Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*

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Despite its title and emphasis on the value of holding one's tongue, Heldris de Cornuälle's thirteenth-century[1] *Le Roman de Silence* has inspired anything but silence on the part of medievalists for the past two decades. To be sure, the romance seems tailored to today's audience. Scholars and students alike are drawn to the story of the world's most beautiful baby girl, who is raised as a boy for inheritance purposes, becomes the King of England's most loyal and talented knight, emerges unscathed from the queen's vindictive attempts to bring about Silence's permanent exile or death, and eventually weds the sovereign to become queen herself. Still, the plot alone does not explain the tale's appeal. Equally important are the myriad questions that the text raises but never answers conclusively. Who was Heldris de Cornuälle – and, the designation of "Maistres" notwithstanding, was Heldris a man or a woman?[2] Do two references to Arthur and the late arrival of Merlin suffice to qualify the romance as Arthurian?[3] Is the tale ultimately misogynistic, transmitting an ultra-conservative message, or does it reveal more radical, proto-feminist tendencies?[4] If the latter, does Heldris

[1] In his introduction to the romance, Lewis Thorpe dates it to the second half of the thirteenth century, probably nearer to the end of the period than the beginning. See Lewis Thorpe, *Le Roman de Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse-Romance by Heldris de Cornuälle* (Cambridge, W. Heffer and Sons, 1972), p. 10.

[2] Peter Haidu notes that "de Cornuälle" may indicate the English Cornwall or La Cornuaille in France, near Nantes. See Peter Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 239. While Heldris could be a man or woman, the pronoun "he" will be used in this essay to refer to the author.

[3] Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann does not include it in the Arthurian corpus in *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart*, trans. Margaret and Roger Middleton (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4. Karen Pratt shares Schmolke-Hasselmann's doubts in "Humour in the *Roman de Silence*," in *Arthurian Literature XIX: Comedy in Arthurian Literature*, ed. Keith Busby and Roger Dalrymple (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 87–103, at p. 88.

[4] This question has generated the greatest critical response. For varied viewpoints, see: among others: Caroline Jewers, "The Non-Existent Knight: Adventure in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 7 (Summer 1997), pp. 87–110; Catherine L. White, "Not So Dutiful Daughters: Women and Their Fathers in Three French Medieval Works: *Le Roman de Silence*, *Erec et Enide*, and *Le Livre de la cité des dames*," *Cincinnati Romance Review* 18 (1999), pp. 189–99; Sarah Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12 (Spring 2002), pp. 6–21; Kathleen J. Brahney, "When *Silence* Was

espouse this viewpoint, or does it result despite attempts to prove women's "natural" inferiority?

These questions are not merely imposed by twenty-first-century critics looking at the romance through modern eyes. Rather, they are built into the text itself. That is, the storyline and the tale's presentation repeatedly call our attention to these issues – and to their lack of definitive resolution.[5] In fact, the ambiguity in *Le Roman de Silence* adds immeasurably to its interest: the unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, questions invite discussion. The narrator, who consistently sends mixed messages, plays a key role in this process. From beginning to end, Heldris-the-composer employs varied strategies to shape a narrator who guarantees that the romance will inspire controversy. Ambiguous portraits of characters – whose actions often undermine the qualities for which the narrator praises them – blanket statements condemning an entire group, and narratorial contradictions from one statement to the next render impossible any straightforward interpretation of the tale. The complex characters and diverse perspectives that result from these approaches encourage audience members to draw their own conclusions, ensuring that the debates within the romance will provoke dialogue extratextually well after *Le Roman de Silence* concludes.

As the tale begins, the characters presented appear in a very favorable light. From an opening commentary on the lamentable state of honor in his own day, the narrator passes to a detailed description of King Ebain's courtliness. Comparing the English sovereign to Arthur, the narrator lauds the way in which Ebain maintains peace, upholds justice, and generously supports his young knights – with particular emphasis on the last (106–31).[6] By juxtaposing Ebain with the avaricious nobles of later times, Heldris presents the English king as the exemplar of honor. Ebain's bride, Eufeme, whom he weds to end

Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*," in *The Spirit of the Court*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 52–61; Gregory Walter Gross, *Secrecy and Confession in Late Medieval Narrative: Gender, Sexuality, and the Rhetorical Subject*. Ann Arbor, MI, University Microfilms International, 1994; Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romances* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 103–26; Peggy McCracken, "'The Boy Who Was a Girl': Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*," *Romanic Review* 85 (1994), pp. 517–36; and Kofi Campbell, "Queer from the Very Beginning: (En)gendering the Vernacular in Medieval France," in *Identities across Time and Cultures*, ed. Jarrod Hayes, Margaret R. Higonnet, and William J. Spurlin (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 23–43, esp. p. 40.

[5] Katherine H. Terrell attributes the divergent readings of the text to the inherent instability in the concept of gender; see "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Romance Quarterly* 55 (Winter 2008), pp. 35–48, at p. 43. Barbara Newman remarks that the question of whether humans are intrinsically good or evil remains unanswered too; see *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 127.

[6] References and citations come from Heldris de Cornuälle, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing, MI, Colleagues Press, 1992), with verse numbers following each citation. Translations are mine.

a war between England and Norway, is depicted as a good match for the king. The narrator qualifies her as a "beautiful gem" (166), and Ebain views her as a treasure (182). The royal pair possesses the attributes an audience would expect of a sovereign and his wife, with no indication of any flaws.

Other key characters display equally distinguished traits. Cador, described as the most valiant, best-loved, and bravest of Ebain's knights (393–4), proves his worth without hesitation when a dragon attacks Ebain and his retinue. Unbeknownst to anyone except his squire, Cador prepares to battle the dragon – who has already killed thirty men – and slays it, living up to Ebain's expectations for honorable conduct. Cador's future bride, Eufemie, also demonstrates her desire to behave nobly. Having healed Cador from the wounds incurred during his combat with the dragon, she struggles with her nascent love for the young knight.[7] Caught between suffering caused by her unspoken feelings and her hesitation at speaking out, Eufemie opts for the latter. On her way to Cador's chamber, however, her fear temporarily gets the better of her. Notably, she couches her internal conflict in terms of honor and shame, thrice accusing her heart of seeking to disgrace her (848–9, 851, 860). Only a linguistic faux pas resulting from her emotional turmoil finally suggests to Cador that she loves him.

The perfectly matched couple find their virtue validated in an exceptional gift from Ebain: the right to choose any mate. It is small wonder that the generous king sees fit to reward two subjects who have displayed valiance and noble character. Yet there is a gap between what the narrator tells us about these characters and their acts, suggesting that honor does not entirely dominate in any of them. Throughout the tale, each engages in behavior that can hardly be construed as exemplary. Ebain prohibits women from inheriting after two of his counts, wed to twin sisters, kill each other in an argument over which sibling was born first. The king thus punishes all women, although the sisters themselves are blameless in the situation. Moreover, despite Ebain's promise to allow Cador and Eufemie to select a partner, his reaction to hearing the two ask him to keep his pledge suggests a degree of insincerity.[8] After assuring each one separately that he will respect his or her choice, Ebain meets with his council and announces that he wants Cador to wed Eufemie and that someone

[7] For more on Eufemie's role in the romance, see Chapter 5 of Laine Doggett, *Love Cures: Healing and Love Magic in Old French Romance* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

[8] A number of scholars have analyzed Ebain's behavior and eventual marriage to Silence in the context of inheritance law. See, for instance: Craig A. Berry, "What Silence Desires: Female Inheritance and the Romance of Property in the *Roman de Silence*," in *Translating Desire in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Craig A. Berry and Heather Richardson Hayton (Tempe, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), pp. 191–206; Sharon Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12 (Spring 2002), pp. 64–75; and Christopher Callahan, "Canon Law, Primogeniture, and the Marriage of Ebain and Silence," *Romance Quarterly* 49 (Winter 2002), pp. 12–20.

should explain the wisdom of the decision to the pair. In short, Ebain vows to Cador and Eufemie that he will give each the desired lady or lord, and then proceeds to choose a spouse for them. Only the fact that his wishes correspond to those of the couple prevents a conflict. In this instance, the king is honorable by default.

The narrator concludes the episode that leads to Cador and Eufemie's wedding with another excursus on the shift in values over time. Eufemie's father journeys to accompany the couple back to his lands after their marriage. The narrator offers nothing but praise for the count, who is generous, courtly, and without baseness or treachery (1547–8) – in contrast to the deceit, baseness, flattery, disregard for the truth, and, especially, shame that overshadow love and virtue in Heldris's day (1551–76). By placing the digression here, the romance also invites us to reconsider what has just occurred. Although the narrator never condemns Ebain, Cador and Eufemie's union has been brought about by many of the traits that Heldris laments: deception, flattery, and an ability to manipulate the truth.

After the count's death, Cador and Eufemie, too, display questionable judgment. First, the two consciously contravene the king's law by raising their daughter as a son, a decision that requires a good deal of planning.[9] Later, Cador follows in Ebain's footsteps by banning all minstrels owing to his mistaken belief that two jongleurs have kidnapped Silence. While the choice is explicitly Cador's, it comes after lengthy passages insisting on the grief experienced by both Cador and Eufemie, who are regularly linked by the pronouns "they" and "we."[10]

No character undergoes a more radical transformation than does Eufeme. The same queen who was a "gem" and greeted the king courteously upon her arrival in England becomes ruthless and calculating. She repeatedly tries to seduce Silence (whom she believes to be a man) and then goes to great lengths to punish the youth for rejecting her advances. She claims that Silence has tried to rape her, falsifies a letter from her husband to the French king in an effort to have Silence killed, devises an ostensibly impossible task that will lead to Silence's permanent exile, and is finally discovered to have a lover who disguises himself as a nun to be near the queen. The narrator thus paints two

[9] Erika E. Hess argues that Cador's solution depends on the natural right to inherit. See "Inheritance Law and Gender Identity in the *Roman de Silence*," in *Law and Sovereignty in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Robert S. Sturges (Turnhout, Brepols, 2011), pp. 217–35, esp. p. 235. This interpretation may explain potential audience support for Cador's decision. Furthermore, although Cador takes the initiative in proposing that Silence be raised as a boy, the romance consistently emphasizes that Cador and Eufemie act as one, and Eufemie immediately agrees to the plan.

[10] Like Cador, Silence defies Ebain's edict, opting to live as a man even after reaching adolescence and realizing that the body developing is definitely female. While Silence's choice stems from the recognition that being male has many advantages, it is also motivated by the desire not to betray Cador. In Silence's case, the honorable decision to protect Cador outweighs the potential dishonor in disobeying the king.

portraits of important characters. Praised for their honorable qualities, Ebain, Cador, Eufemie, and Eufeme do not always act in accordance with expectations. With this pattern, the audience cannot ignore the divergence between the examples the narrator provides and the exemplary traits first highlighted – and must wonder how to interpret the dissonance. Actions speak louder than words.

The narrator himself plays an enigmatic role, as becomes evident in the tale's prologue. The poem's opening, which introduces a high degree of ambiguity and raises doubts about the teller's motives, provides no hint of the story to come. All that we discover at the end of the first 106 lines is that Heldris wishes to begin the tale – information conveyed in a mere five verses. More surprising, Heldris offers no praise for a patron at the narrative's outset. To the contrary, he chastises those who do not recognize good stories or remunerate those who recount them.[11] Contrasting the current state of affairs with that of the past, Heldris asserts that

> Honor lor est si esloignie
> Que il n'en ont une puignie.
> Doner, joster et tornoier,
> Mances porter et dosnoier
> Ont torné en fiens entasser. (41–5).
>
> ["Honor is so far distant from them (the stingy) that they don't have a handful of it. Generosity, jousting and tourneying, wearing ladies' sleeves and courting have turned into piles of dung."]

This passage comes in the midst of a diatribe against avarice and the evils of wealth; Heldris implies that munificence can prevent one from becoming mean-spirited and miserable. Yet Heldris seems less concerned with the effects of stinginess on those who hoard wealth than with the consequences of their behavior for composers and performers. Underscoring the honor gained from generosity and the shame born of greed permits Heldris to make a case for financial compensation for minstrels, revealing his self-interest. He sets the stage for his own remuneration.

As the prologue concludes, the audience may wonder what it has to do with the romance. The narrator's goals are unclear; Heldris appears to be mainly interested in criticizing contemporary social woes rather than in recounting Silence's story. One may also suspect that the narrator is unable to provide an introduction designed to pique the curiosity of readers and listeners and draw them into the narrative to come. As Suzanne Kocher notes, more than anything else, the prologue ostensibly acts as therapy for a narrator she characterizes as

[11] The criticism of stingy nobles calls to mind songs from the *trouvère* tradition; it is far less typical in romance. For more on avarice in *Le Roman de Silence*, see Nicole D. Smith, *Sartorial Strategies: Outfitting Aristocrats and Fashioning Conduct in Late Medieval Literature* (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), esp. pp. 62–3.

"grouchy and possibly inebriated."[12] From the beginning, the romance casts doubt upon the narrator's skill and authority. He appears to be a man of limited ability.

Dismissing the narrator as simple or untalented, however, is only possible if one overlooks the fact that the prologue does in fact set the scene for what it to come by introducing a theme that will play a key role throughout. The prologue is far less distinct from the romance than it initially seems to be, for, Heldris explicitly links generosity to honor and stinginess to shame and ensures that no one can miss his point: words based on one concept or the other appear eleven times in the passage. Albeit indirectly, the tale's opening thus prepares the story to come, in which remarks concerning generosity, avarice, honor, and shame are rife.[13] As the narrator makes clear throughout, honor and shame in particular serve as strong motivators: characters pursue the first and endeavor to avoid the second (or are supposed to, since they are not always entirely successful). This is especially true for Silence, who consistently seeks to preserve others from disgrace, whether by continuing to live as a man to protect Cador and Eufemie, rejecting Eufeme's overtures by telling the queen that any other choice would mean dishonoring the king, or keeping quiet when faced with the queen's accusation of rape because refuting it would mean a loss of honor for both Cador and Eufeme. Precisely because the prologue differs from conventional beginnings, we are invited to scrutinize it and cannot neglect the attention accorded to honor and disgrace. Like so many of the characters, then, the narrator is not necessarily what he appears to be. His ability is cloaked in ambiguity; the audience must watch this character, too, closely to determine what his goals and skills may be.

The narrator's strongly worded views concerning women reveal another of Heldris-the-composer's strategies for encouraging debate: the use of generalizations.[14] Implicitly condoning the count's plan to raise Silence as a boy, the narrator notes that the gifts the child's parents give to Cador's cousin, who has agreed to help them, are well deserved. After all, he reminds us, Cador and Eufemie

[12] Suzanne Kocher, "Narrative Structures of the *Roman de Silence*: Lessons in Interpretation," *Romance Notes* 42 (Spring 2002), pp. 349–58, at p. 352. Kocher also characterizes the narrator as "curmudgeonly" (p. 349), "untrustworthy," "quirky," and "self-contradicting" (p. 351). Regina Psaki describes the narrator as neither dignified nor learned; see Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence*, trans. Regina Psaki (New York, Garland, 1991), pp. xxv–xxxi. Kate Mason Cooper further remarks on the narrator's tendency to break his own story in "Elle and L: Sexualized Identity in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Romance Notes* 25 (Spring 1985), pp. 341–60, at p. 353.

[13] Heather Tanner contends that the prologue introduces other essential themes, including lordship and the importance of counsel and discretion. See her "Lords, Wives, and Vassals in the *Roman de Silence*," *Journal of Women's History* 24 (Spring 2012), pp. 138–59, at p. 141.

[14] Mary Ellen Ryder and Linda Marie Zaerr contend that another type of generalization – the generic expression of Silence's actions in scenes with fighting or minstrelsy – helps prepare the audience for the tale's end. See their "A Stylistic Analysis of *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 18 (Spring 2008), pp. 22–40, at p. 28. They argue persuasively that Silence's power is consistently diminished throughout the romance.

will get a boy instead of a girl, a male heir rather than a daughter (2207–10). Whereas this passage criticizes women indirectly, later comments point out all of the sex's stereotypical flaws. When Queen Eufeme grows enamored of the cross-dressed Silence, the narrator finds ample opportunity to condemn evil female nature. Woman easily abandons love for hate and is fickle, vindictive, manipulative, and dominated by her baser emotions, the narrator informs the audience in one rant (3901–24). Later, when Eufeme discovers that her plan to have Silence killed by the French king has failed, her reaction provides more fodder for the narrator's misogyny. Noting the disjunction between the queen's inner rage and the sweet demeanor she shows her husband, Heldris once again compares love and hate before censuring all women:

> Faintice feme paltoniere,
> Quant violt d'ome estre parçoniere,
> Pasmer et plorer est sa guise.
> Mais ja n'iert d'ome si soprise,
> Por cho qu'il n'ait de s'amor cure,
> Ne voelle sa male aventure.
> Feme faintice n'ainme mie,
> Ains faint pur furnir sa folie.
> Moult a a dire en fainte feme. (5233–41)
>
> ["Fainting and crying is the way of deceitful wanton woman, when she wants a share of a man. But she will never be so taken with a man that she does not desire his misfortune if he does not want her love. A deceitful woman does not love, rather she pretends to in order to fulfill her lewd desires/folly. There is much to say about deceitful woman."]

Based on the reprehensible conduct of one woman, the narrator condemns the entire sex.

The main male characters of the romance echo the narrator's sentiments in a notably similar way. Cador, for example, chooses not to reveal his feelings for Eufemie early in the romance because of concerns that she may love another. While his justification is logical, the remarks with which he follows it seem unnecessarily severe. Not only does Cador allude to woman's fickleness, but also he notes that she confuses will and reason, looks for occasions to disgrace herself, does not do her best, and has a will that contradicts nature, reason, and right (667–75). Ebain, too, refers to unflattering aspects of female "nature." For instance, although he has no intention of demanding Silence's execution after Eufeme accuses the youth of attempted rape, he remains silent when the queen insists on such a punishment. He holds his tongue solely because he knows how argumentative woman is (4265–70). The narrator, Cador, and Ebain all generalize about the female sex.

Yet there is a problem with their sweeping statements: they do not hold true in the context of the romance. While no one attempts to redeem Eufeme, Eufemie does not embody any of Cador's criticisms. Moreover, Silence's behavior

undermines the tale's misogynistic overtones.[15] The decision to deceive the king by cross-dressing may be less than admirable, yet in every other way Silence incarnates honor.[16] The youth's reaction to Eufeme's false allegation of rape is particularly telling: well aware of the lie, Silence says nothing in order to protect the queen's reputation (4166–8). Only Eufeme behaves in a way that deserves harsh criticism, and she hardly represents all women.[17]

Even the narrator's conclusion serves as an aside rather than a rational ending to the tale. Heldris exhorts all "good women" in the audience not to take offense at the depiction of Eufeme and to find comfort in the positive portrayal of Silence – a provocative suggestion, given that Silence has cross-dressed, become an exceptional knight, and finally wed the king. Furthermore, Heldris offers a backhanded compliment to the "good women" he addresses, informing the audience that woman has less opportunity to be good than bad, so being good requires working against nature (6683–91). Continuing, he entreats such women not to take offense at other's faults but to make a more concerted effort to do what is right (6699–701). The narrator's comments can hardly be construed as truly positive; they imply that most women are inherently bad. Yet the fact that they do not logically follow from Silence's story opens them to scrutiny. Moreover, they represent a shift away from the earlier grouping of all women in the misogynistic passages, for they admit exceptions and draw attention to women rather than Woman. The narrator, prone to generalizing about women, closes the tale with a reminder that such generalizations are untenable.[18]

The placement of the men's statements further mitigates the misogyny. By the tale's end, Ebain has good reason to doubt Eufeme; the king has already discovered that she has acted abominably. In no other case, however, is condemnation of women supported by the plot. No particular instance of female misbehavior motivates Cador's comments about women's fickleness and desire to dishonor themselves. Nor does the tale explain why Ebain alludes to woman's argumentative nature from hearing Eufeme accuse Silence of trying to rape her and demanding suitable punishment. And while the narrator may justifiably note that Eufeme's love for Silence turns to hate, the twenty-five lines devoted to woman's irrationality and vindictiveness seem to grow from more than a desire to explain the queen's change of heart. In short, the most blatantly misogynistic

[15] For more on the roles played by Eufeme, Eufemie, and Silence, see Anita Benaim Lasry, "The Ideal Heroine in Medieval Romances: A Quest for a Paradigm," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 32 (1985), pp. 227–43.

[16] Smith, p. 91, views Silence's transvestism as a visible sign of filial honor and integrity, making even cross-dressing a positive reflection on Silence's moral character.

[17] Katie Keene and Heather Tanner propose that Ebain may play a role in Eufeme's behavior. See Keene's "'Cherchez Eufeme': The Evil Queen in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 14 (Fall 2004), pp. 3–22, esp. p. 17; and Tanner's "Lords, Wives, and Vassals in the *Roman de Silence*," *Journal of Women's History* 24 (Spring 2012), pp. 138–59, esp. pp. 149–52.

[18] Kocher argues that the narrator best illustrates excessive loquaciousness and the failure to keep secrets, two shortcomings attributed to women (p. 355).

passages appear to be digressions; they could easily be removed without affecting the storyline in any way. Heldris-the-composer thus marginalizes the tirades, which draws attention to them and raises questions about the veracity of the ideas they assert.

The implicit distinction between an essential Woman and all members of the sex notwithstanding, the narrator consistently insists on innate female "badness." Yet a closer look at the tale's emphasis on false appearances raises questions about what assumptions one can truly make about women's nature and brings to the fore another textual strategy for generating discussion: the narrator's tendency to contradict himself. Bypassing the most blatant examples of a gap between appearance and reality – Silence's cross-dressing and later disguise as a minstrel – I will concentrate on a series of scenes examining the role that Nature and Nurture play in creating and maintaining such appearances. The narrator clearly depicts Nature's supremacy as he recounts Silence's creation. Informing the audience that Nature uses the finest raw material when she wishes to make someone of quality, the narrator notes that at times Nature grows careless and accidentally mixes in a bit of coarser matter – which explains why a "good" body can conceal a base heart. Similarly, if a small quantity of fine material is added to the coarser ingredients with which Nature makes the lower classes, those who are not of high birth can possess a noble character (1835–60). Appearances can be deceiving – an appropriate commentary immediately prior to Silence's birth. Nature also seemingly predetermines one's character: regardless of social status, one is born good or bad and cannot escape innate moral traits.

Fewer than five hundred verses later, the narrator disproves this philosophy. In a lengthy passage that initially insists on Nature's power, Heldris's perspective shifts without any acknowledgement of the change. After claiming that naturally "bad" men who do the right thing because of nurture merely fear the consequences and eventually return to their wicked nature, the narrator points to the potential power of nurture. A naturally vile heart can never permanently reject its wickedness, but a noble heart can become so corrupted by nurture that it risks being lost (2296–342). To be sure, the narrator does not paint a flattering picture of nurture – or of humankind in general. Nonetheless, the assertion of nurture's influence conflicts with the narrator's stance on nature's dominance. Moreover, later in the romance the narrator privileges nurture even more greatly. During a brief intrusion, Heldris announces that good manners are crucial for a courtly life. He informs the audience that:

> Mains hom fait tols jors desonor
> Que s'il eüst flairié honor
> Et maintenue dé l'enfance
> Ki n'avroit cure de viltance. (5171–4)
>
> ["Many a man who does shameful acts each day would not care for base deeds, if he had tasted [smelled] honor and lived with it from childhood."]

Without voicing the terms "nature" or "nurture," the narrator expresses precisely these concepts – and implies that "good" nurture can correct "bad" nature. A false appearance can become true.

The overall function of Nature and Nurture in the romance can be fully understood only when examined with Silence. While the young protagonist frequently serves as a counterexample to the narrator's diatribes, in this case the youth is at once counterexample and example. Silence's success as a knight belies narratorial insinuations that Nurture cannot equal Nature. Were such the case, Silence would quickly be unmasked as a woman, yet Merlin alone can reveal Silence's biological sex. Nurture's importance cannot be denied, despite the ending and Silence's repeated doubts about the wisdom of leading a cross-dressed life. And yet the youth's story is not so straightforward, for Nature and Nurture do not exist in true opposition. As important as Nurture is in Silence's upbringing, Nature, too, plays a key role. The narrator attributes the child's capacity for education to Nature – innate qualities help the young Silence to learn much alone, just as a good falcon trains itself (2382–90). Describing the young Silence's efforts to excel when praised, the narrator tacitly acknowledges Nature's role in Silence's success. He explains that when the wicked are praised, they grow arrogant (2410–13) and that wickedness increases (2417–19), concluding "Et por cho di jo que Nature / Signorist desor Noreture" ["And so I say that Nature rules Nurture"] (2423–4). Nature continues to influence Silence as an adolescent, when the protagonist continues to exhibit an inherently noble character. While serving two jongleurs in an attempt to learn an appropriately feminine skill for the future, the apprentice quickly surpasses the masters. Simultaneously returning once more to the theme of honor and shame and contradicting passages that point to the influence of Nurture, the narrator remarks that:

> Silences croist moult en francise,
> Li jogleör en culvertise,
> Tant com li buens tent a l'onor
> Et malvais a le dishonor. (3201–4)
>
> ["Silence grew greatly in nobility, and the jongleurs in baseness, just as the good tend to honor, and the bad to dishonor."]

Nature guides Silence, despite the concealment of the youth's biological body. One might even say that Silence's proclivity for learning Nurture's lessons so thoroughly stems from Nature, which is often defined in terms not of one's body, but of one's heart.[19]

Given the tangled strands woven between Nature, Nurture, and Silence, the narrator sends a mixed message. False appearances are not always deserv-

[19] Krueger notes that "Nature" has a series of meanings, from biological sex to good breeding: *Women Readers*, p. 117.

ing of condemnation; Silence's "unnatural" existence leads to rewards, and Nature has a hand in the youth's success. And Nature only ultimately stands victorious in instances where Nurture – which signifies more than adopting male dress and behavior – does not prove to be a stronger influence. For Silence, both encourage the pursuit of honor; the two in tandem create an identity.[20]

Complicating the impulse to dismiss the narrator as untrustworthy is the fact that he, too, is a study in contradiction: not all of his assessments are erroneous. After Cador bans jongleurs, the narrator decries the injustice, voicing his opinion that the minstrels were not to blame (3131–7). Here, his judgment is accurate. Furthermore, in a series of comments that he makes about the truth, he never purports to be entirely veracious. Rather, prior to launching into Silence's story, he admits that fiction mingled with truth will embellish the tale (1662–9); later, he notes that those who tell too much of the truth can destroy their credibility (3099–3101). The narrator himself thus raises the possibility that not every element of the work is entirely truthful and therefore that he may be somewhat unreliable. By mixing contradictions with truth and admitting the need to enhance the story, the narrator keeps the audience guessing. He may be more sophisticated than is often thought.[21] At the very least, Heldris-the-composer artfully weaves the narrator's comments into the romance, providing coherence between Silence's story and the "extratextual" opinions of Heldris-the-narrator.

What, then, are we to make of the narrator in *Le Roman de Silence*? Perhaps, as Psaki and Kocher have suggested, the character is unsophisticated. Ambiguous portraits of characters that result from actions that subvert qualities that are praised, generalizations that are both untrue and appear to digress from the story, and reversals from one statement to the next that reveal inherent contradictions may all be techniques used by Heldris-the-composer to point out the narrator's unreliability. Even this aspect of the work, however, is arguable. The narratorial divagations are not truly separate from the romance, for they repeatedly underscore major themes, such as the function of honor, the moral character of women, the naturalness of false appearances, and questions of truth. Moreover, they are carefully placed at the beginning and end of the tale or at key points such as Silence's creation, ensuring that they draw attention to themselves. It is impossible to know if the narrator is meant to offer contrast with the tale of Silence through a lack of sophistication or is intended to be a more aware character who harps on key themes to draw the audience's focus to them. Regardless, the narrator fosters – even forces – discussion about the romance.

[20] See Terrell for more on the overlap between Nature and Nurture (p. 39).

[21] Roberta L. Krueger asserts that the narrator anticipates a critical response from the audience. See "Beyond Debate: Gender in Play in Old French Courtly Fiction," in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees (New York, Palgrave, 2002), pp. 79–95, at p. 90. This may also suggest a degree of sophistication.

Ultimately, Heldris's work is all the more satisfying for it. With no real guidance that might lead the audience to clear conclusions, the tale leaves us with a provocatively ambiguous message that will generate controversy for years to come. The question of whether Nature or Nurture truly reigns supreme in *Le Roman de Silence* may remain unanswered, but there is no doubt that Heldris displays a remarkable talent for nurturing debate.