Le Roman de Silence: Allegory in Ruin or Womb of Irony?

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Merlin and Silence wage a final metaphoric / metonymic battle in the evolution of allegory: Merlin's laughter exiles him to perpetual self-generation, as women are restored to the reign of *Silence*. (GTG)

> The broken pediment, the crumbling columns are supposed to bear witness to the miracle that the sacred edifice has withstood even the most elemental forces of destruction...[1]

In his *Roman de Silence* Heldris de Cornuälle uses allegory in rich layers: as a genre peopled with personifications; as a technique or trope where both metaphor and silence function linguistically; and as a pervasive mode of thought that grounds events and characters. How the allegory functions, what it promises, what fulfillment of that promise occurs, and what transformation, if any, is realized thereby, are the questions that directed my inquiry. I pursue here the allegorical function of personification as the layer that allows most direct access to these issues.

More than a character, Merlin is the embodiment of writing itself, polyvalent and a shape-shifter; the Middle Ages knew him as the personification of reading (Bloch 1983, 2). In Old French *lire* [to read] already means 'to teach a lesson' (Greimas), as is defined further in the text:

> Merlins a *liute* tel lechon
> Que s'il le recomence a lire,
> A recorder, et a redire,
> Et a *descovrir* tolt le blasme...(6506–09; my emphasis)
>
> [Merlin has begun to *read such a lesson*
> that if he picks up where he left off
> and continues to confirm, affirm
> and *uncover* all the wrongdoings...][2]

Merlin reads the signs of his times, uncovers truth veiled by 'figura,' and as a translator of allegory delivers meaning. Therefore, his participation in the story must be read as a declaration of allegorical intent.[3]

The first personification clearly labeled as abstraction-come-to-life[4] is Nature, creator of the girlchild. She argues for the sovereignty of inborn qualities[5] against her counterpart Nurture, who champions upbringing, dress and conditioning, all that is acquired by practice or applied to the outside. The battle rages: will true Nature—biological femaleness—be revealed, and Silentius reveal herself to be a woman, or will Nurture—the men's clothing and knightly conduct—dominate by masking Nature to the point of actually marking it in some essential way?

Such a marking is precisely the function of the allegorical *figura*: the image goes beyond covering to actually breathe new life into the original nature of what was covered, transforming it. Merlin describes just such a process:

> 'Jo ai veü jadis enter
> Sovent sor sur estoc dolce ente,
> Par tel engien et tele entente
> Que li estos et li surece
> Escrut trestolt puis en haltece.' (5916–20)
>
> ['I have often seen
> a young bud grafted onto a sterile stock
> with such skill and purposefulness
> that both stock and graft
> soon grew and flourished.']

These are among Merlin's first words to Silentius, counseling her that the power of Nurture, adding otherness, can be vital to generation: Nature is often sterile without a skillful grafting-on of unnatural yet life-giving forms. Natural figures are dead to understanding if not read allegorically; Nurture is the perversion of adding peripheral knowledge to quicken understanding. Augustine demands such supplemental knowledge for fullest interpretive ability:

> Among figurative signs, if any impede the reader, he should study them partly with reference to a knowledge of languages and partly with reference to a knowledge of things. An ignorance of things makes figurative expressions obscure when we are ignorant of nature, of animals, or stones, or plants, or other things.... (II–XVI–23,24 50).

Alain de Lille, on the other hand, holds that any departure from Nature is a perversion: 'That man, in whose case a simple conversion in an Art causes Nature's laws to come to nought, is pushing logic too far' (69).

We can read Merlin's description of grafting as a critical comment on the relationship of form to content as there can be no viable separation of the two. Content is not Plato's 'Ideal,' more 'real' than the *figurae* we see; it is a

sterile stock, and the forms only promising buds. Neither can live alone; the highest, truest understanding weds the two for further growth. In terms of allegory, such growth is more than enlargement or expansion: it promises increase through generation, through multiplying the seed of meaning. Allegory fulfills its promise when it engenders meanings that continue to propagate additional fertile possibilities. Grafting is, however, still the superimposing of an unnatural other, and, in Alain de Lille's thinking, highly improper. To suggest that poetic, metaphoric allegory is capable of such procreation would discount his complaint that only proper grammar, like natural sex, is capable of producing.[6]

Merlin's image of the grafted tree underlines the role of allegorical intent in art. *Engien* means art; *entente*, intention or understanding; *estos*, essence; *surece*, that which is added; and *haltece*, height. The passage thus says: 'understanding the essence through that which is added to it moves one vertically to a higher level of understanding.' The essence and the covering are transformed by union in allegorical interpretation, to yield a product of meaning greater than the mere sum of the two parts.[7] This product is the fulfillment promised by allegory, as Merlin's explanation is followed by a promise:

> 'Alsi pora en ceste voie
> Sor vostre dol naistre tels joie
> Ki tolte amenrira encore
> La dolor que vos avés ore.' (5921–24)
>
> ['*Thus, in this way*
> such joy may be born of your sorrow
> that it will completely transform
> the sorrow you feel now.']

I translate 'in this way' because the promise of fullness of joy, equivalent to fullness of understanding, will only be fulfilled 'in this way': by interpreting the allegory. The new bud only invigorates the sterile stock through the act of grafting, using the living graft to penetrate the stock to the very heart (*en/core*, suggesting 'in the heart'). In the same way, the literal meaning of the *figura* only transforms, giving a fuller transcendent understanding to the essential meaning through the piercing action of allegorical insight or interpretation.

The last personification in discussion is Silentius.[8] As a character she is the allegory of woman's exclusion from having (her inheritance, all that males inherit, all male privileges), and from being (the self-generation of self-expression and naming).

> 'Silentius! Qui sui jo donques?
> Silencius ai non, jo cui,

U jo sui altres que ne fui.
Mais cho sai jo bien, par ma destre,
Que jo ne puis pas altres estre!
Donques sui jo Scilentius,
Cho m'est avis, *u jo sui nus*.' (2532-38, emphasis mine)

['Not Silentius? Who am I then?
Silentius is my name, I think,
or I am other than who I was.
But this I know well, upon my oath,
that I cannot be anybody else!
Therefore, I am Silentius
as I see it, *or I am no one*.']

She is no more than an object controlled by her father and king:

'Mes pere fist de moi son buen... [...]
Mes pere fist asavoir
Que jo ja ne poroie avoir,
Sire, ireté en vostre tierre.
Et por mon iretage quierre
Me rova vivre al fuer de malle.... '(6592, 6595-99)

['My father *made of me his possession, goods*... [...]
My father explained to me
that I could never inherit
in your land, Sire.
And in order to claim my inheritance,
he asked me to live like a man....']

Moreover, she will not speak out against her situation: 'et jo nel vol pas contredire' [and I don't want to *speak* against him](6601).[9]

Silentius speaks throughout the text, but her most significant communications come through silence as a rhetorical device. She is consistently silent about her gender, even when faced with the Queen's attempts at seduction, but most importantly, she remains silent to Merlin while he explains how only a woman can catch him. Silence, as a trope, functions as a non-articulation that nevertheless delivers a meaning, a signified without a signifier: 'Silences, trop avés parole' [Silence, you talk too much](6274). In each instance of communication through silence, silence conveys meaning by the absence of speech, by the absence of signifiers. It is only the context that signifies: the context of dress, setting, behavior, the application of *us* [custom] and the *-us* applied as a masculine marker to the end of her name. The signified is known only by metonymy, by what surrounds the absence of signifiers. Rhetorically, then, silence functions as a 'placeholder' (Allen 105), *i.e.*, metonymically.

Silentius enters into conflict with Merlin when she is sent to capture him. He replays the conflict of Nature versus Nurture in the trap he unwittingly sets for himself, knowing he can only be caught by a woman, but not knowing Silentius's natural gender.[10] His nature is to eat meat, but he has accustomed (nurtured) himself to eat herbs and berries; he promises that if Silentius plays her Nature against his Nurture she will trap him, but he thinks that he is lying. The scene in which he foretells his capture is a rich allegorical text in itself, using images to relate a surface incident. The words also, by phonemic polysemy, resonate[11] with ideas already preoccupying the medieval mind: the fall of man, carnal seduction of (or by?) Nature, sin as burning, sex as dirty, and so on.[12]

This evocation is fulfilled in the Nature / Nurture argument which follows, in which each blames the other for the Fall of man (6007–85). Nature overcomes Merlin and he scrambles through spiny thickets to the flesh: he Falls, his side pierced by thorns, refiguring Christ's side pierced to pay for Adam's Fall. The delivery of Merlin into the hands of society implies the delivery of meaning to the understanding of men. The use of silence to capture the deliverer of meaning is at the heart of the question of whether allegory can keep its promise.

The setting for this seduction scene can be read as a description of textual interpretation. Linking interpretation to seduction would seem to endorse Alain's opinion of poetic license / licentiousness (70). Does interpreting allegorically mean risking being seduced into a trap? Or is it rather the *failure* to read below the surface covering (Silentius's male clothes to her feminine gender) that ensnares? And what of reading the female body that is beneath the clothing? In a physical sense it would take more than just groping around for such 'reading' to engender full meaning. To do this, allegorical interpretation must penetrate the image and impregnate the essence. Such reading is seduction at least, or possibly even rape;[13] allegorical interpretation (*i.e.*, Merlin) is in a very difficult position here.[14]

The actual description of the seduction site directs us how to read the seduction: 'entre .i. bos et .i. plasscié' [between a wood and a clearing] (5982). The 'presence-absence' connotations of wood and clearing invite us to read between the physical presence of the letters on the page, and the absence of their fuller, ideal meaning. *Plasscié* is the open space for 'reading between the lines,' for adding interpretation to what is found in the lines of a text. This space or gap is where Silentius is told to keep Merlin's flint and tinder: 'Tens chi mon fural et m'esce' (5946). In addition to flint and tinder, *fural* also means 'application' (as in *figurae* applied over a meaning), and *m'esce* can

mean 'my inner Nature', even 'my slipping away'. Thus we can read: 'Keep here (between the lines of the text and the spaces open for interpretation) my application of figurae and my inner nature.' In this reading Merlin instructs Silentius to maintain the link between—to keep together in that textual, extra-textual place—allegorical figures and the natural element they cover. This passage raises the critical question of whether, or how, silence is capable of performing the metaphoric function of bridging the gap between signifier and signified. The text's response will emerge later, in the conclusion.

The narrator intercedes to clarify Merlin's function, as allegory's reader, to liberate and deliver the fullness of the text. Again, I read through the lines' surface meaning to constitute my interpretation:

> Que vos diroie? Tolt li livre,
> Se li a mostré a delivre
> Le bos u Merlins vait et vient.
> Dont prent congié, sa voie tient.[15] (5983-6)
>
> [What can I tell you? *The book*
> *showed itself all to him and Merlin delivered, set free*
> *the textual presence where Merlin goes and comes.*
> Then he took his leave and *held to his own path.*][16]

This movement of going and coming into and beyond the lines of a text is a definition of allegorical interpretation; it is the movement from signifier to signified, from image to essence, from foreshadowing to fulfillment. The text presents the figures that veil the fuller meaning, and Merlin, as allegorical messenger, pierces the veil to the transcendent union of figure and essence to deliver that fulfillment to reader or listener. Merlin demonstrates this function at least nine times, as, for example, when he sees through the nun's robes to the man who is the Queen's lover and denounces him.

Merlin 'poses the possibility of a vision that presents itself as comprehensive and of a system of meaning adequate to...an all-encompassing horizon' (Bloch 1983, 5). This possibility is not realized, however, as a perfectly functioning system. A loss of center, an unbridgeable gap, is already intimated in the slipping away of Merlin's inner Nature (5946). This slipping away is coupled with a foreshadowing of his eventual disappearance into his own realm of existence, 'his own path' (5986) which is the unspoken end. This hint is fulfilled when Merlin disappears from the scene in interpretive silence: 'U il Silence avoit lasscié, / Entre .i. bos et .i. plasscié' [Where he had left Silence, between a wood and a clearing](5981). He left silence between the lines and the spaces: only Silentius / silence is left to read between the lines. The question returns, will she, will it?

This brings us to the knot of the problem.[17] The conflict between Merlin and Silentius is the conflict between metaphoric and metonymic functions in language: 'A competition between both devices, metonymic and metaphoric, is manifest in any symbolic process' (Jakobson 1116).[18] Merlin, the personification of allegorical interpretation, the seer of allegorical plenitude, functions by extending metaphors, by linking similarities across a gap. If there is always an inevitable gap[19] between the elements of metaphor, it is significant that Merlin comes to be trapped there in the end, and that it is Silentius who brings this about.

Silentius, the personification of aphasia, the absence of speech, the silent place-holder, functions only by metonymy.[20] The silent message of Silentius's context, her clothes and bearing (Nurture), overpowers Merlin's metaphoric reading of her true Nature. He cannot link enough similarities across the gap between her Nurture and her Nature to be able to fuse the confusing *figura* with her essence beneath, so he divulges to her the nature of the trap he cannot escape. Silence disrupts the metaphoric flow and Merlin is trapped in the gap in his reading; he Falls into the void.[21] Silentius does not bridge the gap between the applied *figura* and the element beneath; she does not read between the lines in Merlin's absence. Her refusal to function metaphorically (*i.e.*, to merge her Nurture / cover with her Nature / inner essence) empowers her metonymy.

Does Merlin's disappearance into the void constitute a failure to fulfill the allegorical promises made? Not at all; he continues to read through figural coverings, and reluctantly, still under the influence of silence, delivers the fullness of his understanding to the court. But he has perceived his Fall from allegorical omniscience,[22] and his reaction to each reading is laughter.[23] It would seem that his only options, given his awareness of his fallen state, are silence (the signifier without articulation) or laughter (the articulation without a signified): 'Fallen nature mourns...its mournfulness makes it become mute' (Benjamin 224). But rather than mourn and remain silent, aligned with his captor, Merlin chooses the more constructive option: 'Just as earthly mournfulness is of a piece with allegorical interpretation, so is devilish mirth with its frustration in the triumph of matter' (Benjamin 227).[24] He laughs.

Laughter fashions the void Merlin has been forced into. Whether this void is in Hell, as Benjamin posits,[25] or on the 'borderline between art and life' (Bakhtin 7), this transposed world is as real as the allegorical one it has displaced—perhaps more real, in that it has been demystified by Merlin's recognition of his Fall. As Bakhtin explains, laughter can be richly creative in reverse.[26] Laughter lines the void with the comfort of becoming: 'Death

becomes pregnant' (Bakhtin 81). This is truly a nurturing, engendering womb: the tomb of a man living backwards. 'A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed' by laughter (Bakhtin 11).[27]

As Merlin observes his Fall, and laughs at himself, he creates irony:

> The ironic, two-fold self that the writer or philosopher constitutes by his language seems able to come into being only at the expense of his empirical self, falling from a stage of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of his mystification. (DeMan 213)

But this fall, this demystification, does not cause the loss or destruction of the empirical self, only its relocation in the ironic void. DeMan concurs with Schlegel in depicting irony as a dynamic for personal realization:

> Irony engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness which is endless. Schlegel at times speaks of this endless process in exhilarating terms, understandably enough, since he is describing the freedom of a self-engendering invention. (DeMan 217)

Merlin, the messenger between the 'real' world of forms and that of the Ideal, the unraveler of texts for others' understanding, seems particularly well suited for such self-fabrication. The positive irony Schlegel proposes fits Merlin even more precisely: 'Irony allows for fulfillment only in the past and in the future' (Schlegel Fragment 668). After all, Merlin lives backwards and sees past, present, and future with equal clarity.

Returning to the question of what Merlin promises this text: does he, as Bloch claims, transform his culture with the understanding he delivers?[28] Not profoundly: as DeMan pointed out, laughter is still part of the allegorical system, only inverted. It is Silence who has taken Merlin out of that culture. He delivers the truth, he reads the allegory, but this does not change the world significantly. He unveils the truth of Silentius's gender, but the King publicly strips her anyway (6572, 6586). He would not have done so had Merlin's allegorical interpretation profoundly enhanced King Ebain's understanding. Had the King accepted Merlin's reading of Silentius's gender and fused that realization with what he knew of her virtues and strengths, he would have grasped the whole woman who transcended the limitations of either component. What need would there be to strip Silentius,[29] if not to maintain the status quo, to prevent the transformation of the culture programmed for women's subordination?

Merlin translates the signifiers, but the signifieds remain unchanged. Silentius becomes Silentia, who then weds the King, rather than enjoying the

power and property she has finally been allowed to inherit. With her first uncovered speech she relinquishes all power:

> 'Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir,
> Faites de moi vostre plaisir.' (6627–28)
>
> ['*My only care is to keep silent*;
> Do with me what you will.']

This renunciation of personal volition recalls Christ's 'not my will, but Thine be done' (Luke 22:42). Her final words, 'al fait *pert* quels est li sire' [it is by his acts that one knows who is truly king](6646), suggest that Silence *loses* out again, as when the resurrection of her womanly beauty and softness removes everything manly from her entire body:

> Si prist Nature a repolir
> Par tolt le cors et a tolir
> Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle. (6671-73)
>
> [Nature began to refinish
> Silence's entire body, removing every trace
> of anything that being a man had left there.]

It is difficult to imagine her retaining any powers after that subtractive transformation, which she invited with her abdication; there have been no grafting of un-natural, male privileges or powers onto the female experience.

What could or should have been a *texte de jouissance* for Merlin's audience, was such only for himself.[30] Merlin is no longer in that world he has explained; Silence has removed him from it, and he has disappeared from the text. The author / narrator[31] rushes in to fill the gap he leaves, to leave us a *texte de plaisir*.[32] 'Master Heldris says here and now...' (6684): not here and beyond, not for now and all time. The order is essentially unchanged: allegorical understanding has not taken us to the new world promised; Merlin alone resides there, laughing.

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NOTES

1 Borinski, Karl. *Die Antike in Poetik and Kunsttheorie*, cited in Benjamin (178).
2 I cite Lewis Thorpe's edition of *Le Roman de Silence* and Sarah Roche-Mahdi's

translations from *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Romance*, unless otherwise noted. Italics indicate my alternative translations.

3 I disagree with the many critics who find Merlin's presence in the text to be either mysterious or clumsily *ad hoc*: not only does it make sense, but he has a pivotal role to play. Lorraine Stock's essay in this issue also vindicates the Merlin episode, though on other grounds.

4 Roche-Mahdi notes that Eufemie, 'use of good speech determined by convention', and Eufeme, 'Alas! Woman!' connoting woman's negative social definition (xx), could also be seen as personifications of certain feminine cultural problems, at one remove from the more explicit personifications I pursue here.

5 'True Nature' is read throughout the romance as the physical body. Whether there is an essence within, more central to the heart of Nature, differing from and veiled by its covering of flesh, is a question I will consider later, and which Erin Labbie's essay in this issue also entertains.

6 'Becoming a barbarian in grammar, he disclaims the manhood given him by nature. Grammar does not find favor with him but rather a trope. This transposition, however, cannot be called a trope. The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects....He hammers on an anvil which issues no seeds' (Alain 68-69). Such generational movement implies, however, the dynamic temporality explained by Walter Benjamin, who recognizes 'the other (allegory) as a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time'(165). Paul DeMan takes the same process but points his perspective backwards: 'The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority'(209).

7 'The synthesis of surface and depth would then be the manifestation, in language, of a fundamental unity that encompasses both mind and object' (DeMan 203).

8 Despite the discussion of how to spell her name (2067-82), the spelling varies throughout the text, most often occurring as 'Silence.' I will use Silentius, the spelling emphasizing her male role-playing, as long as she is in that role. This will also serve to distinguish her name from 'silence,' the trope, which is at least as active linguistically as the character.

9 Why does she refuse?

> Ne li vallés ki est mescine
> Ne violt pas dire son covine,
> De sa nature verité
> Qu'il perdroit donques s'ireté. (3871–74)
>
> [Nor did the youth who is a girl
> wish to reveal her secret,
> the truth about her nature,
> because he would lose his inheritance.]

Her compliant silence not only allows her to inherit, but empowers her to trap

Merlin. In the end, however, her choice of silence disenfranchises her from the transformation of allegory. Such a transformation, the fusion of her Nature and Nurture, would have enhanced in her the power and beauty of both aspects of her being.

10 Silentius senses the same self-set trap as the tale closes: 'Jo cuidai Merlin engignier / Si m'ai engignié'[I thought I was tricking Merlin,/ but I tricked myself](6457); the one prefigured the other. A relevant variant of *engignier* is to create with art or to seduce. Both of these resonate with the literary intent, as well as with the seduction scene suggested below.

11 The text invites us to derive meaning through resonance: 'Sevent que la parole sone' ['They know that speech means through ringing with sound'](6494) is more than just 'knew what his words meant," in Roche-Mahdi's translation.

12 I hear explicit sexual undertones in this passage:

> 'Abandonés li soit li fus,
> Et si vos traiés bien en sus.
> Li car sera tres bien salee,
> Et quant l'ara adevalee,
> Et mangie al fu d'espine,
> Angoisçols iert por la saïne.
> Metés le miel si priés qu'en boivie
> Anchois que del lait s'aparçoivie.' (5959–66)
>
> ['Abandon yourself to his fire
> And if you draw yourself well on top of him
> the flesh will be all tarnished, soiled,
> And when he burns it, works it, it will be brought down,
> subjugated, overwhelmed,
> And consumed by the fire of his prick,
> He will be full of anguish, desire for the breast.
> Put the best close by so he'll be deceived by it
> before perceiving his devastation, destitution.']

Grammatical function may be somewhat perverted or sexually exploited (as it is in all poetry, according to Alain), but the resonance of the words is unmistakable. This fluid play in the text delivers a message quite different from Roche-Mahdi's translation of the surface story line:

> ['Leave the fire to him,
> and withdraw to a safe distance.
> The meat will be very salty,
> and when he has seized it from the
> fire of thorn-branches and eaten it,
> he will be terribly thirsty.
> Place the honey close by so that he will drink it
> before he catches sight of the milk.']

13 Benjamin refers to just such a 'violence of the dialectic movement within these

allegorical depths' (165).

14 We must recall that the on-grafting of the figure was to be done with much *engien*, art, with its valence of seduction. Textual production, as well as its interpretation, here seems a very risky, risqué business.

15 Roche-Mahdi translates:

> What can I tell you? He gave him everything,
> showed him all around
> the grove that Merlin frequented,
> then took his leave and was on his way.

16 The aspect of generation is also reinforced by the word *delivre* which means 'deliver,' as in 'give birth,' as well as 'set free.' Such a translation not only refers to textual interpretation but also foreshadows the self-engendering process that Merlin will undertake after he disappears.

17 A solution is promised: 'Por verité le vos desneu' [For truth I will unknot it for you](6367). The promise is emphasized by the repetition of the line: 'Por verité le vos desnu' [For truth I will unveil it to you](6366). The unveiling becomes all too literal when Silentius is publicly stripped to reveal her feminine nature.

18 Although Jakobson's discussion of aphasia has received widespread challenge, correction, and modification, and cannot be taken simply at face value, it does initiate discussion of such functions.

19 Medieval intellectuals were well aware of the gap, but hierarchical authority presumed the ability to bridge it. Modern perception of this gap is no longer met by a universal omnipotent authority.

20 'In aphasia one or the other of these two processes is restricted or totally blocked' (Jakobson 1114).

21 How perverted was metonymy's seduction of metaphor? That is difficult to say: Merlin's carnal nature was fooled into thinking he was safely dealing with a man. It was the female flesh, not the male covering, that actually defeated him, however, so I would venture that it was more 'natural' than otherwise.

22 'At the moment the artistic or philosophical, that is, the language determined, man laughs at himself falling, he is laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself' (DeMan 213).

23 He laughs at the pauper who will die before using his new shoes (6316–21); at the lepers begging on top of a site of buried treasure (6330–36); at a nobleman weeping at the death of his wife's bastard son (6361–62); at the King's threat to kill him (6227); at himself for being tricked by Silentius (6234); at Silentius for tricking the whole kingdom with her dress and manners (6239–41, 6534–36); at the Queen's lover disguised as a nun (6531); and at the Queen for trying to seduce Silentius (6602–06).

24 Laughter would seem a liberating, empowering choice: 'In laughter, above all, mind is enthusiastically embraced by matter, in highly eccentric disguise. Indeed it becomes so spiritual that it far outstrips language' (Benjamin 227).

25 'The allegorist is countered by the scornful laughter of hell. Here, of course, the muteness of matter is overcome' (Benjamin 227).

26 Although it denies the authoritative structure, it revives and renews life by defeating fear and impregnating death (Bakhtin 11, 91). Bakhtin explains additional aspects of laughter that correspond to Merlin's laughter: it is related to time (9); to cross-dressing (81); to ambivalence; and to replacing the immovable, extratemporal stability of medieval hierarchy with becoming (81).

27 The whole question of the historical intrusion of folk influence on this text is much too large to consider here. Merlin's laughter is an element of folk culture ('the people's unofficial truth' [Bakhtin 89]). The allegory is shored up by proverbs, as by the bricks of ruins (Benjamin). They support and maintain the verticality of allegory's authority as self-evident truths based on folk wisdom. The loss of such authority through Merlin's disappearance undermines the whole hierarchal cultural base. 'It is fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history' (Benjamin 180).

28 'He systematically usurps the officially sanctioned discourses of a culture that is transformed by his pervasive presence' (Bloch 4).

29 As Roberta Krueger points out, 'the female body [was] a source of considerable anxiety, and female sexuality a force to be controlled' (106). Stripping Silentius before the whole court renders that body a visual object subject to male authority.

30 '*Texte de jouissance*: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts, unsettles the historical, cultural, psychological assumptions of the reader, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relationship with language' (Barthes 14). This text was Silentius's whole person: her female body fused with its 'male' behaviors and attire; her essence read metaphorically through her context. Krueger however contends that although his text is essentially driven by misogyny, 'whether intentionally or not, Heldris problematizes easy gender identification for women readers' and actually 'may invite women's critical resistance' (Krueger 126). In this light it would become a *texte de jouissance* for those women readers and respondents.

31 'The moment when the difference between author and narrator is asserted is precisely when the author does not return to the world' (DeMan 216). As Heldris takes over Merlin's role, however, he seems to try to unpick some of the antifeminism that has woven the romance: 'Master Heldris says here and now / that one should praise a good woman / more than one should blame a bad one' (6684-86). This worrying at the sore spots of the text, however, reveals an 'anxiety about the imposition of a repressive order of sexually determined identities' which Krueger identifies as a basis for misogyny (126). On close examination, then, we see he only succeeds in inflaming the irritation, which festers with cross-contaminations of authorities, king, narrator and author.

32 '*Texte de plaisir*: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text comes from the culture, does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading' (Barthes 14). Such pleasure is clearly reserved for men: how *comfortable* was Silentius when the court, the cultural collective from which she had deviated, reads her body, stripped of its fuller meaning of contextually acquired abilities, as her only text of significance?

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