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Lesbian Desire in the Old French *Roman de Silence*

KATHLEEN M. BLUMREICH

Eufemie, representative of 'natural' heterosexuality, is praised and rewarded for her behaviors. Eufeme, the embodiment of 'unnatural' lesbian desire, is executed for her heretical deviancy. (KMB)

Since Lewis Thorpe's republication of the *Roman de Silence* in 1972, many scholars have explored the complex philosophical, ethical, social, and moral issues articulated through the speech and behavior of the poem's characters. Given the importance of the nature–nurture debate to the text, as well as the fact that the protagonist is a female transvestite, it is not surprising that readers have been led to ask: What informs Heldris's attitude toward gender and gender roles? Is gender-identity the function of nature or of nurture? What constitutes 'natural' activity according to one's sex? And ultimately, what consequences result when a character's behaviors do not conform to thirteenth-century norms and values?[1]

Silence's cross-dressing and consequent asexuality make these questions difficult to answer; indeed, the ambiguity surrounding Silence's sexuality has drawn critics to concentrate on her/him almost to the exclusion of the other characters inhabiting Heldris's romance landscape. However, one particularly intriguing matter within the poem has not received adequate attention, despite frequent allusions to it: Heldris's understanding of what would now be termed sexual orientation.[2] One of the poet's main concerns, I argue, is not merely to comment upon gender-appropriate behaviors, but to provide his audience with a primer on the distinction between natural and unnatural human sexuality. If the most irreducible difference between male and female is the configuration of their genitalia,[3] what one *does* sexually is fundamental to determining one's femininity or masculinity, one's adherence to or deviation from 'normal,' and morally acceptable expressions of physical impulses.

In this essay, I would like to shift the focus from Silence to Heldris's other women: Eufemie, Silence's mother, and Eufeme, the queen who attempts to seduce the young girl/boy. Unlike Silence, who must be rescued from her

gender-limbo through unmasking and marriage, these two women represent clearly established, already 'naked' extremes on the spectrum of sexual orientation. Eufemie is strictly heterosexual; as such, she functions to reflect the norms espoused by thirteenth-century society and is thus rewarded for her adherence to these values. In stark contrast, Eufeme manifests, however subtly, sexual perversion in the form of covert lesbianism. And because her desires are deviant, she is a threat to what has been deemed biologically, socially, and morally right; thus, both her physical person and what she signifies must be thoroughly obliterated.

* * *

From the moment that Heldris introduces Eufemie, we are expected to see her in a positive light. As Anita Benaim Lasry has suggested, within the context of romance Eufemie represents woman idealized: she is strong, sensible, confident, educated in both the seven liberal arts and medicine (228). However, whereas Lasry further asserts that Eufemie's moral qualities and intellectual talents afford her 'power and status equal to that of a man' (228), and whereas Kathleen Brahney similarly argues that Eufemie's relationship with Cador 'introduces into the romance the notion of a new ordering of male-female roles, one in which man and woman share equally in status, human potential, and power' (55), I do not read the text so optimistically.

To be sure, Eufemie presents us with a model of ideal womanhood, and Eufemie and Cador are unquestionably in love, their relationship passionate and consensual. Indeed, at first glance it appears that Eufemie is anything but typical given the usual occupations of women in medieval romance, even those of high status. And again, at first glance, Heldris seems to embrace a rather modern attitude toward courtship and matrimony, insisting on the depth of the lovers' mutual caring, emphasizing Cador's refusal to treat his beloved as chattel, and taking pains to show that neither can bear the thought of separation. But we must remember that these images are tightly woven into a thirteenth-century cultural fabric, and the poet's craftsmanship is hardly feminist. For above even Eufemie's renown as a well-educated, skillful doctor, Heldris elevates, first, the fact of her beauty: she is 'the crowning glory of [her father's] estates,/ the most beautiful girl in the world' [Tols ses païs en abeli,/ Qu'el mont n'avoit plus bele mie] (401).[4] More significantly, we are never given cause to question Eufemie's sexual identity or the so-called normalcy of her desires, for as though to underscore the lady's heterosexuality, Heldris tells us almost immediately that she was 'deeply in love with Cador' [D'amer Cador forment esprise] (404), '...the bravest knight of all,/ the best loved and most valiant' [li plus vallans de tols,/ Li plus amés et li plus prols] (393–94).

Beyond this, Heldris devotes several hundred lines to the lovers' constant pining for one another, their declarations of love (which Eufemie boldly initiates), their embraces and kisses, and their increasing longing to be married. Yet within a thirteenth-century framework, this mutuality of affection and respect does not guarantee equality between the sexes, nor does it really counter the poet's unflaggingly conventional views regarding marriage as a social institution or the role of woman in that union. For Heldris, and probably for his readers as well, Eufemie's most admirable characteristics are her unambivalent willingness to acquiesce to male-defined values, her unambiguous femininity, and her unquestionable heterosexuality.

To begin with, we must not forget that Eufemie *is* a prize, whether she or Cador cares to acknowledge that fact. Evan has promised to reward any knight capable of killing a marauding dragon, and in this case, the 'guerdon' is marriage: the successful vassal will gain the right to 'take the one [woman] he likes best/ except, of course, if she's already pledged' [Ki miols li plaira, celi pregne,/ Mais solement soit sans calenge] (386–87). Cador, who defeats the fire-drake, chooses Eufemie, and together they go to seek Evan's approval.

Eufemie's consent is not a revolutionary element within the romance, however we might want to consider it. Jeffrey Richards has shown that despite an increased societal emphasis upon consensual marriage in the early Middle Ages, the lady's willingness to accept a particular suitor would not have been a primary consideration. In fact, although '[i]t may be said that we should see the promotion of consent by the couple as part of the rise of individualism which characterized the twelfth century...[it] seems more likely that [it] was part of the process of sacralization' intended 'to extend Church control over marriage, transforming it from a largely secular institution into a sacrament' (24). The 'expected fate of most women,' marriage 'was a matter of business or politics, with love as an optional extra' (26). Moreover, despite the official stance of the Church that marriage was sacred, a physical and spiritual joining of man and woman grounded in a loving and compassionate friendship,

> [i]n all this the woman's role remained subordinate. When Gratian wrote 'The woman has no power, but in everything she is subject to the control of her husband,' he was merely expressing one of the universally held beliefs of the Middle Ages, the inherent and inescapable inferiority of women. (25)[5]

Finally, we should consider how female consent to marriage is articulated in the Burgundian Code, a sixth-century book of constitutions that directly influenced Frankish law. Article 100, 'Of Women Who Go To Their Husbands Voluntarily,' reads:

> If any woman, Burgundian or Roman, gives herself voluntarily in marriage to a husband, we order that the husband have the property of that woman; just as he has power over her, so also over her property and all her possessions. (Drew 85)

Eufemie's giving of herself to Cador is thus even more inconsequential than imagined.

The shift from ostensible equality to masculine superiority in Eufemie and Cador's relationship is subtle: we do not hear Cador telling Eufemie to be quiet and go to her room while he attends to matters of state, as Evan tells Eufeme (6398–6407). Nevertheless, husband does exercise authority over wife because male interests take precedence over female abilities. However useful Eufemie's formal education might have been before her marriage, she is never again called to exercise her intellect or medical skills in any way. With her strengths overshadowed by Cador, her assertiveness becoming superfluous, Eufemie fades into the background, leaving Cador in charge to make the important decisions.[6]

Eufemie's deference to her husband in the matter of Silence's upbringing, a duty that would typically have been relegated to the domestic sphere, is striking. Cador consults his wife as to the best course of action at Silence's birth, but he has already master-minded the plan to disguise his daughter's identity, arranged to carry it out, and seeks Eufemie's participation only because the deception could not succeed without her.

Eufemie's clear subordination thus exemplifies the norm for women in a socially correct, theologically orthodox marriage. It also works to underscore Heldris's implicit assertion that *only* heterosexual, male-dominated relationships can be deemed moral and natural, since the ultimate aim of these unions is to beget children. As cultural historians have often remarked, the sacralization of marriage (and its subsequent emphasis on woman's inferior status within that union) also served to *exclude* and to render both unnatural and illegal any sexual coupling not sanctioned under canon law.[7] According to Aquinas, 'Marriage...is natural to man, and an irregular connexion outside of marriage is contrary to the good of man; and therefore fornication must be sinful' (Rickaby 221). Aquinas and other theologians considered as irregular connections those relationships not formalized in the Church, as well as those involving bestial, adulterous, incestuous, polygamous, and/or homosexual liaisons.[8] This latter practice was considered especially heinous since, as Reay Tannahill observes:

> [Aquinas] started from Augustine's proposition that the sexual organs had been designed by the Creator specifically for reproduction, and could only be legitimately used in ways that did not exclude the possibility of it. Homosexuality

> was thus, by definition, a deviation from the natural order laid down by God...and a deviation that was not only unnatural but, by the same Augustinian token, lustful and heretical. (160)

Within this context, it is important to note the depiction of Eufemie at her final appearance, immediately following Silence's marriage to Evan: 'And then the count [Silence's] father/ and her mother, Eufemie, came to court' [Et dont i vient li cuens ses pere,/ Et Eufemie avoec, sa mere'] (6681–82). Cador is referred to by his title, but Eufemie is mentioned almost in passing as *accompanying* her husband; only her maternal role affords her any status. In this way, Heldris re-emphasizes both Eufemie's lack of 'irregular' sexuality and her adherence to culturally-constructed notions of woman's procreative purpose. Eufemie has fulfilled her social destiny by marrying, and her biological destiny by giving birth. If Silence's femaleness posed difficulties earlier, it ceases to be a concern when Evan restores to women their inheritance rights. Heldris thus clarifies Eufemie's performance of her heterosexual duty in her finally giving Cador a legitimate heir.

In one sense, Eufemie's reward for embracing conventional attitudes toward female sexuality is the absence of punishment. Eufemie's role in disguising Silence could unquestionably be construed as an act against the crown, for the underlying intent was to retain lands and estates that would have reverted to the king's use had Cador and Eufemie failed to produce a son. Instead of being charged with treason, Eufemie is welcomed at court by virtue of her relationship to the new queen, Silence.

However, Eufemie's reward is simultaneously her punishment. Although she has obeyed natural law through strictly female-heterosexual conduct, thereby gaining approval in the sight of God, Church, and society, she has nevertheless paid a heavy penalty in the loss of her autonomy. There are multiple ironies present here. A willing participant in her own subjugation, Eufemie never protests the losses she endures, including the right of a mother to rear her child; yet it was precisely to protect Silence from unjust treatment by an antifeminist law that Eufemie chose to engage in a potentially tragic subterfuge. Most ironically, Eufemie's submission to male interests amounts to nothing: as soon as Silence is stripped of her masculine attire, she is also stripped of the freedom to speak and to act of her own volition. As marriage silenced Eufemie, so too will it silence her daughter.[9]

* * *

Just as Heldris describes Eufemie hyperbolically, he says of Eufeme that 'the world never held such a beautiful gem' [El mont n'avoit plus biele gemme]

(166). However, aside from their beauty, these women share nothing else, least of all any moral attributes. Eufemie is woman idealized; Eufeme is everything that woman should *not* be.[10] Whereas Eufemie, before her marriage, won admiration for her learning, Eufeme seems to have applied herself in rather nefarious studies: she is an expert locksmith, forger, liar, seductress, schemer; and until Merlin's revelations, she is a successful adulteress, skilled in keeping secret her illicit liaisons.

Moreover, as a 'gem,' the queen is an object rather than a flesh-and-blood woman, a beautiful, cold stone whose intrinsic value depends upon economic factors or its utility as personal adornment. As Brahney points out, Eufeme is forced into a position more common in epic than in romance: she is chattel, given by her father to Evan to secure peace between their warring countries (55). Although Evan claims that he has suffered long for love of Eufeme (185), his attitude toward her belies any such tenderness. He refers to her as a war-prize, a treasure for which he has fought hard (179–80); he wants to possess Eufeme, 'to wed her and bed her properly' [Par us d'eglise od li gesir] (184).

Between Evan and Eufeme there is no courtship, no wooing, no sleepless nights or passionate declarations. Officials and ambassadors arrange the marriage, and put Eufeme, who never speaks a word of consent, aboard ship along with 'many black horses.../ and bears and fowlers and lions, too' [maint cheval avoec morois,/ Et ors et ostoirs et lyons] (232–33). Not surprisingly, when she arrives in England, Eufeme is bitter at heart [son cuer ot un poi amer] (245), an allusion both to her emotional and physical condition. When Evan greets his new bride with a lingering kiss and attempts to make her comfortable, Eufeme is so ill that the wedding cannot take place until three days later (243–47).

While Eufemie is also technically a prize, her attitude toward her role as wife differs radically from Eufeme's. Whereas Eufemie embraces marriage and the socio-cultural ideology that makes it sacred and indissoluble, Eufeme attempts to endanger, if not put off altogether, her 'natural' responsibilities. Instead of being loyal, she constantly seeks to undermine her husband's power, wresting it for herself by document forging and illegal appropriation of the king's seal. Eufeme contrives to avoid Evan's company by pretending to be indisposed, and during the king's absences, she engages in unlawful relationships, thus simultaneously threatening the line of succession and avoiding payment of the marital debt. Eufeme thus rejects the orthodox Christian insistence upon sexual intercourse as an exclusively procreative function, and the Pauline dictum that the wife's body belongs to her husband (and vice-versa). Unlike Eufemie, the queen does not produce an heir, male

or female, her moral and social unnaturalness dramatically underscored by her depiction as barren. Even Eufeme's metaphorical offspring, her thoughts and desires, are deformed, monstrous, or stillborn, like her efforts to destroy Silence. As the embodiment of wanton sexuality minus its concomitant, requisite fecundity,[11] Eufeme stands in direct contrast to Eufemie.

Eufeme's greatest sin, greater than corruption, is her lack of normal feminine desire, a point made strikingly evident in the seduction/rape episodes (3711–4369). Lusting for the 'boy' Silence, Eufeme manufactures an excuse for Silence to visit the royal apartments while King Evan is away hunting. Claiming illness and requesting musical entertainment, Eufeme summons Silence to her private rooms; but as soon as Silence arrives, Eufeme begins the seduction, first leaning next to 'him,' then forcibly embracing and giving 'him' 'five long kisses,/ exceedingly passionate and very skillful' [.v. baisiers traitis,/ Bien amorols et bien faitis] (3771–2). When Silence rejects her advances, citing respect for her and loyalty to Evan, Eufeme tries several different approaches to gradually wear down the 'boy's' resistance. She tempts Silence with lascivious displays of her smooth, white body; taunts 'him' with mock insults about 'his' lack of manliness; attempts to assuage 'his' fears of discovery; and even accuses 'him' of behaving like a vulgar prostitute trying to 'jack up the price' (3757–3879). Having failed with physical aggressiveness, cajoling, pouting, even threatening, Eufeme struggles to save face, pretending to have been merely testing Silence's virtue and loyalty:

> 'Moult me convenroit esmaier,
> S'il me tenoit ensi a certes.
> Vostre cors doinst Dex males pertes,
> Car fait eüsciés altretel
> Se bien le volsisse et niënt el.' (3890–94)
>
> ['I certainly would have reason to be annoyed
> if I had been serious about it;
> may God curse you,
> because you wouldn't have hesitated to do it,
> if I had really wanted you to.']

Silence escapes, having barely concealed her identity, and having barely avoided being raped.

Later, alone and brooding, the queen seizes upon a comforting explanation for Silence's refusal:

> 'Certes, gel croi bien a erite
> Quant a feme ne se delite. [...]
> Ainc nel lassça por parenté,
> Mais el a en sa volenté. [...]

Herites est, gel sai de fi,
Et jo de m'amor le deffi.
Honte li volrai porcacier.' (3935–36, 3943–44, 3947–49)

['I'm sure he's a queer,
since a woman doesn't arouse him at all...
He didn't reject me because he's related to the king;
he did it because he has something else on his mind...
He's a fag; I'd swear to it,
and my love threatens him.
I will see that he is totally disgraced.']

The concept of 'projection' underlying this passage did not originate with Freudian psychoanalysis; blaming one's difficulties on others or attributing to others one's own unethical desires and impulses is at least as old as Adam, Eve, and the serpent.[12] Whereas *we* know that Silence is really female, the fiction demands that Eufeme (like everyone else except Merlin) be duped by Silence's outwardly masculine attire and appearance. Significantly, throughout the romance, only one character finds Silence sexually appealing; only one character is drawn to Silence's youthful effeminacy—Eufeme.[13] When the queen charges Silence with homosexuality, she is actually projecting onto her adversary the very desire that she herself most wishes to repress.[14] Later, going to Evan with her false accusation of attempted rape, Eufeme employs yet another ego defense mechanism: reaction formation.[15] To prevent her own dangerous and unnatural impulses from entering her consciousness or from being carried out in action, Eufeme adopts diametrically opposed behaviors and attitudes. Fearful of her own latent lesbianism, she seeks to destroy the stimulus—here Silence—and takes on an attitude of righteous indignation, urging Evan to convict and execute Silence without a trial.

Heldris's expectations for us to associate Eufeme with aberrant sexuality are implied throughout the romance in the sharp contrasts between Eufeme's active search for 'irregular,' non-marital relationships and Eufemie's 'natural' expressions of proper female love exclusively within matrimony. Heldris also provides us with smaller clues to the queen's deviancy. Even in terms of what might be seen as the 'normal' (*i.e.*, male-female) configuration for an adulterous liaison, Eufeme's sexual orientation is suspect: she manifests 'unnatural' tendencies in her choice of partners, desiring first a girl disguised as a boy, and second a man disguised as a woman.

Despite the fundamental differences between Eufeme's non-affair with Silence and her consummated affair with the 'nun,' Heldris does not grant the queen any moral leeway. Unaware of the 'boy's' true gender, Eufeme might be excused for her behavior in the attempted seduction of Silence. The poet,

however, is unwilling to do so, viewing the queen's sexual attraction to Silence as inherently sinful. Richards has observed that

> [T]he medieval popular perception of homosexuality was that it was something that occurred in the absence of women or marriage and that it was not an autonomous inclination....[H]omosexuality was regarded not as something innate and inescapable but rather a habit deliberately taken up as an act of defiance and wickedness. Indeed theologians reasoned that homosexuality would have to be voluntarily perverse since God would not have given men unnatural leanings. (138, 141–142)

Further, Heldris's treatment of Eufeme reflects contemporary attitudes toward sodomy and sodomites, particularly that of Albert the Great (1206–1280):

> [S]ome types of intercourse...might serve man's purpose but were against nature and against reason. The worst of these was sodomy, which [Albert] defined as outside the marital relationship and as constituting male with male or female with female. Sodomy...deserved special condemnation for at least four reasons: (1) It proceeded from a burning frenzy that subverted the order of nature; (2) the sin was distinguished by its disgusting foulness but yet was likely to be found more often among persons of high degree than of low; (3) those who became addicted to such vices seldom succeeded in freeing themselves; and (4) such vices were as contagious as a disease and spread rapidly from one person to another. (Bullough, 379)

Instead of depicting Eufeme as someone who, deceived by appearances, makes a comically gross error in judgment,[16] Heldris describes her as acting with calculated determination, carefully planning each move before and during her meetings with Silence. A 'female Satan' in whom 'deceitful madness and burning lust/ lurked' [...faite rage et quele ardure/ Cis Sathanas en soi aquelt] (3698–99), Eufeme is shown as fixated on the idea of intercourse with Silence. On three separate occasions the queen tries to force herself upon Silence, even claiming that her royalty grants her the 'right of possession' by which she can 'command' Silence to 'take [her] matchless body now' [Et par meïsme le catel,/Prent chi mon cors, il n'i a tel] (4061–62). Rejected by Silence, the queen seeks revenge by fabricating evidence of rape: tearing at her clothing and hair, bloodying her own nose, working herself into a frenzy of moaning, shuddering, weeping (4075–78, 4097–99). This behavior, like her lust, is 'prompted by the Devil' [com diäbles le fait faire] (4076). Significantly, when Eufeme shifts her affections from Silence to another lover, the homosexual contagion appears to have spread: although the 'nun' is actually a man, he is nevertheless *dressed* as a woman.

The scenes immediately surrounding the alleged rape offer further evidence that Eufeme signifies unnatural female sexuality. Once her love for Silence has turned to hate, Eufeme wants both revenge and the permanent removal of her nemesis, for Silence's knowledge of the truth endangers Eufeme's position as queen and her confidence that she is above suspicion (cf. 3973–76). In Eufeme's subconscious, Silence has taken on a more ominous role, being attributed a sexual deviancy which is actually a projection of the queen's own lesbianism. Like one who shatters the mirror which reflects ugly reality, Eufeme urgently wants to destroy the object of her fear and desire.

This desperation causes Eufeme to demand of the king swift and irrevocable justice. Insisting that Silence be convicted of treason for rape and adultery, Eufeme even suggests several appropriate punishments, all of which are prescribed in *custumals* of the thirteenth century: flaying alive, burning at the stake, hanging, equine quartering (4090–92, 4228–31).[17] When Evan determines that he cannot convict Silence without proof and decides on banishment instead,[18] Eufeme forges a command to the King of France to behead Silence immediately upon 'his' arrival,[19] for a crime 'too shameful to commit to writing' [il ne le violt pas metre en conte] (4326, 4444).

The allusive wording of Eufeme's letter is essential, recalling the language of the penitentials and other corrective literature condemning homosexuality. According to *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, for example, the 'sin against nature' was considered 'so foul and so hideous that it should not be named...so foul that it is abomination to speak it' (Bullough, 386). Further, 'the mere confession of such a shameful sin was regarded as part of the penance for committing such a sin....So serious was the sin that it could not be named except by allusions...' (Bullough, 386).

The phrasing of the forged letter takes on greater significance when conjoined with Eufeme's earlier charge of homosexuality against Silence and the suggested punishments for the alleged rape. Together, these passages clarify Heldris's intention to connect unnatural sexual practices, heresy, and treason, all embodied in Eufeme. When the queen accuses Silence of being 'a queer...a fag,' her term is 'erite' (or 'herites') which, as Peter Allen notes, 'derives its secondary meaning ('homosexual') from its primary meaning ('heretic')' (111 n. 12). Since Augustine and Aquinas had declared that 'unnatural sex acts' constituted 'injury to God' because they 'violated the natural order prescribed by God' (Richards 142), homosexuals, like those engaging in bestiality or practicing non-orthodox forms of worship, were viewed as heretics: their activities ran counter to those universal rules of morality and right conduct written on the heart and from which canon law derived its juridical force. In

the Middle Ages, writes Luther Link, 'Heretics, from Waldensians to Cathars, were [seen as] hideously depraved agents of the Devil; therefore, executing them was justified' (96, 105). When Pope Gregory IX declared heresy to be high treason punishable by death early in the thirteenth century, logic demanded that homosexuals be condemned because they were servants of Satan, traitors according to both secular and divine law.[20]

Sodomites who refused to repent, or who continually relapsed, were first tried in the ecclesiastical courts, where a judgment of excommunication was inevitable. Then, convicted offenders were turned over to the secular authorities who retried them and sentenced them according to criminal guidelines.[21] Homosexuals—male and female—were usually hanged or burned at the stake (the latter the preferred form of execution for heretics). Other methods of punishment included dismemberment, mutilation through torture, drowning, beheading, and castration.[22] Given the direct correspondence between heresy and treason, some men and women convicted of 'unkynde sin' were likely also drawn and quartered.[23] Although it was relatively rare in the thirteenth century, quartering eventually became 'the conventional punishment for lese-majesty' (Riedel 79–80), a criminal act that Andrew Horne linked specifically to heresy: 'The crime of lese majesty is an horrible offense done against the King; and that is either against the celestial King or the terrestrial' (*Miroir of Justices*, qtd. in Riedel 149, n. 35).[24]

Throughout the *Roman de Silence*, Heldris depicts Eufeme as the epitome of female wickedness: she is thoroughly evil, corrupt, bent on realizing her own desires, whether for pleasure or revenge, and regardless of the cost to others (6560–66). While more palatable to consider Heldris's depiction of the queen as essentially the product of a misogynistic age,[25] it is more likely that the poet saw himself as expressing profound truths about what women *must* be and about how they *must* conform to established norms if the laws of God, Nature, and man are to have validity. Considering the philosophical and theological temperament of the thirteenth century, this conviction, coupled with Heldris's own understanding of what is 'natural' to men and women, indicates that Eufeme symbolizes a particular threat to the prevailing social and moral orders. The poet's focus on Eufeme's sexual depravity is not ordinary, everyday misogyny; rather, in direct contrast to Eufemie, the queen is shown to manifest thoughts, desires, and behaviors that are intrinsically perverse, 'unkind' in the narrower meaning of the word: 'unnatural,' 'un-*human*.' It is no coincidence that Eufeme first attempts to seduce Silence, then accuses 'him' of homosexuality, refers to 'the sin so heinous it cannot be named,' and finally suggests to Evan manners of execution consonant with those actually

meted out to traitors and heretics. Nor did Heldris mean for us to see Eufeme's own death 'a chevals detraite' (6656) as simply a matter of poetic justice or an instance of the 'biter bit' motif as critics have sometimes asserted. When Evan orders the execution of Eufeme and her transvestite-nun-lover, he is reacting not only to their alleged lese-majesty, but to their 'lese-nature' as well (Gallagher, 38).

From a legal perspective, Eufeme is guilty of treason on several counts: falsifying the royal seal, making false accusations, behaving treacherously toward persons to whom she pretends friendship, and leading an individual into peril with the intention of procuring his death.[26] More specifically, as a result of their adulterous relationship, Eufeme and the 'nun' are guilty of treason, having injured the personal dignity of the king, and having endangered Evan's line through the potential birth of bastard children.[27]

The matter of 'lese-nature,' though less explicit, is nevertheless apparent considering the ways in which Eufeme and her lover commit treason against God, society, and Nature. Unlike Eufemie—indeed, unlike 'good' women—Eufeme wants the kind of power afforded exclusively to men, including dominance in sexual relationships. In the seduction/rape episodes, Eufeme is extremely aggressive, pinning Silence down and forcibly kissing 'him.' It is also implied that Eufeme is the masculine partner in her relationship with the 'nun': whereas female transvestism was often tolerated because the woman was viewed as attempting to reach a more perfect (*i.e.*, male) state, male transvestism was, even from classical times, derided and condemned. To dress in women's clothing was seen as evidence of a man's lack of virility, of his desire to play the effeminate partner, whether in a pederastic, homosexual, or heterosexual relationship. Insofar as male cross-dressing came to be associated with witchcraft, especially in the later Middle Ages, men who indulged in this vice were also considered heretics.[28]

Like the transvestite 'nun,' Eufeme is herself a traitor whose biologically, socially, and theologically heretical expressions of sexuality are unnatural and dangerous. She fails to produce an heir,[29] disregards her marriage vows, usurps masculine authority for her own dark purposes, and most significantly, betrays her true sexual orientation through first a covert lesbian attraction to Silence, and later an effort to transform her male partner into the feminine shape that she apparently prefers.

Toward the end of the poem, when Evan condemns his wife and her lover, Heldris writes that 'The king despised Eufeme./ He had no wish to spare her,/ nor did anyone ask him to....No one was sorry for Eufeme' [Li rois ot Eufeme en despit./ Onques ne volt doner respit,/ Ne nus nel quist ne demanda.

[...] Nus hom qui fust ne plainst Eufeme.] (6651–53, 6663).[30] Just as Eufemie is rewarded for her 'natural' goodness, Eufeme, along with the victim of her moral contagion, is punished for her 'unnatural' evil. Divine and secular justice prevail, and the *Roman de Silence* ends with celebration.

If, as critics have suggested, the nature-nurture debate is central to the theme of the *Roman de Silence*, the story reading 'in many places like a vernacular version of [Alain of Lille's] *De Planctus Naturae*' (Bloch 84),[31] then of equal importance to the text are Heldris's attitudes toward heterosexuality and homosexuality. For Master Heldris of Cornwall, sexual orientation is not a matter for individuals to decide: God, through His handmaiden Nature, has already decreed what is right, what is good, what is acceptable—even for fallen human beings in a fallen world. It therefore becomes the duty of God's agents on earth to ensure that any deviation be dealt with quickly and finally, for *only* death is appropriate to unnatural, un-Christian, heretical desire. On this matter the poet has, for his own age, set the record straight.

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NOTES

1 Particularly valuable discussions of Heldris's treatment of gender and gender roles include those by Allen, Bloch, Brahney, Cooper, Gallagher, Gaunt, Lasry, Lloyd and Perret.

2 While discussions of 'sexual identity' pervade recent *Silence* scholarship, essays by Allen, Bloch, Gallagher, and Perret refer specifically to homosexual overtones in the romance. Heldris would not of course have used such terms as 'sexual orientation,' 'heterosexuality,' 'homosexuality,' or even 'lesbian(-ism),' since sexual labeling and categorization did not enter into common parlance until quite recently. For a useful summary of the debate over applying such language to pre-modern texts, see Judith C. Brown, 171–73.

3 Commenting on the scene in which Cador names his daughter Silentius/Silentia, Roche-Mahdi asks, 'When male and female are reduced to an arbitrary gender distinction marked by minute grammatical suffixes, what does a minute difference in the genitalia signify?' (xxi).

4 Line references and translations are from Sarah Roche-Mahdi's edition and translation.

5 For fuller discussions of the Christian view of consent in marriage, see Richards 7, 26–27, 31, 46. A useful assessment of the historical context surrounding

consensual marriage appears in John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*, 162–98.

6 Roche-Madhi arrives at a similar conclusion: 'Good speech [as Roche-Mahdi glosses "Eufemie"], temporarily denied Cador by the torments of love, is now his characteristic, while the brilliant and articulate Eufemie is reduced to a silent spouse, subsumed under Cador's identity...' (xx).

7 See, for example, John Boswell, *Christianity*, especially 162–66; Bullough 385 ff.; and Richards 24–41, 132–149.

8 Essentially, any nonprocreative form of sexual intercourse was forbidden: anal, oral, rear-entry, dorsal (with the woman in the superior position), masturbatory (including intercrural and interfemoral masturbation). Heterosexual intercourse was also restricted by Church regulations 'forbidding it on all feast days and fast days...on Sundays...during [the woman's] menstrual periods, during pregnancy, during breast-feeding and for forty days after childbirth' (Richards 29). See also Bullough, 378–407.

9 Gallagher suggests that 'Silence resembles Eufeme more than she does her own mother Eufemie. Unlike her mother who freely chose Cador as her spouse, and he her, Silence is chosen by Ebains her great uncle to replace Eufeme, whom he had been given as a peace offering' (42, n. 18). I would argue, however, that at the end of the poem Silence is in a situation precisely like her mother's. Marriage rendered superfluous Eufemie's strengths, skills, and talents, and it will force Silence to discard her masculine ways and the only identity she has ever known. As queen, Silence will have a wider sphere of influence than her mother enjoyed, but she will nevertheless be expected to assume the roles of wife and mother. Cf. Brahney 57.

10 Critical views of Eufeme vary. Lasry argues that 'the unpleasant and evil woman [Eufeme] represents prosaic reality, whereas Eufemie is the heroine of a romance, a creature of fantasy who does not actually exist' (231). It seems to me more probable that Eufeme symbolizes 'unnatural' female sexuality, while Eufemie embodies 'natural' female sexuality, particularly in light of Gaunt's compelling remarks on Heldris's 'essentialist view of sexual difference' (208).

11 The official view of the Church on these matters remains constant: 'The conjugal love of man and woman thus stands under the twofold obligation of fidelity and fecundity.' *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 627.

12 For an extended discussion of projection, see Hall, 89–91.

13 Gallagher notes that 'Queen Eufeme's ... lustful pursuit of Silence functions...to underscore the ultimate untenability of Silence's pose as a male. It is only at the point in the story when Silence's disguise arouses sexual interest in another that the narrator begins to refer to the title character by the subsequently often used oxymoronic epithet "li vallets mescine"...' (36).

14 On the ways in which Heldris's own repression and denial surface in the romance, see Gaunt, esp. 203.

15 See Hall, 91–93.

16 See also Gallagher, 36.

17 For a thorough discussion of punishments for such crimes as rape, treason, lese-

majesty and adultery, see Riedel, 80–97, and Abbott.

18 Ironically, when Eufeme is accused of treachery, Evan does not opt for the softer penalty of banishment; instead, he bases his decision upon the presumptive proofs offered by Merlin and orders the queen and her lover immediately put to death. On the legal distinction between 'real proof' and 'presumption of guilt' during the medieval period, see Riedel 30–32, 71–77, 152 n.57.

19 According to Riedel (92), decapitation, drawing and hanging, drowning, or emasculation were all considered to be suitable punishments for criminals convicted of *raptus* (forcible abduction) and/or rape (the violation of a woman against her will).

20 See Boswell, *Christianity*, 283–86; and Richards 143 ff. See also Gallagher, 36.

21 Richards notes that by the late twelfth century, homosexuality had become 'a reserved crime, which only the bishop or his representative could deal with' (143). Despite the apparent blurring of the line between ecclesiastical and secular justice, however, 'the medieval Church never burned anyone;...allowing the state to execute the condemned kept the Church officially from shedding blood or executing anyone' (Bullough 390–91). See also Riedel, 45 ff.

22 See Boswell, *Christianity*, 287–94; and Richards 143–47. For a discussion of penalties for lesbianism, see Crompton.

23 Usually preceded by hanging, drawing and quartering also involved disembowelling and dismembering the still-alive victim, and later casting his or her limbs and vital organs into a fire. The preserved head was put on a spike in some public area, to provide clear warning to others with traitorous thoughts (Abbott 21–22).

24 The technical distinctions between lese-majesty and other forms of treason are quite subtle. For a thorough discussion, see Riedel 52–65.

25 Given the twelfth-century's focus on individualism, education, and courtly love—particularly the elevation of the lady to icon status—one might have anticipated more progressive attitudes toward women in the next one hundred years. Instead, a kind of backlash occurred, the result of which was the emergence of a particularly virulent strain of antifeminism. Two factors are often cited as having significantly impeded women's socio-cultural advancement: gross scientific misapprehensions of Aristotelian principles of biology; and a renewed conservatism in the Church, as articulated by such High Scholastic theologians as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. On the matter of women's biological inferiority, see especially Lemay and Thomasset. Readable and cogent discussions of the connections between oppression and institutionalized religion can be found in Boswell's *Christianity* and *Same-Sex Unions*, Ranke-Heinemann, and Richards.

26 Exile was frequently the punishment for false accusation; however, 'false accusers may often have been compelled to undergo the punishment intended for the accused' (Riedel 91). It is therefore more than merely ironic that Eufeme should be torn apart by wild horses, for this is the very thing she had hoped would happen to Silence.

27 As the writer of *Britton* explains, 'Great or high treason' includes the attempt to

disinherit the king of his kingdom; 'the judgment in high treason is to be drawn and to suffer death for felony....The same judgment is incurred by those, who in appeals of felony are attainted of...adultery with the wives of their lords....' (qtd. in Riedel 149, n. 35).

28 For discussions of transvestism generally, see Brown 134, 204 n. 4 and 5; and Bullough 393–95. On transvestism in *Silence*, see the article by Perret. Excellent studies of the historically-drawn links among homosexuality, transvestism, and witchcraft can be found in Bullough, *Sex, Society, and History* (especially 74–92) and Evans.

29 Heldris gives no indication that Eufeme's childlessness is deliberate; neither contraception nor abortion is mentioned explicitly. Still, given Eufeme's penchant for extra-marital intimacy and her careful avoidance of Evan, it seems likely that she would avoid becoming pregnant if at all possible.

30 An interesting parallel to this scene appears in the *Comte d'Anjou*: as the wicked aunt is being led to execution for crimes of lese-majesty and forgery, the writer tells us that 'no creature who may see her mourns for her or has any pity, so ill did she conduct herself toward those who were subject to her' (qtd. in Riedel 88–90).

31 See also Roche-Mahdi, xvii–xix.