The Modern Editor and Medieval 'Misogyny': Text Editing and *Le Roman de Silence*

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Text-editing is one of the activities that, in my innocence, I used to consider joyless and unlikely to be pertinent to my own research in medieval literature. Recently, though, scholars representing the most wildly divergent critical approaches have been warning us that we neglect this aspect of medieval studies at our peril. Bernard Cerquiglini's *Eloge de la variante* [*In Praise of the Variant*], the New Philology issue of *Speculum* (1990), and the acerbic reaction to that issue in *Romance Philology* (1991), among others, have foregrounded the implications of text-editing procedures and philosophies, and have often concluded by warning us that we must go back at once to the original manuscripts.[1] I want to consider here the role text-editing plays in our understanding of the Middle Ages as a period characterized by what Howard Bloch (1991) called 'the viral presence of antifeminism' (7). To what extent do various modern editing practices (which are far from uniform) promote a perception of a misogynist Middle Ages well beyond what the original artifacts may support?

Bloch's perception of medieval misogyny as so widespread—'viral'—as to render his title *Medieval Misogyny* itself redundant, imagines the lines of force running one way, from the past to the present. He states emphatically that our perception of the Middle Ages as overwhelmingly misogynist

> does not emanate from the nineteenth-century revival of medievalism, from contemporary feminism, or even from recent interest in the study of women in medieval culture. (7)

He examines, he says, not only

> the canonical antifeminists of the Middle Ages, but...their spiritual heirs—the philosophers, novelists, medical specialists, social scientists, and critics of the nineteenth century, whose own particular brand of Romantic and naturalistic misogyny carries a large charge of unexamined attitudes from the medieval, and even the patristic, past. (7)

What does he not set out to do, but he could profitably have done, is to examine the extent to which the misogyny of the Middle Ages is *in part also* a product of that nineteenth century which essentially invented our discipline. I am not trying to move from one caricature to another, to claim that the Middle Ages was actually a goddess-worshipping matriarchy. I am, however, trying to nuance the notion of a monolithically, homogeneously misogynist Middle Ages. How did the nineteenth century, with its projects of canon formation, cultural analysis, and text-editing, actually 'influence' the Middle Ages we know? How does a nineteenth-century construct of 'woman' show up in the Middle Ages shaped for us by our predecessors?

The *Roman de Silence*, which I use to approach these questions, is now a subject of lively conversation among medievalists. This recent popularity follows decades in which it was neglected and centuries in which it was altogether unknown. *Silence* has emerged from obscurity because our curiosities have changed. The questions we ask now are different, and are such as illuminate this romance. *Silence* engages theoretical and critical preoccupations which have become contemporary: the constructedness (or not) of gender; the role of language and writing in gender identity; the relative force of nature and culture; the ethical and practical effects of excluding women from economic and political power. The concerns of the romance are clear.

What is *not* clear about the text is the stance its author takes toward these issues. Is the romance misogynist, or not? Does its author undertake to challenge or confirm the notion—diffuse in his culture, but by no means universal—that women are naturally inferior and rightly subordinate to men? We as critics disagree; that's our job. Published interpretations run the gamut from reading it as rah-rah feminism to reading it as boo-hiss chauvinism.[2] Kathleen Brahney reads the romance as a straightforward and partisan declaration of what women can do, freed from the social constraints which attend their gender. For Simon Gaunt, on the other hand, 'the *Roman de Silence* explores the possibility that gender is a cultural construct before firmly reinstating the status quo' (203). Gaunt attributes what he sees as the overt misogyny of the romance to a fear of women. How does the same romance generate such disparate evaluations of such a central issue?

One important reason that this romance is slippery on the issue or the possibility of gender equality, is that most of us know it first and best in its

modern incarnation, *i.e.*, in a normalized edition with a cargo of emendations, interpretations, and contextualizations proposed (imposed) by its first editor, Lewis Thorpe. Since Thorpe rescued this text from oblivion, my point is not to find fault with him. *Silence*'s new editor and translator, Sarah Roche-Mahdi, said kindly that 'like most pioneer efforts, his work stands in need of considerable revision' (xxiii); her new edition-translation corrects Thorpe's errors as faithfully as my own translation had preserved them. I will use Thorpe as a test-case to examine the effects on readers of a certain kind of editing practice which has dominated the modern diffusion of medieval texts. I will try to show that our urge to clarify, disambiguate, and determine—a habit of mind which governs our approach to medieval studies in general and to text-editing in particular—works to promote strong readings of texts which in fact might well be more equivocal. *Silence* tries to pose and explore a problem, not to resolve it. Our ways of looking at distant and diverse cultures, of which our modern editing standards are both a reflection and a product, encourage us to reduce the plurivocal medieval text to a single response.

Peter Allen, in his article 'The Ambiguity of Silence,' stresses the romance's violated reticence in a modern edition: 'To transform the text from its unruly manuscript state into an accessible, socialized, printed work is the job of an editor' (104). But, he says, '...in studying [*Silence*], we are forced to think about...the role and limitations of the textual editor' (98). Allen argues that the physical presentation of this manuscript reenacts its specific problematic—that our desire to impose determinate meaning on this text prevents us from recognizing its multidimensionality, what the text really is. While Allen perhaps makes too much of the fragility of this manuscript (since restored), he is quite right to insist that it is our mentality of mastery which leads us astray, though I prefer to call it a mentality of clarity or determinacy. And while I will not base my discussion on a quasi-sensual preference for *jouissance* (as Allen does) or *excès joyeux* (Cerquiglini 114), I do agree with these scholars that we have perhaps lost by trying to pin our texts down, to fix them, to make them say one thing or the other—but *not* a multiplicity of competing or even contradictory things.

The habits of mind with which we approach the Middle Ages are difficult to describe because they are obvious and automatic. We want to regain the knowledge and the contexts lost in the intervening centuries, in order to experience, analyze, and ultimately evaluate the Middle Ages on its own terms. We try to divest ourselves of anachronistic cultural baggage, just as when we visit a Romanesque church we tend or try not to notice the cars and electrical wires outside. Sometimes we're surprised to see them materialize in our

photographs, just as traces of the modern world also materialize in our analyses. Our goals are obvious, though how attainable or reasonable they are is questionable. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are constantly categorizing, sorting, generalizing, and synthesizing our data, attempting a clear and coherent picture. But the results lose in accuracy whatever they gain in clarity and comprehensibility. Why do we bother making broad statements about our period which a moment's reflection, or a single example, destabilizes? We bother because this is the way empirical minds *know*: in rough sketches which we gradually fill in with detail, nuance, contrast, and ultimately contradiction.

I doubt we can get away from it, and I would not advocate replacing our epistemological model with an intellectual anarchy without discrimination or order. But for this problem, at least—the reading of medieval texts which exist in manuscript—might we not start at least with more neutral data, and restrict our generalizations to smaller sections of it? If our questions and preoccupations regarding medieval literature have evolved, perhaps we should also reconsider the form in which we are accustomed to seeing medieval texts. Perhaps we could try to have our first, rather than our last, exposure to our texts in a nearer approximation of their manuscript incarnations, *i.e.*, in diplomatic rather than critical editions. It would be fascinating to see the kinds of readings students and scholars would arrive at with a little less guidance than most modern editions offer.

While no two editors agree on the *desiderata* for a superior critical edition, most would include: word- and sentence-division; quotation-marks, and hence dialogue attribution; internal punctuation; modern letter-forms; expansion of abbreviations; and indication, if not correction, of 'patent' scribal errors. More interventionist editions may also include emendations or disambiguations of equivocal readings; normalized spelling; and corrections based on other manuscripts, if applicable. Also, extensive introductory material may offer such a vivid version of a work (a plot summary, study of the language and literary context, a glossary, etc.) that it predetermines or at least colors a first exposure to that work. Underlying all this auxiliary work is an urge to clarity which would build a bridge between the modern reader and her text, to bridge the gulf (great or small) of her ignorance, her non-medievalness. From another perspective, however, this bridge can be a barrier, or a simulacrum of the text we have in manuscript—a text that is already, in fact, a translation.

When we finally do get to the original artifact, our first reaction is usually severe manuscript shock. Most of us have experienced this sinking feeling: a text you know and love turns on you, becoming unexpectedly unreadable.

This sickening thud comes from the disjunction between the original artifact in front of us and the tidied, deciphered, and virtually pre-interpreted versions to which we have typically been exposed and have taken for granted. In fact, Siegfried Wenzel describes these pre-digested versions as no less than one of 'the necessities of life—intelligible texts and tools for their understanding' (17). Manuscript shock is not merely, or even primarily, a function of the script itself. It is also a function of letter forms, undivided words, blocks of unpunctuated text, spelling all over the map, and (perhaps most of all) no intervening modern hand offering annotations, guides, glossaries, or indices. Is it entirely a good thing for us to be so dramatically alienated, so dependently disconcerted, when we come face to face with our own objects of study? Imagine an art historian who never worked even from slides or photographs of painting and sculpture, but only from sketches of the originals done in modern style. How different then are the conscientious and variously competent readers of medieval languages from the reader who consults only a translation?

We have taken a curious path in our assessments of written languages which we can never (more's the pity) hear spoken, and whose regional, class, and gender variations we cannot fully fathom. Where we acknowledge wordplay, idiolect, dialect, deliberate error, variant usage, and inconsistency in modern speech (and to a lesser extent in writing and printing), we expect and extrapolate fixed rules, and consistent observation of them, in the medieval languages we study:

> a compelling case can be made for viewing the language of Old French texts as not yet a codified, written idiom; from the standpoint of its grammar and discourse structure, Old French is very much a spoken language, the communicative instrument of a fundamentally oral culture, adapted—sometimes better, sometimes worse—to writing. (Fleischman 21–23)

We speak confidently of scribal error, although a native speaker of any language can abuse grammar to highlight an attempt at humor, emphasis, or characterization. Onto a written language still emerging from a Latin matrix, we try to impose modern punctuation, word-division and sentence structure. The work of textual editors in regularizing medieval texts, formatting them so that the only difference left between them and a modern text is that of language, has been dazzling. But I believe that after medievalists have come to terms with initial language difference we need to keep going, working into the other differences—of format, variants, script, fluctuating word boundaries, initials and decorations, and so on. If the notions of meaning as inhering in expression, and of content as inhering in form, carry any validity, then the

differences between a hand-written and a standardized printed document *must* make a difference in the way we read.

I would move beyond even a Bédierist conservatism in text-editing to propose a presentation much closer to a diplomatic transcription: let the reader untangle, if she must, what the scribe did not find necessary to clarify. As Mary Speer summarizes the last hundred years of textual criticism, printed diplomatic editions or transcriptions are not seriously considered by either the conservative or interventionist sides of the debate. Both sides conclude that critical editions, in one form or another, are the optimal vehicle for medieval literature, and various attempts to approximate more closely the materiality of the medieval text are discounted in favor of a *translating* kind of editing activity. Karl Uitti, speaking for the pragmatic, traditional editorial praxis, finds 'diplomatic editions too sterile' (22). Bernard Cerquiglini, from a deconstructionist perspective, finds multiple-text editions unsatisfactory because they lack a theoretical focus and therefore merely represent texts without leading to understanding: '*il faut donner à voir, mais surtout à comprendre*' (112). Both sides discount a more nearly neutral, or at least less inflected, presentation of the text because it leaves the reader too rudderless. Both sides assume that the reader and the text are better off for the editor's intervening hand, that there are 'truths' to help the reader see and 'errors' into which, unaided, she will fall—and that the editor knows which these are. *Plus ça change.*

I do not pretend that a diplomatic transcription stands outside ideology or theory; both are writ large in its very presentation: minimalist, spare, untranslated. They would also, ideally, emerge in the editor's introduction, which would address these issues overtly. But the understanding of the text through which a reader worked her way might be somewhat more her own, and somewhat less the editor's. Only two considerations keep me from urging a mass conversion to manuscript facsimiles: first, facsimiles are themselves inadequate to the task of representing all the codicological and material evidence a manuscript provides; and second, they are prohibitively expensive. While the electronic media are busy solving the latter problem, they will not soon, if ever, solve the former.

I turn now to the specific question of misogyny and the modern editor in the *Roman de Silence*. I offer an example that may be relevant to other texts as well, rather than a text-specific issue of glossary definitions, word-divisions, punctuation or dialogue attributions. One of the primary reasons adduced for reading this text as misogynist are the 'virulent misogynistic tirades' (*e.g.*, 3901–24) which Simon Gaunt attributes to the author (210). Gaunt does not

distinguish between author and narrator; he attributes the conflicting impulses he notes in the text to an uncontrolled eruption of the culture's minority voice, here that of women, into the romance. I have argued, by contrast, that the occasional misogynist commentaries on a (in my view) patently non-misogynist tale are a function of a narratorial persona whom the author portrays as unsophisticated, blustering, even oafish (xxv–xxxii). From the outset the narrative voice establishes himself, in Jane Austen's mode, as a Mr. Collins rather than a Mr. Bennet, and it would be unwise to identify the earnest, leaden narrator with the deft and subtle author of this rich tale. How, then, could a less inflected edition bring us closer to appreciating the reticence of this romance on the issue of female subjugation? How does a normalized text obscure or camouflage the fundamental ambiguity of the author's position?—to put it more precisely, how does a normalized edition efface or alter the characterization of the narrator in the manuscript? In the manuscript the narrator is a *persona* like any other in the romance, though a conventional modern presentation silently suppresses that possibility. The insertion of the characters' speeches into quotation-marks endows those of the narrator with an authoritative weight by default. While it would seem absurd to enclose the narrator's pronouncements in quotation-marks, it would be quite a small step to remove quotation-marks from the speeches of the other figures. The narrator's remarks would be more visibly idiosyncratic if his default authority were removed; compare for example, the narrator's comments on love as hatred (5222–32) and Silence's (5710–15), or the narrator's comments on women's nature (3901–24) and those of the chancellor (5001–5022). The narrator's tendency to contradict himself—to say now that nature overpowers nurture, then the contrary—would also stand out more sharply as incoherent, ingenuous rambling (2295–2344 cf. 5165–5190).

Thorpe's introduction implies that the narrator and the author are one and the same, and indeed Heldris names himself at the beginning and at the end of his text, seeming to align 'Heldris' unequivocally with the 'I.' But the acceptance of this voice as *auctor* overlooks some key features of its presentation in the manuscript. Within Thorpe's edition, as indeed in most editions, no representation is made of the placement and content of illustrations; only the introduction discusses them. The opening of *Silence* has a conventional image of a writer-figure sharing the writing-space of the first eight lines. Since all of folio 88 recto and part of folio 88 verso contain the narrator's overwrought harangue, the opening portrait corresponds to and highlights this accidental self-revelation: accidental because, while the narrator means to instruct us about avarice, stinginess, and shame, he is actually telling us a great deal about himself. He is expostulatory, self-righteous, a little muddle-headed; his

exclamatory bombast makes him rather like an amateur actor who shouts instead of projecting, and exaggerates his every gesture. That miniature alone would have told us something, I think, about how to read the romance's opening. Later, as further miniatures allow us to make a comparison, we would perhaps have understood that the Heldris-character is on a very similar plane with the other figures represented in them (Cador and Eufemie, the seneschal and the nurse, Silence, Ebain, etc.) The critical distance on the narrator which manuscript illustrations afford, could and should be reflected in the edition as well.

Another perhaps more deliberate inflection of the narrator in Thorpe's edition, involves the various moves Thorpe made to rehabilitate his credibility and authority. The most overt and troublesome example is Thorpe's insertion into the glossary of definitions, whose primary purpose, I would argue, is to occlude the narrator's obsessive repetition of certain etyma. Speculating wildly for a moment, I imagine Thorpe's reasoning to be as follows: 1). Good authors in Old French romances vary their lexicon, and certainly they avoid rhymes *du même au même.* 2). This author harps at length on very few strings. 3). Either this author is incompetent, or he is using words differently than he seems. 4). I don't want my author of this neglected masterpiece to be incompetent, so I will figure out how these words might mean something other than they seem. Thus Thorpe invented glossary definitions which have thrown me and other medievalists off the track.[3] Lecoy in his 1978 corrections to Thorpe's edition laughed out of court some forty proposed definitions or word-forms, calling them, variously, 'monstrueux,' 'barbare,' 'extravagant,' 'fantaisiste.'[4] A glossary that reflects the extent to which the narrator repeats himself with minuscule variations—especially in the convoluted considerations on Nature and Nurture—would have helped clarify the extent to which the narrator may be intellectually inferior to the author, and the extent to which the 'misogyny' of this text lies with the narrator. But Thorpe, I think, wanted a loftier narrator, and hence elevated the tone of the narrator's remarks, inserting elegant and imaginary glosses for colloquial, proverbial expressions.[5] Other strategies for rehabilitating a sagging narrator (or poet) include suggesting lacunae in the text to account for proximate rhymes (3617–18; 3846–47).

The difficulty I have with modern editing practices, then, is that they bring often unintentional baggage to the meeting of the reader and the text. Thorpe, for example, wrote confidently:

> my aim has been to offer this unpublished romance to twentieth-century readers exactly as it is found in its unique copy, exactly that is as the scribe wrote it out in the thirteenth century. (61)

Yet, as I have suggested, Thorpe's edition is anything but that neutral mirror. I hope to have made it clear that I am not polemicizing with one poor dead defenseless editor; my objections are to the standard editing practice of the greater as well as the lesser lights of textual criticism. I hope I have also made it clear that I am not saying that *Silence* should have been edited in a way that supports my notion of an unsophisticated narrator; what I would like, of course, is simply one which would not have invested the narrator with the authority that a modern medievalist assumes for a narrator, and for misogyny for that matter, in medieval culture. There is material here for a long study that examines the repertory of roles available to women in nineteenth-century European bourgeois consciousness, the medieval texts canonized by the first generations of medievalists, and the logical structures by which the first generations of medievalists arrived at a homogeneously misogynist Middle Ages.

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NOTES

1 '...one appropriately "postmodern gesture" of the New Philology...is a return to the manuscripts, not merely as sources of editions, but as "the original texts"' (Fleischman,25).

2 Lorraine Stock's essay in this issue surveys the stances taken on this question.

3 Misery loves company: human nature obliges me to identify at least Bloch (1986) among those who were bamboozled into accepting, and making much of, 'jealous' and 'dispute' as definitions for *gloze.*

4 As a footnote to the cruelty with which medievalists treat each other, the editors of *Romania*, in which Lecoy's corrections appeared, regretted that Lewis Thorpe died before the issue appeared. For my money Thorpe was lucky, since the tone and volume of those corrections probably would have finished him off in short order.

5 'El a en tine que ferine' (2479) [he has something besides flour in his bucket], a deliberately proverbial expression of jocular tone, Thorpe (and, I'm afraid, I) translated as 'he has something in him other than masculine qualities.' Other examples include 6410ff.