et en racine, / Et d'espisses, de lor valor; / Aprés, le froit et la chalor, / Et de tos maus tote la cure / Et l'ocoison et le nature; / Fesique ne puet mal garir / Dont je ne sace a cief venir. / Puis apris de divinité / Si que j'en sai a grant plenté / Et la viés loi et la novele / Que tot le sens del mont chaële. / Ains que eüsse quinze ans passés / Oi mes maistres tos sormontés. / Aprés apris espirement, / Nigremance et enchantement."

[12]"Je sai molt bien totes les ars, / Et tos engiens et tos baras; / Tos mes savoirs sai jo molt bien, / Mais tot ice ne pris jo rien / Quant ne puis faire les mervelles / Que jo apris par tantes velles, / Par jeünes et par travals: / Tot ai perdu par vos asaus."

[13]I discuss the message of the Middle English *Partonope of Blois*, and its possible interpretation by a documentable fifteenth-century female audience, in "Translating Women in *Partonope of Blois*"; I am revising this paper for publication.

[14]"En aprendre avoient boin sens, / du retenir millor porpens. / Livres lisoient paienors / u ooient parler d'amors. / En çou forment se delitoient, / es engiens d'amor qu'il trovoient. / Cius lires les fist molt haster / en autre sens d'aus entramer / que de l'amor de noureture / qui lor avoit esté a cure. / . . . / Et quant a l'escole venoient, / lor tables d'yvoire prenoient. / Adont lor veïssiés escrire / letres et vers d'amours en cire! / Lor graffes sont d'or et d'argent / dont il escrisent soutiument. / Letres et salus font d'amours / du cant des oisiax et des flours. / D'autre cose n'ont il envie, / molt par ont glorieuse vie. / En seul .v. ans et .xv. dis / furent andui si bien apris / que bien sorent parler latin / et bien escrire en parkemin, / et consillier oiant la gent / en latin, que nus nes entent."

[15]"Dispositionem naturalem verisimilem ad perficiendum secundum doctrinam philosophicam cognoscentem" (50).

[16]Even this is not strictly necessary; in the "popular," slightly later version of the romance, which omits the lovers' childhood, their love is taken for granted. Roberta Krueger emphasizes the overall literariness of *Floire et Blancheflor*, which "inscribes the activities of reading, writing, storytelling and interpretation as critical moments" in the tale ("Subtext" 66). The romance may be self-consciously literary, but the protagonists' lettered education does not explicitly help them at any point.

[17]"Tote nuit a liut en son livre / que a joie peüssiés vivre, / k'a paines tote nuit dormi, / contre le jor se rendormi."

[18]"Qui le baptesme refusoit / ne en Diu croire ne voloit, / Flores les faisoit escorcier, / ardoir en fu u detrencier."

[19]"Qu'en tel liu le portaist enfance / U li enfes par ignorance / Descovrist as gens sa nature, / Se fust falsee Noreture." Until Silence is revealed as a woman, the narrator uses masculine pronouns for her; I retain this usage in translations.

[20]"[Li enfes] est moult liés de l'aresure / Car cho li fait bone nature."

[21]"Nos veomes maint home enbatre / Un an, u .ii. u .iii. u quatre / En bon us tolt par noreture / Mal gré u non sa vil nature. / . . . / Et mains cuers de gentil nature / Empire moult par noreture."

[22]"Car feme n'est mie laniere / D'amor cangier en tel maniere. / . . . / Mais s'amor nen est mie ferme, / Ains est molt fole et moult enferme. / . . . / En feme a grant desmesurance / Quant ire le sorporte et vaint."

[23]"Amors m'a mis en noncaloir, / Ars ne engiens n'i puet valoir. / Jo doins as altres medecine, / Mais moi ne valt une fordine / Quanque jo sai dire et canter."

[24]This in fact happens: Eufeme, believing Silence to be a young man, attempts her seduction. Heldris insists on the impossibility, the sterility, of this potential union—"Il n'a poöir de li rien faire" ("He can't do anything for her," l. 3869)—but clearly Silence will be limited to such sterile linkings unless she is unmasked and returned to her proper place as a woman. Though her inheritance has been saved for her, how can she pass it on? As Sharon Kinoshita writes, Silence "is unable to complete the plot perfectly fulfilled by Cador and Eufemie, the conscription of heterosexual desire into the service of the feudal politics of lineage" (405).

[25]"Se lens iés en chevalerie / Si te valra la joglerie. / Et s'il avient que li rois muire, / Es cambres t'en poras deduire. / Ta harpe et ta viële avras / En liu de cho que no savras / Orfrois ne freials manoier."

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