

CHAPTER 4

Women readers and the politics of gender in Le Roman de Silence

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.

(Paul, 1 Timothy 2:12-13)

Sens de feme gist en taisir.

(*Le Roman de Silence*, [line 6398])

The repudiation of femininity can be nothing else than a biological fact, a part of the great riddle of sex. (Freud)¹

Near the end of Heldris de Cornuâlle's thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence*, Queen Eufeme takes Merlin to task for having spoken ill of womankind by accusing a married woman of having borne a child by a priest. “‘Merlin,’ dist la roïne Eufeme,/ ‘Com tu ses mesdire de feme! / Quels joies est de ton mesdire?’” (lines 6371-73) (“‘Merlin,’ said Queen Eufeme, ‘How well you know how to defame woman! What joy is there in your defaming?’”) Having her own reasons for fearing Merlin’s truth-revealing speech about women, she asks her husband, King Ebain, to kill the seer. The king’s answer is swift and unequivocal. Invoking simultaneously his duty as ruler and his rights as her husband, he tells her to be quiet and go to her room: woman’s sense consists in remaining silent.

“Tort avés, dame,” dist li rois.
“Se uns Escos u uns Irois
Me desist folie u savoir,
Se deüst il bien pais avoir
Chi devant moi. Ne sui jo sire?
Moi lasciés convenir et dire,

Faire mon bon et mon plasir.
 Sens de feme gist en taisir.
 Si m'aît Dex, si com jo pens,
 Uns muials puet conter lor sens,
 Car femes n'ont sens que mais un,
 C'est taisirs. Toltes l'ont commun,
 Se n'est par aventure alcune,
 Mais entre .m. nen a pas une
 Ki gregnor los n'eüst de taire
 Que de parler. Lasciés me faire,
 Et vos alés en vostre cambre.”

(lines 6391–407)

(“You are wrong, lady, said the king. If a Scotsman or an Irishman were to tell me truth or folly, he should be able to do so in peace here before me. Am I not lord? You must let me speak and do as I will, do my own good and pleasure. The sense [meaning/common sense] of a woman consists in being silent. God help me, as I think it, a mute man could tell what women mean, because women have only one meaning, and that is to be silent. They all are alike, unless by chance one is not, but in a thousand there will not be one who would not receive greater praise for remaining silent than for speaking up. Let me handle this, and go to your room.”)

If read out of context, this passage’s denial of woman’s right to speak, and its definition of her meaning as residing in silence, join it to the stock antifeminist definition of woman in Western culture. Devoid of intellectual qualities, empty of “*sens*,” biologically and spiritually inferior to man, woman is inherently unworthy of social or legal rights: she is banished from the affairs of men at court and relegated to her “*cambre*,” the lady’s domain. She has less right to speak than a foreign man speaking nonsense or than a man of such dubious origin as Merlin. Ebain’s obligations as lord and his rights as king and husband are coterminus with his debasement of female nature and his silencing of women’s speech.

Read within the complexities of the final revelation of *Le Roman de Silence*, however, Ebain’s misogynistic tirade becomes problematic. It loses the quality of a flat *topos* and becomes a passage charged with irony that signals the problem of woman’s “*sens*” in this romance. The surface irony is, of course, that Ebain’s delimitation of the “*sens*” of “*feme*” as residing in her

silence precedes the moment when the character Silence, who has been disguised heretofore as a man and remained silent about her sex, will reveal her "sens" as "feme."

At another level, Ebain's invocation of male authority to define women's *sens* signals his failure to have seen the truth about his wife (who has been conducting an adulterous affair with a man cross-dressed as a nun) and about Silence, that supposedly rare woman whose speech redounds to her credit. Ebain's misogyny thus ironizes how widely his attempt to define the nature of woman has missed the mark.

The most revealing irony for the critic lies not at the level of character, however, but at the level of narration. Until this point, the romance has transgressed traditional gender categories by recounting the adventures of a woman, Silence, who has cross-dressed as a knight to preserve her inheritance, and who has performed valiantly in combat. Silence's actions seem to disprove that a woman is limited by her nature. But Ebain's misogynistic outburst marks the end of gender instability in the romance. Eufeme is exposed as wicked for her wanton desires. She is drawn and quartered to death by horses, while Silence returns to her "natural" female role by marrying the king. The narrative's final fix on women is thus a double repudiation: Eufeme is destroyed for having expressed her desires; Silence is celebrated for having repressed her sexuality.

Far from being a cliché about female inferiority that is inessential to the text, Ebain's misogynistic eruption signals the questions of power, sexuality, and interpretation that are at stake in this romance. It underscores the connection between Silence's revelation of truth and Eufeme's silence. It reveals that the king's authority depends on the exclusion of women. Ebain's need to degrade Eufeme in order to rule highlights the imposed nature of his powers, which are based, as we have seen, on the strict separation of men (who are distinguished by national allegiance) from women (who are all alike).

But the king's reasoning contains a logical flaw and an empirical misapprehension. The tautology that a woman should be silent because her common sense consists in being silent contradicts the evidence that she is not, and that "Silence" (a

one-in-a-thousand exception) will have something to say. Instead of delimiting the “*sens*” of woman, instead of restricting the meaning that women may have, Ebain’s outburst invites readers to question the *nature de feme*.

Ebain’s misogynistic outburst prepares us for another remarkable utterance at the end of the romance, here voiced not by the king, but by the narrator. In the final lines (6684–706), Heldris de Cornuâlle appeals directly to the “good women” in his audience not to be angry with him for the way he “blamed” Eufeme: “Se j’ai jehi blasmee Eufeme/ Ne s’en doit irier bone feme” (lines 6695–96) (“If I have blamed Eufeme today/ a good (noble) woman ought not to be angry”). Heldris not only acknowledges the possible objections of women readers, he also flags his characterization of Eufeme as a problem. He makes us wonder what it is about Heldris’ “blaming” of Eufeme that is itself blamable. Is it the cruel way she has been punished? Is it the way Heldris has portrayed a female character as villainous? Or does Heldris’ culpability arise more broadly from the way he has defined “*nature de feme*” within the narrative?

Like Ebain’s antifeminist outburst, Heldris’ apology has the opposite effect from what the speaker originally intended. At the very moment that Heldris wishes to foreclose criticism and enjoin his women readers’ complicity, he instead invites interpretative scrutiny. Heldris’ apology sends the attentive reader back to the romance to consider the fate of the female characters appropriated to and suppressed by the dynastic plot. And there she finds an extended debate about female nature.

WOMEN’S RESPONSE : READING AGAINST MISOGYNY

Elles ne savent pas ce qu’elles disent, c’est toute la différence entre elles et moi. (Jacques Lacan)³

If Heldris’ and Ebain’s misogynistic outbursts are symptomatic of the impositions of a repressive gender order, then what kind of response do they elicit from women listeners and readers? I would like to suggest that such negative constructions of women provoke, whether willingly or not, a dialogue about gender issues, and may invite women’s critical resistance.

As a modern attempt to define “women” by belittling their authority, Lacan’s words in the passage cited above are as dismissive and offensive as Ebain’s antifeminist outburst. The speaker tries to foreclose any objections from women in his audience by denigrating in advance what women know. But if we consider the history of women readers’ reception of this pronouncement, we know that its effect has been quite the opposite. This antifeminist proposition and similar exclusionist remarks in the writings of Lacan and Freud (as in this chapter’s epigraph) have raised a storm of criticism, in particular from women readers.⁴ The effect of these passages for women readers has been less to bolster male authority than to mark a heady controversy about sexual identity in psychoanalysis and feminism.

A long history of women’s political and social emancipation separates Lacan’s female audience from that of Heldris de Cornuaille. We have no written record of thirteenth-century women writing against misogyny, as we do for twentieth-century critics. But Ebain’s and Heldris’ antifeminist outbursts may have also provoked negative reactions from readers. As we suggested in chapter 3, antifeminist diatribes and “outrageous” misogynistic statements only thinly mask the sexual tensions they attempt to cover up. In the Middle Ages, as in our own day, such eruptions could invite scrutiny of the tensions underlying the imposition of the gender hierarchy.

In proposing that we read misogynistic outbursts as marking a dialogue about gender roles within a specific context, I suggest reading against the surface strategy of antifeminism which attempts to displace the origins of its hatred toward impersonal, time-honored “authorities.”⁵ Such an approach goes beyond recognizing the internal contradiction and failure of misogynistic diatribes.⁶ It looks to the sexual tensions in the social context to find a controversy about gender issues in which women may have participated, even though their voices have been silenced.

A contextual, dialogic reading of antifeminist discourse in the Western Christian tradition reveals that specific eruptions are often the locus of controversy about women’s place in Western

society.⁷ Recent feminist research has begun to uncover the contested questions and the controversy that misogyny attempts to conceal. Biblical scholars, for example, have questioned whether the Creation story in Genesis imposes a gender hierarchy as forcefully as tradition would have it.⁸ It has been suggested that the text reveals the vestiges of an earlier sexual equality,⁹ and that Paul's misogynistic reading of Eve's transgression is a retrospective act of *misreading*.¹⁰ Scholars have revealed that the authorial voice of "Paul" emanates from a complex manuscript tradition involving probable scribal interpolations; the texts present a paradoxical portrait of woman as spiritually equal and temporally inferior. For Elaine Pagels, the Pauline letters' insistence on female subordination reflects a fear of female equality that may have existed within certain heretical sects.¹¹ For Jo Ann McNamara, the Pauline misogynistic vituperations reflect anxiety about the autonomy female virgins and widows had attained in late antiquity.¹² Antifeminist invectives by the early Church Fathers, Tertullian, Jerome, and John Chrysostom, similarly evidence controversy about women's participation in the Church and about the role of remarriage and widows.¹³ In all these periods, there is evidence of opposition to attempts to program women's subordination.

What is the contextual gender controversy surrounding romance antifeminism in the period of the *Roman de Silence*?¹⁴ As we have seen, the period from 1150–1300 witnessed a vigilant articulation of gender roles, an institutionalization of gender and class division, the exclusion of women from higher education, increasing restriction of women's roles in the family and Church, and legal controversy about women's autonomy.¹⁵ Within the nobility, women's central role as producer of male heirs made the female body a source of considerable anxiety, and female sexuality a force to be controlled. Most women's activities were restricted to home and family. Sex segregation became an integral component of the educational system as women were excluded from university education. The separation of young noble boys from their mothers for clerical training or apprenticeship in a higher court doubtless strengthened the bonding of young men.¹⁶ It must also have

fostered a sense of distance, if not resentment or hostility, with respect to the “chambres aux dames,” the sphere of the mother.

As didactic vernacular texts of the period articulate this sexual division, some reveal the moralist’s anxiety about its imposition. Etienne de Fougères’ *Le Livre des manières*, the first poem about the social estates and their respective functions in the vernacular and contemporaneous with the works of Chrétien and Hue de Rotelande, constructs an obvious hierarchy of gender.¹⁷ Etienne reviews the respective duties of the king, the clergy, knights, peasants, artisans, and merchants. He then categorizes women, not by class (only noblewomen are considered), but by their sexual morality. “Good” women and “bad” women are ranked in descending order, *after* the last male estate. Included among good women is the dedicatee, the countess of Hereford, who excels in feminine virtue; having lost her children, she can devote her maternal energies to the Church. The placement of noblewomen of all qualities after men of all classes evidences the fundamental gender division and hierarchical order of medieval society. The moral subdivision of women at the bottom of the social scale underscores the ambivalent role of female sexuality: “good” women, wives and mothers, are the supporting base; “bad” women, adulteresses and aborters, ruin the family line and could cause the entire edifice to crumble.

Yet a striking narrative excursus within the category of women reveals the narrator’s apprehension about the gender order. As Etienne describes wicked women, he becomes particularly virulent about women who bond together, lesbians who sidestep heterosexual reproduction altogether. They are described as “contre Nature” in a remarkable passage that details their unorthodox sexuality, and reveals the narrator’s dread of female sexuality that is sufficient unto itself, a “surplus” (lines 1095–124).¹⁸ Even as Etienne deplores it, he inscribes an example of insubordinate women – women whose desire for each other removes them from marital subjugation and its chain of social relations. Etienne’s anxiety reveals the extent to which the ideal social hierarchy imposes itself at the expense of female autonomy.

At that moment when an asymmetrical gender hierarchy is self-consciously articulated, along with a corresponding code of behavior, the strong opposition of masculine and feminine identities becomes the condition of social interaction. And precisely because the subordinate role of women, the conception of femininity as secondary, is not a biological given but a social and political construction, the discourse of misogyny must continually reimpose, in an attempt to naturalize, the notion of female inferiority. The very persistence of clerical antifeminism suggests that the argument was anything but a natural one. Misogyny erupts as the anxious symptom of political regulation and sexual division.

Masculine invectives against women, abundant in thirteenth-century secular and religious texts, generated oppositional voices for women. As an offspring of the antimarriage texts in Latin, a minor genre of poems, whose purpose was to satirize or praise women, developed in the thirteenth century.¹⁹ Interspersed among the fabliaux and preceding the poems of Rutebeuf in the renowned Bibliothèque nationale manuscript français 837, we find the *Blastenge des fames*, the *Evangile aux fames*, and the *Blasme des fames*, all brief poems which catalogue the nefarious influence of the female sex.²⁰ But intercalated between the *Blasme* and the *Evangile* is a poem in praise of women, *Le Bien des fames*. The compilation also includes Robert de Blois' *Le Chastoientement des dames*, a courtesy poem instructing women in proper feminine behavior, which we shall examine later, as well as prayers for the Virgin and a "salut d'amors" voiced by a female respondent. When we consider the number of short narratives contained in this manuscript in which the woman's role is problematic – the *Chatelaine de Vergi*, the *Mantel mautaillié*, and the *Lai d'Aristote*, among numerous other fabliaux – we can see how anxiety about female power and sexuality pervades the manuscript. The poem in defense of women may be a minor voice in this compilation, but it is a significant one. It serves to shape the dialogue about gender roles within the manuscript.

In the fourteenth century, one writer produced a "pro-woman" response to his own antifeminist performance. Jehan le

Fèvre, who translated the *Liber lamentationum Matheoluli* in 1371 or 1372, later characterized his enterprise as an “outrage” and defended himself against the criticism of his female listeners by protesting that he was “only translating.”²¹ He wrote a refutation of the *Lamentations*, *Le Livre de leesce* (1373?) in defense of women and prefaced it with an apology:

Mes dames, je requier mercy.
A vous me vueil excuser cy
De ce que sans vostre licence
J'ai parlé de la grant dissence
Et des tourmens de mariage.
Se j'ay mesdit par mon outrage,
Je puis bien dire sans flater
Que je n'ay fait que translater
Ce que j'ay en latin trouvé;
Assés pourra estre prouvé
Ou livre de Matheolule.
Si me semble que femme nulle
Ne personne qui soit en vie
N'en doit sur moy avoir envie.
Dont, se je m'en suy entremis,
Je suppli qu'il me soit remis
Et pardonné par vostre grace.
Car je suy tout prest que je face
Un livre pour moy excuser;
Ne le me vuellies refuser. (lines 1–23)

(My ladies, I seek mercy. I want to excuse myself here toward you because without your permission I have spoken of the great discord and torments of marriage. If I have offended by my extreme speech I can certainly say without falsehood that I have done nothing other than translate what I found in Latin. This can well be proved in the book of Matheolus. It seems that no woman or person alive ought to be displeased with me. If I have undertaken this, I beg that I be forgiven and pardoned. For I am entirely prepared to write a book to make amends; please do not deny me this opportunity.)

By acknowledging that some women may have been distressed by the antifeminist diatribe of the *Lamentations*, Jehan's defensiveness suggests that women could indeed criticize the attempt to denigrate them. When Christine de Pizan

outspokenly refuted medieval misogyny in the late fourteenth century, she was following in the wake of a marginalized thirteenth- and fourteenth-century profeminist tradition. The rare but persistent textual voices “in defense of ladies” that counter medieval misogyny may well be traces of a more vocal *oral* resistance by some medieval women to their cultural delimitation. The dialogue about woman’s subordination that misogynistic discourse attempts to silence erupts intermittently, as a powerful signal of the precariousness of the antifeminist stance.

The legacy of the “*débat des femmes*” has been continual controversy over the origins of male dominance and the nature of sexual identity. From conflicting perspectives that emphasize the biological body, the unconscious, social context, or the political arena, theorists in anthropology, psychology, and feminist history and literary criticism have grappled with explaining and dismantling the asymmetrical gender hierarchy.²² Whether the explanation turns on the castration complex, on originary male violence against women, on social inferiorization, or on male appropriation of women as the first form of property, these theories have accompanied a major controversy about and transformation of women’s roles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Let us sum up the two, complementary hypotheses of our dialogic reading of misogyny. The first is that antifeminism flags its speaker’s anxiety about the imposition of gender order. The second is that arguments against women and in favor of women’s “subordination” inscribe the persistent insubordination of at least some historical women and invite women’s resistance.

At this point a dilemma arises for the feminist critic. Is the attempt to read women’s response to misogyny an “essentialist” strategy? Does a search for the “female reader” reimpose the male/female division of phallogocentric culture? Post-modern feminists have cautioned that this might be so. Denise Riley, among others, has shown that the category of “women” not only perpetuates the very political system that feminists would want to escape, but also precludes other differences – of race, class, ethnic origin, personal history, and so on – between

women.²³ For Judith Butler, the championing of women's difference and the search for a specifically female subject reify a category of woman that plays into the binary oppositions of a misogynistic gender system.²⁴ Adapting Foucault to a feminist analysis of gender, Butler argues that our very conceptions of male and female sex as purely pre-social and of nature versus culture are illusions that mask the political matrix that produces sexuality.²⁵

Yet both Butler and Riley write as female feminist critics within a particular historical moment. Neither would call for an end to political action by men and women who would resist their cultural delimitation, nor would they maintain that the political stakes for men and women are identical. To deny that women in the past might have resisted their social and cultural appropriation would be to deny the possibility of political change, both in the past and the future. To refuse to consider how women may have read *Silence* would be to accede to the silence Heldris enjoins upon his female audience.

Post-modern feminism emphasizes that our ideas about what is innate and natural about sex are inevitably embedded within a system of political repression. A focus on the problem of the female audience of courtly romance can reveal clearly this system's structure. With this in mind, let us return to *Le Roman de Silence* to show how it inscribes the repressive politics of gender and to consider the dilemma its misogyny creates for the female reader.

LE ROMAN DE SILENCE: GENDER POLITICS AND THE NATURE OF "WOMAN"

If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing. (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 32)

For its profound analysis of the political regulation of gender, Heldris' narrative deserves a prominent place in the post-modern genealogy of "gender trouble." Given the recent spate of articles on the romance, it can no longer be considered

virtually unknown.²⁶ The English translation will doubtless lure more readers to this intriguing text.²⁷ Which is not to say that this romance about a woman who cross-dresses as a man to preserve her father's inheritance has generated consensus about the text's construction of gender. On the contrary, almost as remarkable as the complexities of the medieval text are the divergent views of modern readers, for whom *Silence* takes on many different meanings.

From one perspective, the romance is primarily an exploration of the *ambiguity* and *indeterminacy* of language and of gender, whether that ambiguity is seen in terms of the author's relationship to writing, as it is for Howard Bloch, or in terms of the reader's and critic's relationship to *Silence*, as it is for Peter Allen.²⁸ From another perspective, the text is political, although its underlying agenda has been described by terms as various as "proto-feminist" and "misogynist."²⁹ Allen makes an eloquent plea for allowing the text's ambiguities to continue to resonate, since "[to] remove ambiguity from this text means to tear it, to falsify it, to lose its *essence*" (emphasis mine).³⁰ Although I agree with him that much of the romance is intriguingly ambiguous, I wonder precisely about the political import of Heldris' ambiguity.

Others have argued that Heldris ultimately reimposes the status quo of gender ideology on his heroine and her world.³¹ Furthermore, as Simon Gaunt has shown, Heldris reveals his own anxieties in the process.³² In my view, which I shall demonstrate through a reading of *nature de feme* in *Silence*, Heldris reinforces asymmetrical power relationships at the expense of female sexual autonomy. But even as he reimposes stable categories of gender, he opens a space for women's resistance to their cultural construction. Precisely because Heldris reveals so clearly the repressive political matrix of gender, the observant reader might glimpse a chink in the narrator's antifeminist armor.

At the level of plot, the *Roman de Silence* seems to effect not a repudiation of woman, but the very opposite: her moral and social vindication. The intrigue turns on King Ebain's eventual revocation of his interdiction of a woman's right to inherit. By

vastly expanding its source's account of the transvestite's heroic accomplishments and by highlighting her virtue, *Silence* would appear to argue for woman's natural "droiture." It might seem that the romance, which centers the greater part of the narrative on an inversion of gender relationships, would somehow free up gender distinctions, exposing gender roles as artificial constructs that thwart natural abilities. But instead, in each section of the nearly six thousand lines that lead up to the reworking of his source, Heldris creates a narrative that repudiates femininity.

Heldris' antifeminist stance becomes more pronounced as the romance unfolds. In the Prologue, the narrator is generally misanthropic rather than misogynistic. He asks that his poems be burnt rather than disseminated to those who do not appreciate the true value of a story, who do not reward clerks with generosity (lines 3–22). He inveighs against avaricious people of all sorts who have blocked the exchange of goods and services (lines 31–42). He considers the amassing of worldly goods more contemptible than heaping up excrement (lines 46–51). He seems to ascribe to this acerbic commentary, this *tençon*, a therapeutic function, as if in arguing first he were purging himself of invective (lines 77–82). At the end of the Prologue, Heldris announces that he wishes to begin his rhyme "sans noise faire et sans tenchier" (line 106) ("without quarrel and without argument").

Heldris' bitterness resurfaces frequently in the narrative that follows,³³ however, and his attacks focus increasingly on women. As it turns out, an antifeminist moral structures the entire narrative. As Thorpe has noted, this romance is an expansion into a full-length romance of a brief episode in the *Estoire de Merlin* that tells about the transvestite Grisandole's capture of Merlin and the revelation of the empress of Rome's adultery.³⁴ Heldris has retained and emphasized the episode's moral, which in the *Estoire* is voiced by Merlin, who tells the king that although women are by nature weakened by lust, there are good ones who are worthy of queenship:³⁵

"Car feme est de tel nature ke quant ele a le millor segnor de tot le monde si quide ele avoir le pior. & ce lor uient de la grant fragilite ki est en aus. Mais por chou ne soies mie courreichies car il en ia asses de

uraie el monde. Et se tu as este deceus de la toie tu auras encore tele qui bien sera digne destre empereis et de rechevoir si haut empire comme cestui.”
(II, 289)

(For woman is of such nature that when she has the best lord [husband] in the world she thinks she has the worst; this comes to women from the great weakness they have in them. But do not be angry because of this, because there are many true ones [i.e. faithful women] in the world. If you have been deceived by your wife, you will still have another one who will be worthy to be empress and to receive such an empire as yours.)

In *Silence*, this assessment of woman's essentially corrupt nature occurs in the Epilogue. It is expressed not by Merlin, but by the narrator, who informs his readers that it is easier for a woman to be wicked than good, which is against her “nature” (lines 6688–91). Heldris deploys this antifeminist dictum as a framing device for the narrative, which precedes his appeal to the “good” female reader. Events within the narrative can be construed as preparing for and justifying this ultimate misogynistic repudiation. In each of the romance's three parts, Heldris shows how gender relations are constructed within a repressive political regime.³⁶

Part 1 recounts the events that lead to the birth of a daughter to Count Cador and Eufemie. Heldris portrays a world in which desire is secondary to political expediency, to the rule of the tyrannical Ebain, king of England. The king's authority is particularly harsh. Opponents to his rule are locked up in prison without trial for the rest of their lives (lines 112–18). The royal marriage is forged in war. Ebain takes his wife and queen, Eufeme, as a prize from a ruler who is desperate to appease his enemy. Although Ebain claims he has been driven by love for this woman, Eufeme is in fact bestowed upon Ebain by her father, King Bege of Norway, as a war prize in a political exchange (179–85). After two barons are killed trying to defend the territorial claims of their wives, who as twin sisters dispute their right to inherit as eldest, King Ebain imposes an interdiction against all women inheriting. Although his intention is to foster peace in the realm, his ruling seems an arbitrary discrimination against women. (Had the twins been

boys, they might have been involved in a similar dispute themselves.)

The love between Count Cador and Eufemie, daughter of the count of Cornwall, seems to offer a striking contrast to events within this repressive regime. Heldris recounts how the two young people love each other so deeply that they are unable to express their desire for some time; when they do, their comically indirect speech ends in an embrace that tells more than words could reveal (lines 1090–146). The entire episode allows the narrator to engage in much Ovidian love casuistry and rhetorical word play (see lines 640–1196).³⁷ The narrative's exploration of reciprocal romantic passion is relatively brief, however. Once the couple decide to marry, the romance's focus shifts back to the political framework. From the perspective of King Ebain, who does not initially realize that the couple are in love, Cador's and Eufemie's marriage is a political expediency. Heldris describes at length how the king enlists the aid of the wily count of Chester to "convince" the willing couple to marry. Ebain bestows money and the inheritance of the duchy of Cornwall on Cador as a wedding gift and reward for his service. Because Eufemie is the sole heir to Cornwall, Ebain's gift of Cornwall to Cador relieves the king of having to confront the consequence of his ruling on inheritance by women.³⁸ The narrative's focus has shifted rather quickly from innocent love to the political consequences of marriage – the couple's need to produce a male heir. Mutual desire has been artfully subsumed to, and apparently controlled by, Ebain's rule.

In part 2, the central and major portion of the romance, Heldris relates Silence's birth, her parents' decision to disguise her as a boy, and her subsequent education and cultural and chivalric accomplishments. Cloaking the girl's sexuality in the guise of a knight and veiling his own fiction as an allegorical discussion between Nature and Nurture, Heldris examines the *sens* of female nature. As the narrator's philosophical investigation follows Silence's adventures as a man, it covers up a female body. As we shall see, the romance's presentation of *nature de feme* involves the repression of female sexuality.

Heldris calls attention to the paradoxical mix of covering and

uncovering/disguise and truth in an authorial intervention that functions as a second Prologue (lines 1655–669), which precedes Silence's birth. Here Heldris, who claims that his story has been translated from the Latin (although his audience has never heard it in a “livre” (“book”]), admits that he will mix “mençonge” (“lie”) with “le voir” (“truth”) to improve the tale as necessary (lines 1663–65). He further insists that he will do nothing to make his story worse and that he will not suppress anything that might be true: “Car la verté ne doi taisir” (line 1669) (“For I must not be silent about the truth”). Heldris’ allusion to the lie of fiction-making accentuates the artifice of the tale that will follow. The narrator’s obligation not to hide the “verté” shapes a narrative wherein a woman’s “nature” and “verté” are hidden and covered. The narrator’s pledge to tell the truth – “Car la verté ne doi taisir” – contrasts strikingly with Ebain’s definition of women as silent: “Sens de feme gist en taisir” (line 6398).

Although Cador first thinks that his daughter is so beautiful that her sex is of little importance to him, he soon desires to cover up her sexual difference:

Se Deux en done l'aventure
Qu'il en puist faire coverture,
Donques a il quanque il desire. (lines 2033–35)

(If God gives him the chance to be able to cover up [her sex], then he would have everything he desires.)

With considerable ingenuity, Cador and Eufemie manage to baptize the child as a boy, Silentius. Wrapping the baby carefully in a protective cloth, so that “sa nature” (2090) will not be revealed, they pretend that he is ill and must be baptized quickly – and with his clothes on – before he dies! Enlisted by Cador in the plan to educate Silence in isolation, the seneschal promises “Qu'il celeroit la verité/ Por rendre a l'enfant l'ireté” (lines 2199–200) (“That he would conceal the truth in order to return the inheritance to the child”). The secret house Silence inhabits is tightly secured by “.ii. bones fermeüres,/ .ii. vierals, et fors serreüres” (lines 2231–32) (“two good latches, two bars, and strong locks”). Throughout this section of the poem, the

motifs of covering, of disguising, and of deceiving are seen not as devices that allow Silence to reveal her true capabilities as a woman (as they might be in a work that used cross-dressing to celebrate female capability), but as unnatural artifices that hide “sa vraie nature.” Silence as a transvestite is denatured, and Nature predicts that she cannot work against her true condition for long:

“Par Deu! Par Deu! or monte bien!
Il n'a en tierre nule rien,
Ki par nature ait a durer,
Ki puist al loing desnaturer.” (2269–72)

(“My God! My God! This is a fine state of affairs. There is nothing on earth that endures by nature that is able to go against nature for long.”)

The narrative problem of the “coverture” of Silence’s “nature” catalyzes the central narrative investigation of the poem: the question of “nature de feme.” That question is explored in the poem’s most elaborate fictional cover, the allegorical debate between Nature and Noreture (lines 2257–358; 2416–38; 2497–688; 5996–6089).³⁹ As Heldris sets up the opposition, it is ostensibly a conflict between biological destiny, or what the editor translates as Heredity (“Nature”), and culturally imposed social roles or Environment (“Noreture”). “Nature,” however, turns out to have multiple meanings, ranging from biological sex (the female “nature” that Silence hides), to moral temperament (one’s personal “nature”), to class-bound character (what we might translate as the good breeding that accompanies noble birth), to the status quo of gender roles (the “natural” domain of women, as determined by social conventions and political order). In other words (from a modern critical perspective), “nature” is the justification of how “culture” constructs women. The Nature/Noreture conflict opposes not sex to gender, but two models of gender to each other; one is “natural” because it is socially acceptable, and one is unnatural because it goes against the grain.

Far from asserting Silence’s claim that valorous achievements as a knight are proof of what women could do if only they were

given the chance, Heldris makes it clear that her disguise is an unnatural aberration and that what good she *does* achieve is by virtue of her good character, exceptional for her sex, which seems indirectly linked to her noble upbringing. Her role as a man is unnatural and illegitimate. Heldris articulates his position repeatedly in authorial interventions, siding with Nature throughout the central part of the poem. For example, just after Nature declares that nothing can remain in a “denatured state,” meaning that Silence will not be able to maintain her cover for long, the narrator emphatically agrees:

Segnor, par Deu, Nature a droit!
Car nus hom tel pooir n'aroit
Qu'il peüst vaintre et engignier
Nature al loig, ne forlignier. (lines 2295–98)

(My lords, in God's name, Nature is right. For no one [man] will have the power to vanquish, trick, and deceive Nature for very long.)

As Silence reaches puberty, her suppression of female identity is described as a “moult grant abstinence” (line 2674) causing great torment. She struggles with what her “cuer” and her “voloir” tell her to do, and what she must do to please her father. As it turns out, these biological urges (“nature”) are inseparable from woman’s socially prescribed roles. When Nature angrily reappears to remind Silence of her femininity, female “nature” (“sex”) corresponds to a proper female “nature” whose “us” (“custom”) it is a perversion to breach. As Nature puts it, Woman’s place is in the “cambre”: she entreats Silence to stop hunting and to get back to her sewing:

“Tu me fais, certes, grant laidure
Quant tu maintiens tel noreture.
Ne dois pas en bos converser,
Lancier, ne traire, ne berser.
Tol toi de chi!” cho dist Nature.
“Va en la cambre a la costure,
Cho violt de nature li us.” (lines 2523–29)

(“You do a very wicked thing against me, when you maintain such an upbringing. You ought not to be riding through the woods, throwing lances, drawing, and hunting with a bow and arrow. Get out of here!”)

Nature said to her. "Go to the sewing room. That is what the custom of nature wants.")

Swayed by Nature's argument, Silence at first agrees to return to the "cambre." She ought not to engage in such wild behavior for the sake of her fief or inheritance:

Aler en violt a la costure
Si com li a rové Nature,
Car por fief, ne por iretage
Ne doit mener us si salvage.

(lines 2543–46)

(He wanted to go to the sewing room, just as Nature commanded, Because neither for fief nor for heritage ought one to lead such an uncivilized life.)

But, just as Silence is about to embrace her essentially female nature by returning to the "cambres," Reason intrudes to remind her of the superiority of life as a man: revelation of Silence's female "nature" would mean the loss of horse, cart, and honor at court. Agreeing with Reason, Silence ponders the inferiority of female customs and status. She recalls the games that went on in the "cambres" that she has heard of, and that men's lot in life is better than women's:

Donques li prent a sovenir
Des jus c'on siolt es cambres faire
Dont a oī sovent retraire,
Et poise dont en son corage
Tolt l'us de feme a son usage,
Et voit que miols valt li us d'ome
Que l'us de feme, c'est la some.

(lines 2632–38)

(Then he remembered the games that are usually played in the rooms, which he had often heard described, and he weighed in his heart all the customs/existence of women against his ways, and he saw that men's existence was better than women's, that's the end of it.)

Why should s/he opt for life at the bottom ("desos") when he can enjoy life at the top ("deseure")?

"Voire," fait il, "a la male eure
Irai desos, quant sui deseure.
Deseure sui, s'irai desos.
Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.
Nel sui, par foi, ains sui honis

Quant as femes voel estre onis.
 Gel pensai por moi aäsier.
 Trop dure boche ai por baisier
 Et trop rois bras por acoler.
 On me poroit tost afoler
 Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,
 Car vallés sui et nient mescine.
 Ne voel perdre ma grant honor
 Ne la voel cangier a menor.
 Ne voel mon pere desmentir,
 Ainz me doinst Dex la mort sentir.
 Por quanque puet faire Nature
 Ja n'en ferai descoverture."

(lines 2639–56)

("Truly," he said, "I would be unfortunate to go below when I am now on top. I am on the top now, and I would be below. Now I am valiant and noble. But I would not be, in faith, instead I would be disgraced if I wanted to live in shame with women. I thought of it to ease my life. My mouth is too hard to kiss and my arms are too rough to embrace. One could soon make a fool of me in the game that they do under the covers, because I am a boy and not a girl. I do not want to lose my great honor, I do not want to change it for less. I do not want to betray my father, I would rather that God gave me death. Whatever Nature may do, I will not uncover/disclose myself.")

Silence's speech is of course ironic because she can only choose to live at the top as a man by "coverture." It is also ironic that Heldris uses a character grounded as female to speak out against the feminine condition. Silence does not point up the essential injustice of her predicament, and thereby promote womanhood and equality, but rather agrees with the traditional devaluation of the subordinate sphere of the "cambres des dames" in the natural order. When Silence worries about her future and decides to learn a skill useful for possible ladyhood (should women regain the right to inherit property, lines 2831–33), she takes up singing, an activity suitable for women that she could continue in the "cambres" if necessary (lines 2865–66). Even as Heldris uses the ambiguous Silence to explore gender reversal, he deploys Nature to proclaim women's role as subordinate.

Another female figure emerges in the middle of this central section – Queen Eufeme. She will come to dominate the events

that propel the romance to its disclosure scene in part 3. Eufeme first attempts to seduce Silence in the middle of this section, (lines 3683–4370), and again in the beginning of the last section, (lines 5186–646). The narrator has been a proponent of the “natural” order throughout the Nature/Noreture debate. With Eufeme’s appearance, his interventions become increasingly misogynistic condemnations of woman’s “nature.” As Silence’s sexuality is repressed (as the “good woman” emerges), so Eufeme’s sexuality rises wildly and destructively to the surface.⁴⁰ She lures Silence (disguised as a musician at Ebain’s court) into her room, begs her for kisses, and when Silence hesitates, she offers her body brazenly to a person she imagines to be a lowly courtier (lines 3782–84). In Eufeme (whose name makes her a double for the apparently opposite “good” Eufemie) desire is wildly overdetermined “desmesurance” (line 3918). She plays the role of a vamp who exhibits her body to the valet, hoping to excite him: “Veés quels bras et quel costés!” (line 3799) (“Look at these arms and these sides!”). When Silence refuses her, Eufeme’s love turns to hatred and, rebuffed a second time, she plans to destroy “him”: she uses subterfuge to send a letter to the king of France ordering Silence’s death, a plot that fails only after lengthy political discussion.

If Eufemie and Silence represent the unrepresentability of female sexuality within male discourse, Eufeme caricatures it as fundamentally evil. She is garrulous about her desire, malicious towards its object, and wily. Her characterization is accompanied by misogynistic outbursts that define woman as morally inferior and vile. Describing Eufeme’s sudden hatred of the valet who spurns her, the narrator elaborates upon the theme “Car feme n’est mie laniere/ D’amor cangier en tel maniere” (lines 3899–900) (“For woman is not slow/ to change her affections in such a manner”), and expounds at length upon woman’s fickleness and the “demesure” [“immoderation”] of her hatred (see lines 3899–924).

Eufeme’s destructive passion and wicked action become the prime force of the narrative. Her behavior establishes the norm

for what “woman” is, as confirmed by both the narrator’s and the characters’ antifeminist sallies. To cite another example, when the court scribe (who is imprisoned because Ebain has blamed him for writing the letter penned by Eufeme ordering Silence’s death) realizes that he has been tricked by the queen, he muses bitterly on female “engin”:

“Mais nus hom ne puet feme ataindre
 Quant el se violt covrir et faindre.
 Feme vait par son bel samblant
 Le sens del siecle tot enblant.
 Sens d’ome sage poi ataint
 Por feme ataindre qui se faint.
 ... Car feme nen est pas laniere
 D’engiens trover en tel maniere.
 Engignose est por home nuire
 Plus que por un grant bien estruire.” (lines 5001–16)

(“But no man can touch a woman when she wants to conceal herself and lie. Woman by her beautiful seeming robs the world of its sense. The wisdom of a wise man is little match for proving the guilt of a woman who is false ... For woman is not slow to find tricks in such a way. She is more ingenious about ways to destroy man than to do him good.”)

As the narrative moves to reveal Silence’s “truth” as a woman, it simultaneously advances a definition of female nature as subordinate and evil. The narrator’s uncovering of Silence as an extraordinarily virtuous woman accompanies his representation of Eufeme as naturally wicked. Although Silence has been a complex and ambiguous figure who has defied the “natural” order, her deviation is circumscribed within a political order that ultimately corrects and contains it.

We return now to the very beginning of our investigation of misogyny, to Ebain’s outburst against the queen, with which we began this chapter. Ebain silences his wife and sends her to her “cambres,” which the romance has already defined as the subordinate domain of women. After Merlin unmasks the artifice of sexual reversal, Silence’s true “nature” is revealed, and for the love of her the king returns their inheritance rights to all women. His action is less an example of justice granted to

women who have deserved it all along, than an arbitrary exercise of royal prerogative to recognize that apparently exceptional element, the virtuous woman. The king explains the precious and uncommon nature of Silence's faith:

“Silence, moult estes loials.
Miols vaut certes ta loialtés
Que ne face ma roialtés.
Il n'est si preciose gemme,
Ne tels tresors com bone feme.
Nus hom ne poroit esproisier
Fem qui n'a soig de boisier.” (lines 6630–36)

(“Silence, you are very loyal. Surely your loyalty is worth more than my royalty. There is no gem or treasure so precious as a good woman/wife. No man could esteem enough a woman who has no care to deceive.”)

Silence regards his action as a “gent don” whose bestowal marks the giver's royal agency: “Chi a gent don, Dex le vos mire,/ Et al fait pert quels est li sire” (lines 6645–46) (“This is a noble gift; may God reward you for it. And in this act it is apparent who is the lord”).

Heldris de Cornuaille ultimately creates a “bone feme” as one whose “loialtés” to the patriarchal and royal order have entailed the repression of her sexuality (for her father's birthright) and her assimilation of a male chivalric ethic. He rewards her with a royal marriage, to which Silence seems to acquiesce willingly. But Silence's rise in social rank accompanies a loss of gender status and privilege. By becoming queen, she accedes to a role that she has earlier denounced, and presumably ceases to engage in the public activities through which she proved her virtue. Concomitantly, the elevation of the “bone feme” entails the destruction of the “malvaise”: Eufeme, the embodiment of sexuality, is disembodied, drawn and quartered by horses:

Si com li rois le commanda
I fu la none donc deffaite,
Et la dame a chevals detraite.
Li rois en a fait grant justice.
Or est la roïne as las prise.
Dont el volt Silence lachier. (lines 6654–59)

(Just as the king commanded it, the nun was destroyed and the lady was drawn by horses. The king did a great justice by that: now the queen is captured in the trap by which she wanted to catch Silence.)

Such is the text's final inscription of women and justice: "Nus hom qui fust ne plainst Eufeme" (line 6663) "No man felt sorry for Eufeme," says the narrator. But might a woman?

SILENCE AND THE "GOOD" WOMAN READER

Let us now return to the frame of *Le Roman de Silence*. In the final episode, the narrator has concluded the events of his story in such a way that female virtue is richly rewarded and female villainy cruelly punished. In the Epilogue, he turns to his female audience and asks for their indulgence in the way he has represented the "good" and "bad" women of the romance:

Maistre Heldris dist chi endroit
 C'on doit plus bone feme amer
 Que hair malvaise u blasmer.
 Si mosterroie bien raison,
 Car feme a menor oquoison
 Por que ele ait le liu ne l'aise
 De l'estre bone que malvaise,
 S'ele ouevre bien contre nature.
 Bien mosterroie par droiture
 C'on en doit faire gregnor plait
 Que de celi qui le mal fait.
 Se j'ai jehi blasmee Eufeme
 Ne s'en doit irier bone feme.
 Se j'ai Eufeme moult blasmee
 Jo ai Silence plus loëe.
 Ne s'en doit irier bone fame,
 Ne sor li prendre altrui blasme,
 Mais efforcier plus de bien faire.
 Chi voel a fin mon conte traire.

(lines 6684–702)

(Master Heldris says here that one ought to love a good woman more than one hates or blames a bad one. And I will show you why, because a woman has less opportunity to have the place or occasion to be good than bad, if she works well against her nature. I will show rightly that one must make a better case for her than for the one who does evil. If

I have blamed Eufeme today, no good woman ought to be angry. If I have blamed Eufeme a great deal, I have praised Silence more. The good woman ought not to be angry, nor take another's blame herself, but she should strive more to do good. With that I want to draw my tale to an end.)

The effect of Heldris' appeal to the "bone feme" in his audience is complex. Although his only previous reference to the gender of his listeners has been an address to "segnors" (line 1798), he singles out women here as potential critics of his work. Furthermore, his repetition of "blasmee Eufeme" and "Eufeme moult blasmee" in the subordinate clause of two successive couplets underscores his anxiety about what he rightly understands to be the source of the problem: his harsh treatment of the wicked Queen Eufeme. Although we are told that the king performs a "grant justice" when he has her dragged to death by horses (line 6656), the narrator is clearly concerned that his portrait of the wanton woman may cause offense.

Heldris' defense that his lavish praise of Silence compensates for his destruction of the queen accentuates the misogyny of the romance's purported "moral." For the dictum with which the Epilogue begins – that a good woman is more praiseworthy than a bad one is hateful ("on doit plus bone feme amer/ Que haīr malvaise u blasmer") – rests on the assumption of woman's fundamental inferiority. Silence's virtue is all the more remarkable because it is so exceptional, going against the nature of woman to be "malvaise," like Eufeme. Ultimately, then, the narrator's repeated appeal to the "bone feme" not to be angry with him, but to force herself ("efforcier") to do good further implicates his authority in defining women as inherently weak.

It is significant that the two misogynistic outbursts at the end of *Le Roman de Silence* are voiced by the king and the author, the "authorities" of the political and textual order. Reading them on the surface, the cumulative lesson of these two antifeminist speeches to women would seem to be that women should repress their sexual desires, embrace their traditional role, and be silent. But these passages fail to define women even as they attempt to do so: they point up the discrepancy between the textual and political containment of "woman" and the actions of the

heroine. Silence is not wrong to speak, for her words reveal the truth. Her exemplary deeds as knight belie the discourse of women's inferiority. Her success in adopting a man's role challenges the notion that gender is fixed and immutable. Ebain's outburst and the narrator's apology accentuate the contradictions that pervade the romance's gender structure.⁴¹ Paradoxically, these narrative repudiations of femininity invite a critical analysis of the sexual and political tensions that underlie the romance's investigation of *nature de feme*.

Whether or not Heldris' narrator is "misogynist" or "proto-feminist" remains an unanswerable question that will no doubt continue to be debated by modern critics. Indeed, the effect of *Silence*'s final apology is precisely to raise such questions about the romance's definition of "woman." In the end, whether intentionally or not, Heldris problematizes easy gender identification for women readers. To become the "good" woman Heldris desires is to accept his definition of women's condition and essence as inferior. To side with the "bad" woman, Eufeme, if that were desirable, is to give no less credence to the strict male/female division. Finally, to remain *silent* on the question, to overlook the problem of female nature, is to acquiesce, like the heroine, to the status quo.

We have taken the antifeminist outbursts in *Silence* as a sign of clerical anxiety about the imposition of a repressive order of sexually determined identities. *Silence*'s "truth" about *nature de feme* – a truth that Heldris' text reveals despite its elaborate allegorical cover – is that woman's "nature" is created by the collusion of textual and political authority. Heldris' appeal to the *bone feme* not to be angered by his treatment of Eufeme seems to allude to and invite some readers' resistance. The reader who questions the construction of gender in *Silence* might begin to resist women's textual and political appropriation.

This chapter has traced the inscription of misogynistic outbursts in a romance where the discourse against women accompanies a remarkable exploration of gender and power. *Le Roman de Silence* experiments with reversing the hierarchy of the sexes, but it concludes with a repudiation of a female character even more brutal than those found in *Ipomedon*, *Le Chevalier à*

l'épée, or *La Vengeance Raguidel*. If Hue de Rotelande's narrator taunts his women readers in the *Ipomedon* Epilogue, Heldris' narrator takes an opposite tack and apologizes to them. By so doing, Heldris encourages the debate about Nature and Noreture to continue among readers beyond the frame of his tale.

Now that we have considered the female reader's position with respect to romances that blame women, let us turn to romances in which women are praised. In the next chapter, we shall examine four romances that glorify feminine virtue as the mainstay of chivalric society. The romances of the *cycle de la gageure* espouse an ideal of femininity that might well lure the female reader into acceptance of courtly ideology. Although their thematic opposition to the antifeminist romances seems obvious, their import for women readers is not necessarily more salutary. As we shall see, the virtuous female character is appropriated within the plot of chivalric honor. The reader who would identify with her becomes complicitous with an idealized concept of femininity, one that puts female sexuality at the service of aristocratic lineage.