VI

HUMOUR IN THE *ROMAN DE SILENCE*

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Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* has in recent years received the attention from scholars this fascinating romance deserves, and has in particular provided rich pickings for gender and post-structuralist criticism.[1] At last the modern exordial topos of the silence surrounding *Silence* can be dispensed with.[2] However, most studies have concentrated on the text's treatment of gender politics, sexual orientation and the relationship between sexuality and textuality: weighty topics which allow little space for a consideration of the work's comic potential. To redress the balance, this essay sets out to demonstrate that humour contributes to the meaning of the *Roman de Silence*.[3]

In the following study, several interrelated topics will be considered. After reassessing the *Roman de Silence*'s Arthurian pedigree and generic classification, we shall examine Heldris's fruitful and often amusing response to an important Arthurian intertext: the *oeuvre* of Chrétien de Troyes. Reading against Chrétien's romances will highlight the sexual, grammatical and narrative incongruities which are fundamental to the *Roman de Silence*'s comic effect. This intertexual humour is accompanied, moreover, by intergeneric play. For interwoven throughout the romance plot centring on an exemplary female 'hero' is a misogynist commentary (supplied by the narrator and several male characters) which recalls contemporary didactic poetry and the *fabliau*, two genres known to exploit the 'woman question' humorously. In this essay the analysis of intertextual and intergeneric comedy will be supported by a more traditional exploration of the verbal, structural and situational humour which is found at every level of the narrative. Repetition, exaggeration, incongruity and the breaking of taboos are all techniques exploited by Heldris to amuse his audience. Finally, we shall consider whether the

1 See, for example, the articles in *Arthuriana* 7, a special issue dedicated to the *Roman de Silence* in 1997.

2 See R. H. Bloch, 'Silence and Holes: the *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the *Trouvère*', *Yale French Studies* 67 (1986), 81–99 (p. 81), and *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. S. Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing, 1992), p. xi.

3 See E. J. Gallagher, 'The Modernity of *Le Roman de Silence*', *University of Dayton Review* 21 (1992), 31–9, p. 36, for a different reading.

misogynistic jokes in the *Roman de Silence* have the more serious function of disguising male anxiety about women and their potential for equality.

When Lewis Thorpe published his *editio princeps* of the *Roman de Silence* in book form in 1972 he called it a thirteenth-century Arthurian verse romance.[4] This classification was based on rather flimsy criteria: three references to King Arthur (lines 109, 6154, 6156)[5] and a certain similarity between the Grisandole episode in the *Estoire de Merlin* and the final episode of Heldris's romance, which narrates Silence's capture of Merlin. Heldris also drew on Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace in constructing an Arthurian pedigree for Silence, who claims to be a descendant of Gorlois of Cornwall (line 6145). However, the allusions to Arthurian characters locate them in the narrative past; Silence's story is not contemporary with Arthur's and only the chronologically mobile Merlin interacts with her. Moreover, according to Lecoy, the tale of his capture may be derived from a common source, not directly from the *Estoire de Merlin*, although Heldris's familiarity with Arthurian literature is not questioned.[6] Further peculiarities of the *Roman de Silence* have also led critics to challenge Thorpe's generic classification. Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann decided not to include the work in her 1980 study of Arthurian verse romance, for she found few Arthurian connections in it and furthermore she argued: 'the eponymous heroine, Silence, is a woman. This too is un-Arthurian, since the Arthurian romance remains throughout its history a romance of chivalry and must therefore inevitably revolve around a male hero.'[7]

While the *Roman de Silence* will always be generically problematic, resisting simplistic labelling, its Arthurian credentials are strengthened by the recognition that it was written partly as a response to traditional Arthurian romance and that it alludes frequently to the works of Chrétien de Troyes. Regina Psaki, one of the few critics sensitive to its comic overtones, has commented on the text's 'overt inversion' (p. xvii) of the norms of Arthurian romance and on the humour which pervades the work (pp. xxiv–xxv).[8] In fact,

4 See Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence: a Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse Romance*, ed. L. Thorpe (Cambridge, 1972), first published in *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 5–8 (1961–64) and 10–11 (1966–67).

5 Reference is made here to the edition by Roche-Mahdi, which has the virtue of having incorporated most of the numerous corrections Félix Lecoy proposed to Lewis Thorpe's edition (F. Lecoy, 'Le *Roman de Silence* d'Heldris de Cornualle', *Romania* 99 (1978), 109–25). Since the romance has survived in only one manuscript, there is no discrepancy between line numbers in any published edition or translation of the text.

6 See Lecoy, 'Le *Roman de Silence*', pp. 110–12. If Heldris did know the *Estoire de Merlin*, he deliberately changed the name of Silence's ancestor, for Igerne's first husband is there called Hoel, not Gorlois (as in Geoffrey, Wace and *Silence*).

7 See B. Schmolke-Hasselmann, *Der arthurische Versroman von Chrestien bis Froissart* (Tübingen, 1980), p. 4. The English quotation is taken from B. Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of the Arthurian Romance: the Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart*, trans. Margaret and Roger Middleton (Cambridge, 1998), p. 4.

8 See *Heldris de Cornuälle, le Roman de Silence*, trans. F. R. Psaki, Garland Library of Medieval Literature 63B (New York and London, 1991), pp. xvii and xxiv–xxv, and also Jewers's analysis of the role

it is precisely because Heldris has substituted a chivalric heroine for the usual Arthurian hero that the *Roman de Silence* is comic, for in this romance gender- and genre-bending go hand-in-hand. Moreover, the audience's pleasure is enhanced by recognising not only allusions to Chrétien, but also the clever and thought-provoking modifications Heldris has made to his Arthurian intertexts.

The first example of intertextuality to be discussed here is found in the narrative of Silence's parents' love affair. Parallels have already been noted between the courtship of Cador and Eufemie and the legend of Tristan.[9] However, more obvious antecedents for lovers struck almost dumb by love are Alexandre and Soredamors in Chrétien's *Cligés*.[10] In both romances the Ovidian presentation of love as an illness, brought on by Cupid's dart and producing horrible symptoms, is conventional (compare *Cligés*, 435–1038; *Silence*, 630–878).[11] More unusual is the hero's opportunity to claim his beloved as a reward for service and his reluctance to do so (compare *Cligés*, 2180–97; *Silence*, 555–74).[12] Heldris develops this motif further than Chrétien, however, by granting his heroine the same possibility, creating an equally disturbing psychological conflict for her (lines 797–811). Thus Cador is invited to name his bride as a reward for killing a marauding dragon, while Eufemie is granted a similar marital privilege after curing Cador. In this way, Heldris presents her as a less passive potential prize than Soredamors. Yet in both texts the parents are characterised by timidity, the verb *oser* (in negative or hypothetical constructions) occurring frequently in the narratorial commentary (compare *Cligés*, 575–9; *Silence*, 405, 551, 558). Cador perfectly illustrates the paradox elaborated upon by the narrator of *Cligés* (admittedly in the context of Cligés's love for Fénice)[13] that the presence of a weak young woman can render a brave young man a coward (*Cligés*, 3799–801; *Silence*, 648–51). Chrétien's narrator concludes after an extended adynaton: 'Si vont les choses a envers' (line 3812), thus invoking the world upside-down topos which, as we shall see, is relevant not only to Silence's father as lover, but also to Silence herself when disguised as a man.

Chrétien and Heldris both exploit the comedy inherent in the lovers' situa-

of adventure in the *Roman de Silence*, which contains perceptive remarks on the humorous aspects of the romance: C. A. Jewers, 'The Non-Existent Knight: Adventure in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana* 7 (1997), 87–110.

9 See Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, p. xii, and S. Kinoshita, 'Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage', *PMLA* 110.3 (1995), 397–409 (p. 407, note 8).

10 Kinoshita ('Feudal Politics', p. 407, note 10) and J. Frappier (*Grundriss*, III, 467–74, p. 473) mention *Cligés* as a possible intertext, but elaborate no further.

11 *Cligés* is quoted from *Chrétien de Troyes: Cligés*, ed. A. Micha, Classiques français du Moyen Age (Paris, 1975).

12 See H. Lloyd, 'The Triumph of Pragmatism – Reward and Punishment in *Le Roman de Silence*', in *Rewards and Punishments in the Arthurian Romances and Lyric Poetry of Medieval France*, ed. P. Davies and A. Kennedy (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 77–88 (pp. 77–8).

13 Heldris at times conflates material from both parts of Chrétien's romance: the story of the parents and of their son. A striking example is the use of the distinctive rhyme word *parçonier* in Fénice's and Eufemie's speech (*Cligés*, line 3122; *Silence*, line 811).

tions. There is irony in their mutual yet undeclared love and in their rhetorically elaborate ratiocinations which lead to passivity rather than action.[14] The torments of love are exacerbated in the case of both sets of parents by too great an awareness of potential linguistic ambiguity. Chrétien presents with gentle humour the conflict in Soredamors's mind when, having noticed the shirt with the golden hair she gave to Alexandre, she wonders whether or not to address him as 'ami':

> 'Apelerai le par son non
> Ou par ami? Ami? Je non.
> Comant dons? Par son non l'apele!
> Dex, ja est la parole bele
> Et tant dolce ami a nomer!
> Se je l'osasse ami clamer . . .' (*Cligés*, 1373–8)
>
> ('Shall I call him by his name or call him *ami*. *Ami*? Not I. How then? Call him by his name! Oh God, the word is already wonderful and it is so sweet to call him *ami*. If only I dared to call him *ami*.')[15]

Soredamors deliberates so long over the possible implications of calling Alexandre 'ami' that the opportunity passes with the arrival of Guinevere, who ironically utters the portentous word totally innocently on seeing Alexandre (line 1406).

By repeating the key term 'ami' and by employing aural punning Heldris alludes to Soredamors's dilemma in the scene when Eufemie is betrayed by language into revealing her love for Cador prematurely, against her will (lines 879–92). Showing a little more initiative than Soredamors, Eufemie visits her beloved, but instead of saying, 'Amis, parlés a mi' ('Friend, speak to me') she utters the words: 'Amis, parlés, haymmi' (lines 885–6) ('friend, speak, oh woe is me'), thereby betraying the distress caused by love. Heldris elaborates amusingly (with exaggerated rhetoric: extended *expolitio*) on this verbal betrayal (lines 882–900), then echoes the uncertainties of Chrétien's lovers in Cador's reaction. For, aware of the pitfalls of linguistic ambiguity (line 908), Cador ruminates on the possible connotations of the term 'amis', which Eufemie has at least managed to utter:

> Mais que li parole est covierte,
> Car ja soit cho qu'ami le claimme
> N'est pas provance qu'ele l'ainme,
> Car tels hom est "amis" clamés
> Ki de fin cuer n'est pas amés. (*Silence*, 908–12)
>
> (Unless the word is ambiguous, for just because she calls him 'ami' does not prove that she loves him, for a man can be called 'ami' without being loved with a pure heart.)

14 See P. Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes: Irony and Comedy in 'Cligés' and 'Perceval'* (Geneva, 1968).

15 Translations of all texts in this article are my own.

In his hesitation Cador evokes Fénice, who, quite happy to call Cligés 'amis' (line 4261), is nevertheless left to ponder what her lover's parting words 'Je sui toz vostres' (line 4367) ('I am all yours') really meant. However, not to be outdone by Cador, Eufemie also suffers doubt, as the narrator points out on her behalf the ambiguity of Cador's declaration:

> 'Mais el roiame n'en a trois
> Dont la mellor presisse mie
> S'une m'en faut, bele Eufemie.'
> Biele Eufemie, cho est l'une
> A cui li cuers Cador s'aüne!
> De l'une est Eufemie gloze,
> Mais que sor li prendre ne l'oze,
> Qu'en li n'en a pas tant d'ozer
> Qu'ele sor li l'oze glozer.
> Doute qu'il ait dit altrement . . . (*Silence*, 982–91)
>
> ('Yet I would not take the best of the top three women in the kingdom, if I could not have one, fair Eufemie.' Fair Eufemie was the 'one' to whom Cador's heart was drawn. Eufemie was the gloss for 'one', but she dared not attribute this word to herself, nor did she have enough courage to dare to gloss it as meaning herself. She feared he had said something quite different . . .)

Despite their hesitations, Silence's parents do manage to declare their mutual love (lines 919–1089), more in the manner of Fénice and Cligés than of the latter's parents (*Cligés*, lines 5112ff.). Yet Heldris's protagonists, in their role as timorous lovers, are treated with the same humour and irony as Chrétien's protagonists, even though Eufemie sometimes resembles Fénice rather than Soredamors for her greater confidence and courage.[16]

Although the humorous presentation of Cador and Eufemie owes much to Chrétien, Heldris adds several comic details of his own. The lovers seal their declaration with a feudal kiss, its description comprising litotes (lines 1099–1100), mock discretion (lines 1103–6), exaggeration (line 1111) and a jocular comparison to a very pleasant meal (lines 1101–19). Meanwhile, King Ebain is presented as sharing the same doubts which afflicted the lovers. For, keen that the couple should marry to solve an inheritance problem of his own making, the king believes erroneously that he will need to put pressure on his nephew and Eufemie to marry each other (lines 1258–74).[17] The count of Chester, sent to carry out the king's plan (lines 1321–34) soon realises that they are in love, and has to cough loudly to warn them of his presence (line 1405). Each character in turn is the subject of dramatic irony as they fear failure while the narrator assures us that their hopes and inclinations will be

16 These qualities, along with her learning, make some critics read her as a proto-feminist character, although her acquiescence to Cador's wishes once married tends to negate this view.

17 This is a union that will ultimately be in Ebain's own interests, as Kinoshita shows ('Feudal Politics', pp. 400–1).

realised. Yet it is the king who ends up being the butt of the only deliberate joke when the count dupes him into thinking that it was hard work convincing the lovers to accept each other in marriage (lines 1490–4).[18]

Throughout their courtship, Eufemie, wise and educated in the seven liberal arts (line 403), is treated as an equal to Cador, Heldris thereby preparing the way for her active, wise daughter to don successfully the mantle of romance 'hero'. Yet, at the same time, Silence has inherited some of her parents' less positive characteristics. Their inability to express sexual desire is transposed in her story onto the paternal prohibition against expressing her natural (female) sexuality in return for the cultural benefits of inheriting wealth as a male (lines 6592–602, 6614). It is appropriate, therefore, that a man who fears to express his love and a woman whose name invokes euphemistic verbal indirectness should give birth to a child called Silence.

Silence, when disguised as a man, proves to be an expert in both prowess and *engin*, thus becoming the female equivalent of the likes of Cligés. However, as a child brought up against her nature Silence also recalls another of Chrétien's protagonists, Perceval, and another Arthurian intertext: the *Conte del Graal*.

The parallel with Perceval is evoked fairly explicitly by the narrator when he applauds Silence's nurture in the forest:

> Onques d'enfant norri en bois
> Ne vos pot on si grans biens dire. (2354–5)
>
> (Never could such great and worthy things be told about any child raised in the woods.)

Furthermore, there is probably a humorous echo of the form of address favoured by Perceval's mother when Cador repeats the appellation 'bials fils' (lines 2445, 2448, 2453) in his speech to Silence, now nurtured as a boy.[19] The humour is, of course, created not just by repetition, but by the incongruity of a girl being called 'son' (incongruity being the main source of comedy in the romance).

A more significant parallel, however, linking the two romances on the thematic and structural levels, is their treatment of the nature/nurture opposition. Although Simon Gaunt, in his incisive and rich discussion of the significance of *Silence*, is right to show how Heldris has transposed the nature/nurture debate in *Guillaume d'Angleterre* from class to gender, it is worth noting that Chrétien de Troyes had already produced a gendered

18 King Ebain's behaviour as monarch leaves much to be desired, as several critics show (Kinoshita, 'Feudal Politics', pp. 398–402; L. Stock, 'The Importance of Being Gender "Stable": Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana* 7 (1997), 7–34). Although humour is often benign, winning the audience's sympathy rather than censure (as in the case of Silence's parents), Ebain's lack of perspicacity adds to the somewhat negative portrayal of him.

19 See Jewers, 'The Non-Existent Knight', p. 102. There may also be an echo here of the *vieille*'s speech to the ambiguously gendered Bel Acueil in the *Roman de la Rose*.

version in his *Conte del Graal*.[20] For Perceval is not only a noble youth brought up in the forest like a peasant in ignorance of chivalry, his class destiny. He is also a boy brought up by his mother in ignorance of masculine pursuits. As King Arthur observes, his education has been deficient:

> 'Por che, se li vallés est niches,
> S'est il, puet c'estre, gentix hom,
> Que il li vient d'aprision,
> Qu'il a esté a malvais mestre;
> Encore puet preus vassax estre.' (1012–16)[21]
>
> ('Even if the young man is naive, it is quite possible that he is of noble birth, and this comes from his upbringing, for he has had a bad teacher. He may still become a worthy knight.')

Perceval's maternal education is corrected later (not entirely successfully) by a series of masculine influences and male relatives acting as teachers.

The question of the gendering of the nature/culture opposition, which exercises modern anthropologists, is given complex treatment in *Perceval*, because of the polysemy of the term 'nature'.[22] This polysemy (a cultural product, of course) generates a series of opposites which tend to deconstruct the gendered binary. Thus nature (the forest, the wild, the body, natural activities) is gendered feminine through association with the mother, while culture (the court, chivalry, the church, the mind, cultural activities) is gendered masculine through association with King Arthur, knights and clerics. Yet nature, in the sense of innate characteristics or genetic destiny, and defined in opposition to nurture, is gendered according to biological sex; thus Perceval, with his masculine, aristocratic nature is destined, despite his feminine nurturing, to become cultured, civilised, a knight. His male nature obliges him to leave the maternal imaginary and enter the paternal symbolic order, with its emphasis on language. Perceval seems, however, to be caught between the two orders, his silence and consequent failure at the Grail castle being attributed both to guilt over his mother's death (lines 3593–5), and to an imperfect understanding of Gornemant's teaching on speech (lines 3243–7).

Whereas the forest is gendered feminine in *Perceval*, it is masculine in the *Roman de Silence*. Silence, once weaned, is nurtured away from court society in the forest by a nurse, supervised by a seneschal and Cador (lines 2469ff.). Their aim is to gender her masculine by teaching her all the skills required by male nobles. She is brought up against her nature to adopt masculine culture,

20 S. Gaunt, 'The Significance of Silence', *Paragraph* 13 (1990), 202–16.

21 The *Conte del Graal* is quoted from *Chrétien de Troyes: Le Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*, ed. W. Roach, Textes Littéraires français (Geneva, 1959).

22 See C. P. MacCormack, 'Nature, Culture and Gender: a Critique', in *Nature, Culture, and Gender*, ed. C. P. MacCormack and M. Strathern (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 1–24; S. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford, 1974), pp. 67–88; and R. L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in the Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 117.

though paradoxically in a setting usually associated with nature and the wild. However, her true female nature, expressed through her body and sexuality, will out in the end, and is finally revealed when she captures Merlin. In this episode too the *Roman de Silence* employs the anthropological oppositions nature/culture, the raw and the cooked, and nature/nurture in a sophisticated way (lines 5929–6136). Merlin's state as wild man of the woods, preferring grass and roots to man-made, domesticated food, is presented as the result of unnatural nurture, a regression to the animal state (line 5955). Like Perceval, Merlin's true nature is to be a civilised man, hence his taming using cooked meat, honey, milk and wine.[23] In capturing Merlin through appealing to *his* true nature as a cultural man, Silence is trapped by *her* true nature and most natural attribute, her female body. For only biological females can catch Merlin. At the end of the romance Silence accepts the naturalised roles assigned to women by medieval society and closely linked to their bodies; she becomes the king's wife and presumably a source of legitimate heirs. In fulfilling her female nature she must abandon the cultural roles of knight and jongleur which she performs expertly while masquerading as a man.

Perceval's unnatural upbringing, which produces much of the humour at the beginning of the *Conte del Graal*, is not narrated at length, the romance concentrating on Perceval's rehabilitation. In contrast, three quarters of the *Roman de Silence* is taken up with the amusing consequences of disguising Silence's true nature. The conflict within her is made explicit in the speeches given to the two allegorical figures *nature* and *norreture*. Their respective influences on Silence are also expressed grammatically through the masculine and feminine endings attached to the Latin version of her name: Scilencia is her female nature, the 'a' ending conveying what she possesses intrinsically.[24] Scilenscius, on the other hand, is her masculine persona, the result of *norreture* or 'us', Heldris here punning on the Old French term for habits, customs, usage (lines 2074–82).[25] However, this neat opposition is deconstructed when Heldris implies that a habit may be either by or against nature:

> Car cis -us est contre nature,
> Mais l'altres seroit par nature. (2081–2)[26]
>
> (For this custom is against nature, but the other would be natural.)

23 It is questionable that Heldris viewed Silence's preparation of food for Merlin as one of the feminine activities that Silence will later practise when she reverts to being female (Stock, 'The Importance of Being Gender "Stable" ', p. 25). Indeed, medieval queens are rarely portrayed in kitchens and there is evidence in Old French literature that cooking is gendered masculine (see, for example, the cooks in the *Chanson de Roland*, Rainouart in the *Chanson de Guillaume* and Governal's culinary skills in Beroul's *Tristran*).

24 Interestingly, these grammatical distinctions are possible only in Latin. In Old French, the common noun *silence* is masculine, but derives from the Latin neuter noun *silentium* (though the form *silentia* existed in Medieval Latin too). Thus Silence's name in Old French is ambiguously gendered.

25 See M. Perret, 'Travesties et transsexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine', *Romance Notes* 25 (1985), 328–40 (p. 335).

26 Cf. 'de nature li us' (line 2529).

Furthermore Heldris's distinction between the sexes seems to be based not on innate characteristics but on social convention, or to quote Krueger ' "nature" is the justification of how "culture" constructs women' (*Women Readers*, p. 117). So, in the romance, women are associated with sewing, while men wear different clothes, enjoy outdoor pursuits and have tanned and weather-beaten complexions – a distinguishing feature underlined by the frequent repetition of the rhyme *malle*/*halle* (lines 1979–80; 2051–2; 2473–4; 2503–4; 5162–3).[27] The fact that Silence becomes a very successful male, her prowess in battle helping King Ebain to defeat his foes, implies controversially that gender is a social construct and has little to do with biology. In fact Gaunt ('The Significance', p. 213) argues that although the narrator's commentary and the dénouement of the story suggest that Heldris promoted a typically medieval essentialism, as summarised in the proverb 'Mieuz vaut nature que nourreture', the narrative proper problematises this view, thus revealing an anxiety on the part of the author about the biological justification for woman's inferior role in medieval society.

It is certainly true that narrative inconsistencies reveal authorial unease about serious gender issues. However, the narratorial voice and narrative tone are often comic and influence the way we interpret Silence's actions as a man.[28] Just as Perceval's innocence of chivalric matters is humorous, so Silence's denial of her true nature can place her in amusingly compromising situations. Scenes which involve undressing raise a smile at her discomfiture, and Heldris offers a humorous twist to the Potiphar's wife motif when the queen attempts to seduce Silence and then accuses her of homosexuality, which is ironic given Eufeme's attraction to a woman in drag (lines 3935–49). The comedy of character and situation is further enhanced by the verbal humour in the narrator's commentary. There is frequent innuendo of a sexual nature, which reminds us constantly of Silence's female anatomy (line 2829) and highlights through contrast the unnaturalness of her masculine behaviour. Thus, the narrator's mocking attitude towards Silence's 'artificial masculinity' is a device employed by Heldris to persuade his audience of the essentialism of gender. The author even uses Silence as his mouthpiece when, fearing that the truth will be disclosed by Merlin, she is forced to admit that she has betrayed woman's custom, which she presents as a product of female nature:

> 'Car il fera descoverture
> De quanque ai fait contre nature.
> Jo cuidai Merlin engignier,

27 Unlike P. McCracken, ' "The Boy who was a Girl": Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*', *Romanic Review* 85.4 (1995), 517–36 (p. 532), I do not think one needs to speculate that nature removes anything more essentially male than these surface indicators of gender when she works on Silence for three days before her marriage (lines 6669–73).

28 See Jewers, 'The Non-Existent Knight', p. 98.

Si m'ai engignié. Forlignier
Cuidai a tols jors us de feme.' (6455–9)[29]

('For he will reveal all that I have done against my nature. I thought to deceive Merlin, but I have deceived myself. I thought to betray/deny forever woman's custom.')

Heldris portrays Silence's activities and her success as a man as an extended world-upside-down topos. By treating his heroine and her exploits with humour, he is promoting a normative attitude towards Silence's unnatural situation. As the next example illustrates, Heldris, while seeming to admire the efficacy of Silence's masculine performance, never allows us to forget who she really is, and how strangely she is behaving:[30]

Il a us d'ome tant usé
Et cel de feme refusé
Que poi en falt que il n'est malles:
Quanque on en voit est trestolt malles.
El a en tine que ferine:
Il est desos les dras mescine. (2475–80)

(He has behaved in a masculine way for so long, rejecting feminine custom that it would take very little/he lacks just one small thing to make him a male. All that is visible is completely masculine, [but] he has something else in his barrel than flour: under his clothing he is a girl.)

In this passage the allusion to Silence's lack of a penis as 'poi en falt' is humorously belittling of phallic pride. The narrator's citation of the traditional proverb, 'El a en tine, dit le suriz, que farine', is also suggestive.[31] He seems to be saying that s/he has something different in her/his barrel from flour, and since Latin *tina* was a container for wine, the implication is that s/he has something stronger and more interesting. Besides, Old French *tine* may well be a metaphor for the female genitals, as Gaunt shows for its Occitan cognate ('The Significance', p. 216, note 15). Not only are we here, as elsewhere, explicitly reminded of what Silence's clothing thinly disguises, but her true gender is also invoked through the punning on 'el' and 'il' in lines 2479–80 (even though 'el' means 'something else' rather than 'she').[32] The

29 'Forlignier' is a very strong feudal term, normally associated with the betrayal of one's whole family or lineage, but here applied to gender.

30 In this view I differ from McCracken (' "The Boy who was a Girl" ', p. 529), who claims that the author's portrayal of his female hero reveals 'a confused perception of the relation between Silence's clothes and the features they cover'.

31 See *Proverbes français antérieurs au XVe siècle*, ed. J. Morawski (Paris, 1925), no. 627.

32 Although some of the puns identified by deconstructionist critics are merely virtual, as they do violence to Old French phonology and syntax (for examples, see K. M. Cooper, 'Elle and L: Sexualized Textuality in the *Roman de Silence*', *Romance Notes* 25 (1985), 341–60, and G. T. Gilmore, '*Le Roman de Silence*: Allegory in Ruin or Womb of Irony?', *Arthuriana* 7 (1997), 111–23), this is a genuine aural pun, for *el* + *a* and *ele* + *a* would be indistinguishable to a listening audience, creating initial ambiguity.

disturbing possibility of a female being a convincing male is thus made safe by a risqué joke.

Silence is again the object of sexual humour just as she reaches the heights of chivalric success. Although the joke is mainly on the men who are defeated by her, her status too suffers from the indelicate nature of the narrator's comments (especially lines 5157–9):[33]

> Tels chevaliers par li i vierse
> Que se il le tenist envierse[34]
> Et il peüst la fin savoir
> Que grant honte en peüst avoir
> Que feme tendre, fainte et malle,
> Ki rien n'a d'ome fors le halle,
> Et fors les dras et contenance,
> L'eüst abatu de sa lance. (5157–64)
>
> (Any knight unhorsed by her, if he had turned her upside-down and could have known the truth of it/got to the bottom of it, would have been very ashamed that a tender, gentle, frail woman, whose only masculine characteristics were her weather-beaten face, clothes and bearing, had knocked him down with her lance.)[35]

A more explicit example of Heldris's comic treatment of his heroine is to be found when Nurture, aided by Reason, convinces the young girl that it is socially advantageous to remain a man. Silence's description of her superior

33 The popular medieval theme of appearances being deceptive is exploited for comic effect throughout the romance and many of its characters are the victims of dramatic irony, mildly ridiculed because of their inability to perceive the truth.

34 R. Psaki, 'The Modern Editor and Medieval "Misogyny": Text Editing and *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana* 7 (1997), 78–86, argues interestingly that the *Roman de Silence* has suffered from at least one editor (Thorpe) whose interventions have intensified the misogyny of the text. More serious though, to my mind, has been the violence done to the text by the translation attempts of modern critics. Psaki and Roche-Mahdi are generally honourable exceptions, but neither Psaki, Roche-Mahdi nor Stock (L. K. Stock, ' "Arms and the (Wo)man" in Medieval Romance: the Gendered Arming of Female Warriors in the *Roman d'Enéas* and Heldris's *Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana* 5:4 (1995), 56–83 (p. 70)) translates line 5158 correctly; Gaunt does, yet inexplicably misunderstands *halle* in lines 5162–3. In other important passages to be discussed later McCracken ' "The Boy who was a Girl" ', p. 530, not helped by Psaki, misinterprets 'afoler' in line 2648; Gaunt, 'The Significance', p. 213, Bloch, 'Silence and Holes', p. 93, Gilmore, 'Allegory in Ruin', p. 119, and E. A. Waters, 'The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana* 7 (1997), 35–46 (p. 36) all mistranslate line 6627, with Jewers, 'The Non-Existent Knight', p. 93, citing Gaunt as her authority; finally Psaki's rendering of line 6129 totally misses the point. It is worrying to see certain misreadings being repeated, witness Bloch's translation of 'haymmi' in line 886 as 'hate me' resurfacing in L. Ringer, 'Exchange, Identity and Transvestism in *Le roman de Silence*', *Dalhousie French Studies* 28 (1994), 3–13. Yet Roche-Mahdi (*Silence*, p. xxiv) is right to allude to the many interpretative difficulties which still remain, despite the efforts of Thorpe, Lecoy and herself to elucidate this challenging single-manuscript text.

35 Heldris frequently indulges in gender ambiguity when portraying Silence, the ambiguity enhanced by the Picard tendency to substitute masculine definite article and pronouns for the feminine (see Thorpe, *Le Roman de Silence*, p. 51). In this passage, however, given the feminine form of the adjective in line 5158, Heldris is drawing our attention to Silence's female nature, ironically at the very moment when she is most successful as a male. I have therefore employed feminine pronouns in my translation.

social position cannot fail to remind us of the traditional sexual position for men, a detail Heldris elaborates upon with rhetorical gusto:

> 'Voire,' fait il, 'a la male eure
> Irai desos, quant sui deseure.
> Deseure sui, s'irai desos?' (2639–41)
>
> ('Indeed', he said, 'in an evil hour will I go underneath when I'm on top. I'm on top, shall I go underneath?')

No doubt to poke fun at the absurdity of his/her words, Heldris has Silence add that she is now too rough to pass for a *woman* and would soon be unmasked 'al giu c'on fait desos gordine' (line 2649) ('at the game one plays behind the curtains').[36] The irony is, of course, that it is precisely on a curtained bed that the game would be up for the girl who would be a man.

When Silence is first presented as a boy Heldris employs either the neutral term *enfant* or mainly masculine pronouns and articles to designate Cador's *engendreüre* (line 1657), but because these can also be feminine in the Picard dialect, Silence's gender is ambiguous. In the seduction episode, however, she is frequently referred to as 'le vallet ki ert meschine' (line 3704).[37] Heldris thus emphasises her true nature and the ridiculousness of her situation. Yet the joke is also on Eufeme, who, the narrator comments, will obtain no more satisfaction from Silence than that provided by a kiss:[38]

> Cel pora plus mesaäsier
> Quant al sorplus volra entendre[39]
> Qu'ele falra del tolt al prendre. (3740–2)
>
> (And this will upset her even more if she tries to get the rest, for she will fail miserably to get it.)

The scene which ensues, depicting the queen's enthusiastic love-making and Silence's embarrassment (lines 3743–895) is worthy of any farce. Thus Heldris combines situational comedy with amused narratorial commentary to convey the idea that the heroine's role in the *Roman de Silence* is not entirely heroic and at times comically absurd.[40]

36 I interpret 'afoler' (line 2648) as 'to be made a fool of', 'to be undone', hence 'unmasked'.

37 See lines 3763, 3785, 3871, 3954 for variations on this designation.

38 Note also in lines 3700–4 the comic comparison between Tristan and Iseut's mutual love and Eufeme's illicit passion for a young man who is really a girl.

39 'Li sorplus' frequently has sexual connotations in Old French lyric and romance.

40 Critics have compared the absurdity of Silence's behaviour with that of the queen of Torelore in *Aucassin et Nicolette* (see Jewers, 'The Non-Existent Knight', p. 97). Yet although Heldris's knightly heroine is presented as an anomaly, she is allowed to indulge in proper warfare, unlike the queen of Torelore. Besides, she shares many positive characteristics with the enterprising (but nevertheless feminine) Nicolette. Silence is thus both a comic inversion of the traditional male chivalric hero and a more serious epitome of the ingenious heroine who disguises herself as a *jongleur*, travels extensively and defeats her opponents by force of intellect and verbal dexterity.

Silence and Eufeme are not the only characters to be treated with humour. The capture of Merlin is described with comic exaggeration: Nature, triumphing over his rustic, almost bestial, nurture, takes him by the scruff of the neck: 'Si l'a enpoint deviers le col' (line 6092) and forces him to eat the roast meat. The audience's amusement at his overindulgence is anticipated as the narrator conjures up (with excessive enumeration) the comic scene before our very eyes:

> Ki donc veïst ventre eslargir,
> Estendre, et tezir, et bargir,
> Ne lairoit qu'il n'en resist tost! (6127–9)
>
> (Whoever saw his belly swell, bloat, inflate and expand could not fail to burst out laughing at it.)

Thus Heldris builds on the humour present in Perceval's unnatural upbringing and transfers it onto the figures of Silence and Merlin, to make, it would seem, important points about nature and nurture in an entertaining way.

The third Chrétien intertext evoked by the *Roman de Silence* is *Erec et Enide*. The most obvious parallel between the two works is the linking of the themes of speech and pleasure, or rather female silence and male pleasure. The rhyme pair *taisir*/*plaisir* occurs in Chrétien's prologue (lines 7–8), thereby announcing an important narrative leitmotif, developed later when Enide speaks out in bed. Her female *parole* disturbs Erec's marital bliss and undermines his masculinity. This explains his prohibition on her speech and the suspension of conjugal relations during their adventures. Although there is much overt criticism of her *parole* by Erec and by Enide herself, the narrative nevertheless demonstrates the benefits of speaking out, a conclusion Chrétien anticipates in his prologue, where he censures inappropriate silence.[41]

Heldris uses the rhyme pair *taisir*/*plaisir* twelve times (lines 675–6, 1669–70, 2071–2, 3157–8, 3311–12, 4433–4, 4697–8, 4929–30, 6281–2, 6309–10, 6397–8, 6627–8), a juxtaposition which seems to suggest approval of silence. Yet like *Erec et Enide*, the *Roman de Silence* is a narrative which ultimately proves the virtue of speaking out for both men and women, despite the fact that the overtly misogynistic King Ebain equates ideal femininity with silence:

> 'Car femes n'ont sens que mais un,
> C'est taisirs. (6401–2)
>
> ('Women are good for only one thing/ can do only one sensible thing, to keep quiet.')[42]

41 For a fuller discussion, see K. Pratt, 'Adapting Enide: Chrétien, Hartmann and the Female Reader', in *Chrétien de Troyes and the German Middle Ages*, ed. M. Jones and R. Wisbey (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 67–84.

42 Ebain goes on to equate female silence with his own pleasure in a speech containing the rhyme pair *taisir*/*plaisir* (lines 6397–8).

Indeed, the key to the romance's meaning is to be found in Merlin's role, for it is his speech at the end, after a period of tantalising silence, that restores order by revealing the sexual unorthodoxies of Silence and of the queen's male lover dressed as a nun (lines 6525–52). Moreover, Merlin's revelations are accompanied by laughter (lines 6413–32, 6552), mirroring the normalising laughter which Heldris's narrative was, in my view, designed to provoke from his audience.

Although characters within the *Roman de Silence* repeat the traditional view that silence is a positive quality in a woman, Heldris's treatment of the *plaisir*/*taisir* pair implies criticism of the way that Silence denies her sexuality, her *plaisir*, by remaining silent about, and repressing, her true nature. Silence, pace Gaunt ('The Significance', p. 202) and McCracken (' "The Boy who was a Girl" ', p. 526), is not an 'inability to signify', but a refusal to speak, an active choice which signifies. In Heldris's terms, his heroine's masculine silence is a metaphorical refusal to use language to express the authentic female self. It is associated in the romance with concealment and self control,[43] hence the reference to Sainte Paciensce (line 2068) at the child's baptism.[44] Ironically, Cador sees silence as removing anxiety ('Por cho que silensce tol*t* ance', line 2069), but in relieving his inheritance worries, he has imposed on his daughter potentially greater cares. Heldris, on the other hand, shows that ultimately this silence, being unnatural, has to be broken. This is done when Silence speaks as a woman for the first time and tells the truth about her nature, for, as she says, she no longer cares to lie, wishes no longer to remain silent:

> 'La vertés nel puet consentir
> Que jo vos puissce rien mentir,
> Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir.
> Faites de moi vostre plaisir.' (6625–8)
>
> (Truth will not allow me to lie to you in any way, nor do I wish to remain silent any longer. Do with me what you will.)

Although at this point Silence condemns herself to a sort of social silence, by agreeing to adopt the role medieval society imposed on queens, she does not, as Gaunt argues ('The Significance', p. 213), silence *herself* at the end.[45]

43 The topic of concealment is represented by the terms *celer* (line 2071) and *covrir*/*coverture* (lines 2191, 2462, note especially the rhyme pair *coverture*/*noreture* in lines 2179–80) and their opposite (lines 2656, 6455). Self control or denial is expressed by the term *abstinence* (lines 2616, 2659, 2674).

44 Interestingly R. E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word List* (Oxford, 1965), p. 349, cites the verb 'silenteo ab', 'to refrain from', as being in use from the late twelfth century onwards.

45 Gaunt's reading of line 6627: 'Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir' as 'I only care to be silent' takes it out of context and misconstrues its meaning. Silence's words here echo the narrator in line 1669: 'Car la verté ne doi taisir' ('for I must not keep silent about the truth'), the syntax being parallel to line 6353 'N'ai soig encore de fuïr' ('I do not care to flee yet'). Gaunt interprets Heldris's use of 'mais' in the restrictive sense, as in line 324 ('Mais cil qui n'a mais une fille' – 'but he who has only a daughter'). However, in those cases where 'mais' means 'except for' or 'only' it is always followed by a noun. There are no examples of 'mais' plus a verb to convey the meaning '*außer*, *ausgenommen*' in Tobler Lommatzsch;

Indeed, within the metaphoric system privileged by the romance, Silence acquires sexual liberation through speaking out and embracing her true nature.[46] Thus the *Roman de Silence* provides a mirror image of the thematic of speech in *Erec et Enide*. Silence's adoption of masculine, measured, public speech receives general approval from the protagonists, yet in the narrator's view (supported by the Arthurian authority Merlin) this silencing of her nature is wrong. Enide's *parole* is condemned by Chrétien's eponymous hero and heroine, yet the narrative shows that she was right to speak. Both texts agree that silence is not always golden.

The *Roman de Silence* does not end on an unambiguously positive note, however, for Ebain's praise of his future wife invokes the antifeminist adage going back to Solomon that a good woman, being so rare, is a precious thing:[47]

> 'Il n'est si preciose gemme,
> Ne tels tresors com bone feme.' (6633–4)
>
> ('There is no more precious jewel nor greater treasure than a good woman.')

Moreover, the narrator argues that one should praise a good woman more than criticise an evil one, for given woman's nature it is hard for her to be good (lines 6684–701). Misogynistic comments such as these are sprinkled throughout the romance, and although often provoked by the behaviour of Eufeme, the narrator generalises unashamedly about woman's fickleness and excesses (lines 3901–24), her ability to deceive by weeping at will (lines 4157–8; 5233–5) and her vengeful speech (4266–8).[48] These generalisations are commonplaces of didactic literature, as are the 'excusasions' made supposedly to the ladies in the audience by first-person narrators from Jean de

'mais' has to be immediately preceded by 'ne' as in 'Unc nen out volenté Ne mais de servir Dé, *Ph. Taon Comp*. 1698' ('He had no desire to do it except to serve God'); see A. Tobler and E. Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch* (Berlin, 1925–), V, 865. It is a pity that so many scholars have followed Gaunt's and before him Bloch's reading of this key moment in the romance.

46 The link between lying and denying one's nature has already been made earlier, see lines 3871–4 and 4169–73.

47 See Jean LeFèvre, *Les Lamentations de Matheolus*, II, lines 2589–614, where the authority of Solomon is invoked to suggest that no good woman ever lived, and III, lines 2157–63, where the rarity of a good woman is compared to that of rare birds. Jean Le Fèvre, *Les Lamentations de Matheolus et le Livre de Leësce*, ed. A.-G. van Hamel, 2 vols. (Paris, 1892 and 1905). For the tradition lying behind Ebain's remarks, see K. Pratt, 'Translating Misogamy: the Authority of the Intertext in the *Lamentationes Matheoluli* and its Middle French Translation by Jean LeFèvre', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 35 (1999), 421–35 (pp. 425–6). Le Fèvre's thirteenth-century Latin source closely resembles Heldris's formulation: 'Sed mala ne videar tibi dicere de muliere, / Dico, quod bona fit omni preciosior ere.' (lines 3228–9) ('But lest I might appear to speak ill of women to you, I say that a good woman should be more precious than any precious metal.')

48 The fictional characters also indulge in misogyny: Ebain blames the twin sisters for his barons' deaths (lines 309–18); Cador claims that women do not always do what is best for them and are often capricious (lines 667–75); Silence is convinced by Nurture that it is better and more honourable to be male (lines 2632–56) and Ebain claims that woman's skill at dissimulating can deceive even the wisest man (lines 5001–5).

Meun to Jean LeFèvre.[49] Extreme antifeminism, followed by exaggerated apologies, contributed to these male poets' comic portrayal of the woman question. Heldris also shares with didactic literature the view that female power and success in a masculine world are against the natural order, as is the behaviour of Phyllis when she rides Aristotle in the well-known comic exemplum made popular by the *Lai d'Aristote*.[50] It may, moreover, be significant that the *Roman de Silence* is found in a manuscript which also contains comic and risqué *fabliaux*.[51] For this is a genre that offers similarly comic treatments of apparent female success or superiority, which their epilogues often present as contravening the laws of nature. Berengier au lonc cul is in many ways as humorously unnatural as Silence, and both show that appearances created by females can be deceptive.[52] However, whereas male transvestism was a potential source of great anxiety for androcentric medieval society, the female transvestite, far from threatening the social order, was a safe joke. For despite Silence's triumphs as minstrel and knight, the audience, gendered masculine, is constantly encouraged to penetrate her disguise and laugh at her phallic inadequacy.[53]

If the *Roman de Silence* is read in the context of twelfth- and thirteenth-century French literature, it becomes apparent that the romance was in dialogue with various genres, not just Arthurian romance. The identification of connections with antifeminist comic genres, however, leads one to question whether the discourse of misogyny and the humorous portrayal of a unnatural woman undermine the proto-feminist portrayal of the exemplary 'masculine' heroine or whether the narrative demonstrating the temporary success of nurture ironically undermines the authority of the essentialist narrator and mysogynous characters.[54] In other words, does the invocation of humorous and often antifeminist genres such as the *fabliau* or the didactic

49 See Pratt, 'Translating Misogamy', pp. 424–5, for the comic tradition of the mock apology. No one has been able to advance a more precise dating for the *Roman de Silence* than Thorpe's 'second half of the thirteenth century' (*Le Roman de Silence*, p. 17); it seems, however, that Heldris's romance was contemporaneous with Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* and the Latin source of LeFèvre's *Lamentations de Matheolus*.

50 LeFèvre and his Latin source also cite this example of woman on top, which, as we have seen, is a position Silence is loath to give up (lines 2639–41); see *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx (Oxford, 1992), p. 180, note 102.

51 This type of evidence is problematic though, first because the folios on which *Silence* appears may not originally have been bound with the rest of the texts, and second, because medieval works could be copied together not to create a thematically coherent whole, but to produce a varied anthology for the owner of the codex.

52 See Perret, 'Travesties', pp. 333–4, for a discussion of this *fabliau*. While the joke is mainly on Berengier's husband and his gullibility, she is a comic figure too, the narrative focusing on her genitalia just as Heldris does on his heroine's. Laughter is enhanced by the breaking of taboos.

53 See Ad Putter, 'Transvestite Knights in Medieval Life and Literature', in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. J. Cohen and B. Wheeler (New York, 1997), pp. 279–302 (pp. 296–8). I am grateful to Dr Putter for his useful questions and comments on an earlier version of this paper delivered at the International Arthurian Society Congress in Toulouse 1999.

54 Psaki, *Silence*, pp. xxx–xxxi, noting the discrepancy between commentary and narrative, concludes that the narrator is unreliable.

literature on women negate the positive image of female heroism which this romance makes possible? Clearly Heldris has left space for the individual reader to decide, though I suspect that the reader who resists the narrator's pronouncements and the weight of thirteenth-century clerical tradition is largely a modern phenomenon. However, no reading of the *Roman de Silence* would be complete without a consideration of its sexual, grammatical and narrative incongruities, its verbal, structural and situational comedy, and its clever dialogue with the work of the greatest exponent of Arthurian romance, Chrétien de Troyes.