The Raw and the Cooked in *Le Roman de Silence*: Merlin at the Limit of the Human

Robert S. Sturges
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Dans les romans français des XII[e] et XIII[e] siècles, la figure liminaire de Merlin est souvent employée pour examiner les limites de ce qu'on peut appeler 'l'humain.' Le personnage existe aux frontières de l'humain et du démoniaque. Dans l'œuvre de Robert de Boron et dans le *Roman de Silence*, Merlin met à l'épreuve les limites entre l'humain et l'animal. Les anthropologues modernes comme Claude Lévi-Strauss et Richard Wrangham fournissent un cadre pour examiner Merlin grâce à la distinction entre le cru et le cuit.

Dans l'épisode du roman où Silence doit capturer Merlin, la définition de l'humain est liée à la question de la nourriture. L'appétit irrésistible de Merlin pour la viande grillée, incontrôlé par la raison, semblerait renvoyer à sa nature animale plutôt qu'à sa nature humaine. Mais cet appétit pour la viande cuite est précisément ce qui rend Merlin humain, selon le vieillard qui conseille Silence. C'est sa dernière caractéristique humaine après qu'il a abandonné l'humanité pour l'état sauvage, cela constitue la limite de définition de la culture humaine.

Cet épisode curieux semble être une critique de la définition scolastique de la différence entre l'ontologie des êtres humains et des animaux. De plus, le passage situe la question de la définition masculin/féminin au sein de la problématique plus large de la définition humain/animal. Des penseurs modernes comme Derrida se sont intéressés à la question éthique des relations entre l'humain et l'animal, mais cela nécessite la considération antérieure de la question ontologique que l'on trouve dans le *Roman de Silence.*

The segment subtitled "Memoirs of a Sorcerer" in Deleuze and Guattari's essay on "Becoming-Animal" in *A Thousand Plateaus* associates sorcery with writing and with becoming-animal: "If the writer is a sorcerer, it is

because writing is a becoming . . . traversed by strange becomings that are not becomings-writer, but becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-wolf."[1] They favor "demonic animals, pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale."[2] For a medievalist concerned with the representation of encounters between the human and the animal, the association of writing, sorcery, demonism, tales, and becomings-animal must inevitably recall the figure of the sorcerer Merlin. Medieval representations of Merlin, I argue, suggest that he stands at the limits of the human: in one direction, he tests the boundary between the human and the demonic, and in another, the boundary between the human and the animal.[3] Merlin, with his demonic parentage and his shape-shifting, is a useful figure for medieval romance to explore these boundaries, and this is especially true in the *Roman de Silence*.

In the medieval Arthurian corpus, Merlin is precisely a sorcerer who is also in some versions of the story a Wild Man alienated from, and critical of, human society. This aspect of Merlin was adopted in the twelfth century by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Vita Merlini*, in which Merlin's consumption of uncooked food signifies madness. Indeed, he belongs to the forest rather than to the human civilization represented by family and by a sense of self. Abandoning all of these, his madness is a rejection of human identity, and a reversion to a state not only of wildness, but of animality as well: the abandonment of reason in madness makes him an unreasoning animal.[4] In the following century, Aquinas would link animality and unreason explicitly; the *Ro-*

---

[1] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 240.

[2] Deleuze and Guattari, 241.

[3] Earlier scholarship taking note of Merlin's boundary crossing include Francis Dubost, "Merlin ou la métamorphose de la substance impure," *Revue des langues romanes,* 113.2 (2009): 349-70; Philippe Walter, *Merlin ou le savoir du monde* (Paris: Editions Imago, 2000), 109-27; Yves Vadé, *Pour un tombeau de Merlin: Du barde celte à la poésie moderne* (Paris: José Corti, 2008); Miranda Griffin, "The Space of Transformation: Merlin Between Two Deaths," *Medium Aevum* 80.1 (2011): 85-103; Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[4] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin: Vita Merlini*, ed. and trans. Basil Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), ll. 78-82. On the *Vita* and other early representations of Merlin's relation to animality, see Anne Berthelot, "Merlin gardien de bêtes," in *Tierepik im Mittelalter*, ed. Danielle Buschinger and Wolfgang Spiewok (Greifswald, Germany: Reineke, 1994), 11-21.

man de Silence returns to this scene and uses it as a way of thinking about the nature of humanness.

Merlin also fits Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal schema as a demonic figure or son of the Devil, as in Robert de Boron and his successors in the Vulgate Cycle. The prose version of Robert's *Merlin* embedded in the Vulgate *Merlin* imagines Merlin's father as a devil who intends not merely to have sex with a woman but to engender a spokesman for Satan himself.[5] His mother's attendants also notice that he is "plus velu et plus poil avoit qu'eles n'avoient onques veü a autre enfant avoir" ("shaggier and had more hair than they had ever seen any other child have".)[6]

Merlin again stands at the limits of the human, this time at the limit that separates the human from the demonic —for, due to his mother's correct behavior and to divine forgiveness, he is not simply a devil. He also retains something of the animal nature observed in the *Vita Merlini*. However, in Robert de Boron his animality is not due to madness, but is an essential part of his nature: Merlin, even as a child, is as hairy as an animal, and he retains other affinities with the animal world as well.

Robert de Boron and his successors also introduce another aspect of Merlin's special abilities that remain an essential part of his story right into twentieth- and twenty-first-century versions of his story: the ability to shape-shift. Once again anticipating Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal, this time more literally, Merlin now has the ability to transform himself into an animal, as in the segment of the prose *Lancelot-Grail* (or "Vulgate Cycle") known as *Les Premiers Faits du roi Arthur* (or *Vulgate Merlin*), where he becomes a stag who disrupts the civilized world of the emperor's feast:

> [Merlin] devint uns cers li plus grans et li plus merveillouse que nus eüst onques veü... si s'en vint devant l'empereour et s'ajenoulle et li dist: "Iulius Cesar, a coi penses tu? Laisse ester ton penser car ne troveras qui te die t'avision ne le despondes devant ce que li lyons sauvages le te certifiera et por noient i penseroies plus." Lors se drecha li cers et vit que li huis del palais furent clos. Et lors jete son enchantement si que li huis del palais ouvrirent si roidement qu'il volerent em

[5] Robert de Boron, *Merlin: roman du XIII^e siècle*, ed. Alexandre Micha (Geneva: Droz, 1979), 49-50.

[6] Robert de Boron, 51 (my translation). On the relationship between demons and animals, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 49, 131-32, 210-12; Dubost, "Merlin ou la métamorphose," 349.

> pieces. Quant li huis furent ouvert li cers sailli fors et s'en tourne fuiant aval la vile. Et la chace conmence aprés lui qui longement dura. Tant qu'en la fin s'en issi as plains chans...[7]

> [[Merlin] became a stag, the biggest and most marvelous that anyone had ever seen... he came before the emperor and knelt, and said to him, "Julius Caesar, what are you thinking of? Leave your thinking be, for it is not worth your while. For you will not find anyone to tell you about your vision until the wild lion explains it, and it would be for nothing to think about it any more." Then the stag arose and saw that the doors of the hall were closed, and then he cast his spell so that the palace doors opened so suddenly that they flew into pieces. When the doors were open, the stag leapt forth and went fleeing through the town, and the chase after him began and went on a long time, until in the end he went out into the open field.]

In this episode, Merlin is never called "Merlin," but "the stag," as if he had traded in his identity for that of an animal. On the other hand, though, this is a stag who can speak in human language: once again Merlin is both things at once, both himself and the animal simultaneously. Furthermore, the stag version of Merlin is clearly undomesticated: he violates the division between the inside and the outside. He also suggests that the answer to the emperor's problem is to be found in a confrontation with another wild animal, the lion, which thus becomes another aspect of Merlin's identity.

This episode leads into the story of Grisandole, the female cross-dressing knight who undertakes the emperor's quest for the stag. This episode in turn is a source of the *Roman de Silence, w*hich raises the issue of gender identity as well. What gender transgression has to do with the definition of the human is, again, worked out more fully in *Silence*.

Donna Haraway has trenchantly critiqued Deleuze and Guattari's attempt to "get beyond the Great Divide between humans and other critters,"[8] finding that it "feeds off a series of primary dichotomies figured by the opposition between the wild and the domestic;"[9] thus their attempt to deconstruct the human-animal divide subtly reinforces it. I now want to turn to *Silence*

---

[7] *Le Livre du Graal I: Joseph d'Arimathie, Merlin, Les Premiers Faits du roi Arthur*, ed. Daniel Poirion *et al.*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1229-30.

[8] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 27.

[9] Haraway, 28.

itself in order to suggest that this tale of a sorcerer becoming-animal may investigate that divide in a manner different from Deleuze and Guattari's, one that, at least initially, undermines the dichotomies that Haraway claims Deleuze and Guattari reinforce.

The recent book *Catching Fire*, by Richard Wrangham, has the provocative subtitle "How Cooking Made Us Human." Wrangham argues that "cooking increases the amount of energy our bodies obtain from our food,"[10] and thus that the introduction of cooking allowed a higher survival rate among human ancestors. This higher survival rate in turn led to an increase in reproduction and a concomitant spread of the gene pool, as well as changes in anatomy and physiology, which also ultimately brought about ecological and social changes. In short, cooking is a decisive factor in evolution; without it, we would never have become human.

Lévi-Strauss's classic anthropological study *The Raw and the Cooked* makes a related argument. For Lévi-Strauss, cooking is a question not primarily of physiological evolution, but rather of cultural development: the raw/cooked axis is the axis of culture.[11] Nevertheless, he too suggests that in certain mythologies, cooking not only marks "the transition from nature to culture;" additionally, "the human state can be defined with all its attributes" by means of cooking, including even those attributes that might seem "the most unquestionably natural."[12] Thus cooking food rather than eating it raw is, in these mythologies, actually definitive of the human in a cultural sense, as it is for Wrangham definitive of the human in an evolutionary sense.

These modern readings of the raw and the cooked are the background to my own reading of a curious incident in *Silence*: the episode near the end in which the ambiguously gendered hero Silence is sent on a mission to capture Merlin. We should recall that this episode's importance in the romance plot hinges on the question of Silence's gender. Silence is by nature female, but male by upbringing or nurture, and is living as a man at the French court of King Evan and Queen Eufeme. Eufeme is angry that the putatively male Silence has rejected her sexual advances, and takes her revenge by suggesting that Silence be sent to capture Merlin. Since Merlin, like a unicorn, can be

---

[10] Richard Wrangham, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 14.
[11] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology I*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 142.
[12] Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 164.

captured only by "engine de feme" ("a woman's trick", l. 5803),[13] as a supposed man Silence is doomed to failure, which is what the queen intends. But in the event, Silence's success in bringing Merlin back to court unleashes the gender-based revelations that bring the romance plot to its conclusion. Not only is Silence, because of her success in capturing Merlin, revealed as naturally female, but Merlin also reveals that a nun who has been associating with the queen is actually both a man and the queen's lover.

The capture of Merlin is thus closely tied to the questions of gender that dominate most discussions of *Silence*, but it is tied even more closely to questions of nature and culture, or indeed to questions of the relationship between the human and the non-human with which I began. *Silence* draws on the venerable tradition that regards Merlin as a "Wild Man of the Woods" as well as a son of the devil and a prophet: Eufeme describes Merlin as wild, and suggests that it is this very wildness that makes him difficult to catch. And when Silence, searching for Merlin, encounters a helpful old man, he describes Merlin in terms that link him both with animality and with uncooked foods. Merlin is "com uns ors velus" ("as hairy as a bear," l. 5931) and "isnials com cers de lande" ("quick as a deer," l. 5931), a reminiscence of Merlin's status as both wild man and stag in the source texts. Furthermore, his only foods in his present wild state are herbs and roots ("[h]erbe, rachine est sa viände," l. 5932), and water his drink.

At the same time, however, Merlin is also acknowledged by both the queen and the old man to be a culturally advanced human, regardless of how he is currently living. Eufeme makes it clear that Merlin's wild state is his own choice: he took to the woods only after accomplishing one of his famous feats of engineering, specifically rebuilding Vortigern's tower (ll. 5784-5802); he has thus demonstrated his humanness and has a choice about living in the wild. For the old man, too, Merlin may be *like* a bear or a deer—but he *is,* nevertheless, a hairy *man* ("uns homs trestols pelus," l. 5929). Merlin again stands at the points of intersection both between the human and the animal, and between nature and culture.

The way to capture Merlin, the old man suggests, is with cooked food to eat, specifically grilled meat:

---

[13] Sarah Roche-Mahdi, ed. and trans., *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance* (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992).

Et quant Merlins le flaërra,
A la car lués repaiërra.
S'il a humanité en lui,
Il i venra, si com jo cui.
Par la fumiere et par le flair
Del rost qu'il sentira en l'air. (ll. 5953-58)

[As soon as Merlin smells the scent and smoke,
He'll come running.
If there is any human nature left in him,
He will come here, I'm certain,
Attracted by the smoke and the scent
Of the roasting meat in the air.]

This is a remarkable assertion in the context of thirteenth-century intellectual culture. For the scholastics, it is not humans, but the lower animals, those without the power of reason, who are motivated by the kind of appetite that the old man seems to be describing here. In *De veritate*, for example, Aquinas suggests that animals are subject to their desire for pleasing objects: "Animal enim ad aspectum delectabilis non potest non concupiscere illud; quia ipsa animalia non habent dominium suae inclinationis; unde non agunt, sed magis aguntur, secundum Damascenum" ("animals do not themselves have the mastery over their own inclination. Hence 'they do not act, but are rather acted upon,' as Damascene says."[14]) Humans, on the other hand, are possessed of a rational nature as well as appetite, and the appetites that they share with the lower animals are moved "ad imperium eius quod in nobis principatur, id est rationis" ("at the command of that which rules in us, namely reason."[15]) Here we may find a medieval formulation of the distinction between reaction and response that has energized much recent debate about the division, or lack thereof, between human and animal, for instance in Derrida.[16] The old man's claim about Merlin's irresistible appetite for the grilled

[14] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (Leonine edition online, Q. 22, art. 4, reply, accessed 26 September 2012), http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html; *Truth*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert W. Schmidt, 3 vols. (1954; repr. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 3: 47.
[15] Thomas Aquinas, Q. 25, art. 4, reply, 3: 226.
[16] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008-2010), 1: e.g. 104, 120. For a related analysis of this episode, though in a somewhat different context, see Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "Civili-

meat would seem to align him with the appetitive uncontrolled by reason, that is to say, with his animal rather than this human nature. And yet it is precisely this appetite for cooked meat that renders Merlin human, in the old man's estimation: it is the last remaining human characteristic after he has given up humanity for wildness, one might almost say the defining limit of human culture, as it is for Wrangham and Lévi-Strauss.

The *Roman de Silence*, then, posits an undecidable Merlin situated problematically at the intersection of the human and the animal. He is a human who is nevertheless characterized by his animal qualities; he is defined by what usually defines the animal, and yet it is this very animality, his irresistible appetite, that paradoxically makes him recognizable as human. In some sense we might say that these descriptions of Merlin deconstruct the opposition between animal and human, as well as the opposition between wild and civilized with which the queen attempts to define him. The desire for cooked meat reveals a level of civilization that in itself is available only to human beings, even as that very desire also aligns him with non-human animal being. In this undecidability we may see Merlin in relation to the figure of Silence: what Silence's undecidability is to gender, Merlin's is to culture, and even to humanity itself.

Indeed, the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture turn up to argue over Merlin just as they argue for possession of Silence throughout the romance, and their argument suggests another approach to the undecidability of Merlin's mode of being. But where a modern audience might expect Nature to represent uncivilized wildness and animality, while Nurture would represent human culture, something like the opposite turns out to be the case here: "Nature" refers to Merlin's specifically *human* nature, that which encourages his attraction to the cooked meat; "Nurture," on the other hand, refers to his own unnatural decision to live in the wild like an animal, eating raw herbs. As Merlin, attracted by the scent of cooking, heads for the grilled meat, it is Nurture who forces him to turn aside and who complains that

> Quanque jo noris et labor
> Me tolt Nature a un sol jor.
> Tant a esté noris en bos
> Bien deüst metre ariere dos

---

zation and Its Discontents: Cultural Primitivism and Merlin as a Wild Man in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12.1 (2002): 22-36.

Nature d'ome, si voloit
Herbes user, si com soloit. (ll. 6001-06)

[Whatever I work for and accomplish
Nature deprives me of in one day.
Merlin was nurtured in the woods for so long
That he certainly would have put
His human nature behind him, and should have wanted
To continue eating herbs, the way he was used to.]

It is the nature of a human being to behave as a human, whereas eating raw foods takes an act of unnatural will. The argument quickly takes a turn toward Original Sin: Nurture argues that the corrupt nature of Adam and Eve led them into sin, an argument that Nature rejects:

Quanques Adans fist de rancure,
Fu par toi, certes, Noreture.
Car li diäbles le norri
Par son malvais consel porri. (ll. 6066-69)

[Whatever evil Adam did
Was due to you, Nurture, without a doubt,
For the Devil fed him
Evil, rotten advice.]

Nurture gives up the argument at this point; Nature then encourages Merlin's consumption of the cooked meat, and thus his capture by Silence.

Here Merlin becomes the sign, not simply of an undecidable animal/human identity, but of an incomplete division between animal and human nature, one that is not exactly the division described by the scholastics: in this case, culture itself, represented by cooking, *is* human nature. Humanness, in other words, even at its most technologically advanced, cannot escape animality, enacting what Sarah Kay calls the "porosity between human and animal domains,"[17] or in Giorgio Agamben's terms, "[t]he animal-man and the man-animal are the two sides of a single fracture."[18]

---

[17] Sarah Kay, "Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading," in *The Animal Turn*, eds. Karl Steel and Peggy McCracken, special issue of *postmedieval* 2.1 (Spring, 2011), 25.
[18] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 36.

The third allegorical figure who appears earlier in the romance to settle the argument between Nature and Nurture over Silence's gender is the figure of Reason, but Reason does not make an appearance in the Merlin episode: whereas Reason favors Nurture where gender is concerned, in Merlin's case Nature is able to defeat Nurture's arguments without reference to Reason. This rejection of Reason as a factor in the argument over Merlin again places the *Roman de Silence* at some distance from the scholastic view of the animal/human divide. For Aquinas, reason is the uniquely human quality that allows us to dominate our appetites and act independently of them, whereas animals are moved by appetite alone. But Merlin, human though he is, is also, like an animal in scholastic thought, moved toward the cooked food by his natural appetites. It is not reason that makes him human: it is instead the specific ontogeny of those appetites. Humanness is defined here not by reason, but rather by its appetite for culture, the specifically human culture represented by cooking. In another formulation of Agamben's, the human "results from the incongruity of these two elements."[19]

Furthermore, this appetite for human culture is associated with a state of prelapsarian innocence: Merlin's nature, which is to say his appetite for human culture, is comparable to that of Adam and Eve before the Fall, uncorrupted by the devil's nurture.[20] The human appetite for humanness, for culture, is a positive good, and from this perspective, Merlin's earlier decision to become a wild man, signified by the consumption of raw food, was a perversion of his true, innocent, human nature, prompted by a decadent or even demonic Nurture. Here, it is in the sense of having chosen Nurture that Merlin appears as demonic.

We might ask at this point about the level of irony involved here. If we follow the Vulgate *Merlin* in interpreting the old man who knows how to catch Merlin as being Merlin himself in disguise,[21] it seems to add a level of control over his own appetites to Merlin's character. The old man in that sense might be understood almost as the missing figure of Reason, the aspect of his character that directs his lower appetites. In that reading, human nature is split between the appetites that drive Merlin himself and the reason exercised over them by the old man. Reason in this view is indeed an aspect of human nature, that which guides the appetites toward humanness.

---

[19] Agamben, *The Open,* 16.
[20] Cf. Stock, "Civilization," 28-31.
[21] For this argument, see Sarah Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12.1 (Spring 2002): 6-21, at 12-15.

In any case, the Merlin episode has the effect of placing the gender concerns centering on Silence him- or herself in a larger context. From the perspective offered by these passages, the *Roman de Silence* is not only about the definition of gender as either a natural state or a cultural construction. It is also about the very concepts of nature and culture themselves, and how they interact in the humanness of human beings. Gender, from this perspective, although certainly the romance's main focus, can also be seen as just one aspect of a much larger problem. The Merlin episode opens up the romance to this wider set of concerns not only about nature and culture, but about humanness and animality as well. The Nature/Nurture interventions into Silence's decisions about his or her gender status, in particular, must be re-read from the perspective provided by the later Merlin episode in terms of its problematisation of what in the earlier episodes appear to be a strict division between nature and culture. Perhaps the term "natureculture" might be adapted from Haraway's usage to describe this imbrication of the two.[22]

Recent writers on "the question of the animal"[23] resonate with what I have been suggesting about the *Roman de Silence*, especially in the Merlin episode's initial deconstruction of the human/animal opposition. Even for Lévi-Strauss, writing in the 1960s, the polar opposition between animal and human is mythologically mediated through cooking;[24] "[n]ature and culture, animality and humanity become mutually interpermeable."[25] Other thinkers have gone further. Cary Wolfe, for example, critiques post-Cartesian versions of the scholastics' separation of humans and animals—the view that "animals remain locked within a universe of more or less automated 'reactions.'"[26] He speculates about the possibility of "the shared dynamics of a world building that need not, in principle, be tied to species distinctions *at all*."[27] Derrida conversely suggests that human beings too may be subjected to the world as much as animals are. As well as imagining the possibility that animals are *not* locked into their automated reactions, he also questions "whether what calls itself human has the right to rigorously attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal, and whether he can

[22] See Haraway, *When Species Meet*, e.g. 15.
[23] Cary Wolfe, "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question of the Animal," in *Zoöntologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.
[24] Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 83, 91, 336.
[25] Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 275.
[26] Wolfe, "Introduction," in *Zoöntologies*, ix-xxiii, at xvi.
[27] Wolfe, "Shadow," 5.

ever possess the *pure, rigorous, indivisible* concept, as such, of that attribution."[28]

To re-situate this discussion in terms established by another text of Derrida's, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, we should recall that Silence's capture of the beastly Merlin is ordered by a sovereign king, Evan. But his sovereign decision is undercut or deconstructed even as it appears to succeed: in his role as simultaneously beast and human, Merlin is both subject to the force of law, as apparently evidenced by his successful capture, and at the same time above or outside it. His mode of transcending the law, however, is a carnivalesque one: he knows what no one else knows about Evan's court and about his captor Silence, and his response is laughter:

> Merlins en rit, por poi ne crieve
> Sor la roïne et ne dist mot;
> Et il le tienent tuit por sot.
> Ne sevent pas dont li ris naist. (ll. 6276-79)
>
> [Merlin laughed so hard at the queen
> he nearly died, but he didn't say a word
> and they all thought he was a fool.
> They didn't know the cause of his laughter.]

"Knowledge is sovereign,"[29] according to Derrida. Merlin may have the knowledge/power that Derrida links to sovereignty and the divine, but he exercises it in a beastly rather than a sovereign mode, one that, like Derrida's text, deconstructs the difference between the two. Near the end of his first volume, Derrida links the fool or madman with the animal, and questions "the logic of this desire for territorialisation that made people love the ecosystem of limits in which both animal and madman, and, I'd add, everybody, all the mad animals that we are, are as happy to stay as we are to get out."[30] Merlin as a mad animal chooses the same sort of confinement at court that Derrida describes here, but in his confusion of categories and in his knowing laughter, he also presents a carnivalesque challenge to it.

---

[28] Derrida, "And Say the Animal Responded?" in his *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louis Malle, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 135.
[29] Derrida, *The Beast*, 1: 280.
[30] Derrida, *The Beast*, 1: 311.

Derrida asks whether it might be possible to "spoil the appetite for sovereignty that always slumbers in us."[31] Merlin, in testing the boundary between animal and human, tries to do just that. It must not be forgotten, however, that sovereignty reasserts itself at the end, and finally brings Silence herself within its confining reach by resolving her gender ambiguity. Our last image of Merlin is one precisely of captivity and the restoration of the proper by the sovereign: the king

> Fait Merlin fermement tenir...
> Et Silence despollier roeve,
> Tost si com Merlins dist les trueve.
> Tot issi l'a trové par tolt. (ll. 6569-73)
>
> [... had Merlin seized and held firmly...
> and he ordered Silence to be undressed.
> It was just as Merlin had said:
> he found everything in its proper place.]

Silence is ultimately confined to her physical gender, what Derrida calls "the order of the sexes,"[32] as Merlin is confined by the king's guards, and Nature itself—the animal—is thus resituated under the sign of human sovereignty. Perhaps we cannot spoil the appetite for sovereignty: Merlin himself provides the information that allows Evan to assert it, so we might agree with Kojève that "man is a fatal disease of the animal."[33] But "[w]ho will dare," asks Derrida, "militate for a freedom of movement without limit, a liberty without limit? And thus without law?"[34]

Derrida, Wolfe, Haraway, and others like them are explicitly concerned with the ethics of the relationship between human and animal, but, as all such writers implicitly recognize, and as Agamben makes explicit,[35] the ethical discussion cannot proceed without a simultaneous—or indeed prior—ontological one, and it is this ontological discussion that the *Roman de Silence* instantiates.[36] In the Merlin episode, its consideration of the ontology of

---

[31] Derrida, *The Beast*, 1: 284.
[32] Derrida, *The Beast*, 1: 198.
[33] Kojève, *Introduction à l'étude de Hegel,* quoted in Agamben, *The Open*, 12.
[34] Derrida, *The Beast*, 1: 301.
[35] Agamben, *The Open*, 79.
[36] Recent considerations of the ontological problem in medieval culture include Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus:

the human, whether we read it as an example or a critique of scholastic thought on the subject, is the kind of troubling problematisation of the relationship between the human and the animal that in the long run makes such discussions conceivable. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari's romanticization of the animal/human divide, *Silence*'s consideration of that ontology is genuinely problematic.

Ohio State University Press, 2011); Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).