
Natura (II): Goddess of the Normative

SOME TIME IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE twelfth century an unknown poet, probably French, penned a naughty but delicious poem in sixty-seven rhyming quatrains. The “*Alteratio Ganimedis et Helene*” (“Dispute Between Ganymede and Helen”) follows the then-popular conventions of both the dream vision and the debate poem.¹ One fine spring day, its narrator falls asleep beneath an olive tree and dreams of a meeting between Ganymede and Helen, each stunningly beautiful. After some small talk, the virginal but amorous Helen tries to seduce the boy. But Ganymede, not knowing the sexual role expected of him, presses against her “as if he wished to be passive.” Disgusted, Helen pushes the “monster” away and “curses nature” on his account. The two enter into a heated argument and finally decide to present their case for the judgment of Nature and Reason. So they ride off to the palace of Jupiter, where they find Mother Nature “clothing Hyle with multifarious forms” as she weaves the pattern of life under Reason’s guidance. Providence, “whom the Father of Nature bore from pure mind,” announces the arrival of the young debaters. All the gods assemble, some on Helen’s party and some on Ganymede’s, barely able to restrain their desire as the gorgeous disputants take their places. “Jupiter shamelessly calls to Ganymede,” but Nature takes the maiden’s side. Helen opens the argument and the two debate for 33 stanzas, with more rancor than modesty, on the relative merits of gay love versus straight. In the end Ganymede falls silent when Helen asserts that sodomy is tantamount to child murder, for every “tear of Venus” shed between the legs of a boy represents “the loss of a human being.” At this point Reason proclaims the boy conquered, Ganymede recants, and the converted Apollo declares that he has “come to [his] senses,” while Jupiter is now aflame for his Juno. The gods join in banishing the “ancient heresy” as “Reason rejoices with the children of Nature.” Ganymede asks for the hand of Helen in marriage. As the two are united in connubial bliss, the narrator awakens and declaims, “Let the Sodomites blush, let the Gomorrhans weep. Whoever is guilty of this deed, let him be

converted. O God, should I ever do it, have mercy on me!" Or, according to another version of the line, "please look the other way."²

"Ganymede and Helen" and Nature's Grammar

"Ganymede and Helen" is one of the earliest texts to feature a personified Natura condemning homosexuality, whether or not the poet agreed with her. The poem had a wide if select clerical audience, circulating with the works of other twelfth-century Latin writers such as Hildebert of Lavardin, Serlo of Wilton, Matthew of Vendôme, Peter of Blois, Walter of Châtillon, and of course Alan of Lille.³ "Ganymede's" relationship to *De planctu Naturae* is of particular interest, for the two poems share many verbal parallels and a few substantive arguments. Rolf Lenzen (the editor of "Ganymede") and earlier scholars thought the debate poem had been inspired by *De planctu*, but John Boswell saw Alan of Lille as the debtor, and Peter Dronke somewhat implausibly proposed Alan himself as author of the "Alteratio."⁴ I will argue in favor of Boswell's position, proposing a date of composition for "Ganymede" in the 1150s. The poet's treatment of Natura, Hyle, and Providentia suggests a familiarity with Bernard's *Cosmographia*, as E. R. Curtius showed long ago,⁵ while his off-handed use of grammatical metaphors to represent sexuality seems to have influenced Alan's much more serious, not to say labored, preoccupation with the same imagery.

Before the probably foregone conclusion of the debate, the disputants score some remarkable points. Helen's arguments are the more predictable. Ganymede's sport overturns the order of Nature, she claims; since he will never take a wife, he will not perpetuate his beauty—the same reasoning Shakespeare would adopt in his *Sonnets*. Moreover, sodomites are incapable of true love: beautiful boys only prostitute themselves for the money, and the old men who pay them are even worse. Only "natural" love is fruitful, as all animals know:

O quam felix amor est	in diverso sexu,
Cum mas fovet mutuo	feminam complexu!
Contrahuntur hic et hec	naturali flexu;
Aves, fere, pecora	gaudent isto nexu. (st. 33)

O how blessed is love	between the two sexes,
When male caresses female	in mutual embraces!
He and she are attracted	by their natural bent;
Birds, beasts, and livestock	take joy in this bond.

Ganymede is not at all fazed by Helen's argument, but responds:

Non aves aut pecora debet imitari
 Homo, cui datum est ratiocinari;
 Rustici, qui pecudes possunt appellari,
 Hii cum mulieribus debent inquinari. (st. 34)

Man need not imitate birds or farm animals—
 For he has been given the ability to reason.
 Let peasants, who can be called brute beasts,
 Go defile themselves with women!

Where Helen appeals to Nature, Ganymede appeals to class: the gods invented same-sex love, and the best and the brightest (*optimatibus*) enjoy it most (stanza 30). In fact, since the rulers and prelates are all enamored of boys, their Ganymedes have nothing to fear:

Approbatis opus hoc scimus approbatum:
 Nam, qui mundi regimen tenent et primatum,
 Qui censores arguant mores et peccatum,
 Hii non spernunt pueri femur levigatum. (st. 40)

We know this act is approved by men who deserve approval:
 For those who rule the world and have the power
 To set themselves up as judges of morality and sin—
 Such men do not resist the smooth thighs of a boy.

The youth's taunt about clerical tastes is amply borne out by other twelfth-century evidence, ranging from moral denunciations to an epigram about a gay bishop who "out-ganymedes Ganymede;" and is said to have banished married clergy from his diocese because he personally has no use for women.⁶

These excerpts from the "Alteratio" suggest the general tenor of debates about homosexuality in the later twelfth century. Appeals to animal behavior could backfire, as Helen discovers. Most animals are obviously not monogamous, but more to the point, there was no other ethical context in which clerics taught that rational humans should imitate irrational beasts. Boswell has shown that two contradictory ideas about "natural sexuality" seem to have taken hold among writers at about the same time: first, the notion that certain creatures—such as the hare, the hyena, and the weasel—were "innately" homosexual and therefore to be shunned, and second, the belief that homosexuality is "unnatural" because it does not occur at all among animals.⁷ Alan of Lille alludes to both ideas in *De planctu*: although Natura

protests indignantly that every species but man obeys her laws, her own robes display images of such sexually irregular beasts as the “hermaphrodite” bat, the polygamous ram, and the self-castrating beaver.⁸ Helen’s charge of male prostitution also bears on the disputed naturalness of homosexual relations: presumably, if the pleasure were mutual, money would not have to change hands. Ganymede does not deny Helen’s accusation, but complacently acknowledges that sodomy can be a lucrative career path for boys like himself:

Odor lucri bonus est, lucrum nemo vitat;
 Nos, ut verum fatear, precium invitat.
 Hunc, qui vult ditescere, ludum non dimittat!
 Pueros hic evehit, pueros hic ditat. (st. 42)

The smell of cash is good, no one refuses it.
 To tell the truth, the price does tempt us.
 Anyone who wants to earn money should not forsake this sport!
 This game advances boys, it makes them rich.

Like Helen in the debate, Alan’s Natura will also accuse pretty boys of prostituting themselves, “intoxicated with the thirst for money,” and his narrator likewise denounces any man who “sells his sex for the love of gain.”⁹

But the most interesting parallel between “Ganymede” and *De planctu* is a seemingly trivial yet far-reaching metaphor that favors the priority of “Ganymede.” One of the boy’s throwaway arguments on behalf of same-sex love is a grammatical analogy:

Impar omne dissidet, recte par cum pari.
 Eleganti copula mas aptatur mari;
 Si nescis: articulos decet observari;
 Hic et hic gramaticae debent copulari! (st. 36)

Odd couples never accord; like should be paired with like.
 Male is joined to male in an elegant conjunction.
 If you don’t understand, take note of their gender:
 Grammatically speaking, “he” ought to be joined to “him”!

Ganymede’s point is a simple one, witty in part because it seems self-evident. In grammar, two masculines do agree, and a mixed pair creates a solecism. The satirists of the English Renaissance would play on the same conceit in their famous pamphlets against gender-bending, *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir*.¹⁰ A similar grammatical trope occurs earlier in the “Altercatio,” when Ganymede shows his ignorance of the male heterosexual role:

Sed ignorans Frigius vicem predicati
 Applicat se femine, tanquam vellet pati. (st. 8)

But the Trojan youth, not knowing the role of predicate,
 Applies himself to the female as if he wished to be passive.

The metaphor hinges on the suppressed term *subjectum*: the woman is tacitly likened to a grammatical subject (*subjectum*) because her proper sexual position is to lie beneath (*subjecta*). Conversely, the man should play the role of predicate or active verb; but Ganymede, the passive homosexual, is at best a passive or deponent verb. As if to atone for this grammatical *vitium*, he later produces his triumphant claim that a correct *copula* must link two articles of the same gender.

A bit recherché, yet straightforward, these jests make sense in a humorous debate written by and for clerics. Such grammatical jokes and figures, as Jan Ziolkowski has shown, were not uncommon in twelfth-century Latin, especially in satirical texts.¹¹ But when Alan of Lille took up his pen and linked grammar to Nature, the intellectual and moral stakes of the argument would rise considerably. *De planctu* opens with an anti-sodomy lament that alludes to the “Altercatio,” but parlays its simple witticisms into an elaborate conceit:

In lacrimas risus, in luctus gaudia uerto . . .
 Cum Venus in Venerem pugnans illos facit illas
 Cumque sui magica deuirat arte uiros. . . .
 Actiui generis sexus se turpiter horret
 Sic in passiuum degenerare genus.
 Femina uir factus sexus denigrat honorem,
 Ars magice Veneris hermafroditat eum.
 Predicat et subicit, fit duplex terminus idem.
 Gramaticice leges ampliat ille nimis.
 Se negat esse uirum, Nature factus in arte¹²
 Barbarus. Ars illi non placet, immo tropus.
 Non tamen ista tropus poterit translatio dici.
 In uicum melius ista figura cadit. (I.1, 5–6, 15–24)

I turn laughter into tears, joy into mourning . . .
 When Venus, waging war on Venus, makes “hes” into “shes”
 And unmans men with her magical art. . . .
 The sex of the active gender is horrified at itself
 So basely degenerating into the passive gender.
 A man turned woman blackens the honor of his sex:
 The witchcraft of Venus makes him a hermaphrodite.
 He is both predicate and subject, a single ending becomes double:

He extends the laws of grammar too far!
He denies that he is a man, having become a barbarian
In Nature's art. He takes no pleasure in the art, only in a trope—
Yet this metaphor cannot even be called a trope.
Rather, such a figure falls into the category of vice.

In the “Altercatio,” Nature had been present only as a silent judge of the debate; Ganymede’s witticism about *hic et hic* did not directly concern her. But Alan will attempt throughout *De planctu* to counter the case for homosexuality by forging an alliance between grammar and Nature. At the outset, he makes a key move by identifying the *ars grammatica* as an *ars Nature*—not surprising since, as we have seen in the *Anticlaudianus*, he regarded all the liberal arts as protégées of Natura. Alan’s sodomite has become a “barbarian,” that is, hopelessly inept, in the wholesome, elementary art of sexual grammar. “Natural” usage no longer pleases him, for (much like the poet himself) he takes joy only in ornamental figures or metaphors so overwrought that they have become stylistic vices. Rejecting natural grammar, he delights instead in the unnatural art (*ars magica*) of Natura’s nemesis, Venus. This gay sorceress alters genders at will, makes masculines into feminines, confuses actives with passives, and turns predicates into subjects.

So far, so good. But when our poet attempts to take this conceit further, he runs up against an uncomfortable fact of real grammar: just as Ganymede indicated, masculine nouns do require masculine adjectives, and the same holds for the feminine. To evade this difficulty, Alan lets Natura create a fantastic counterfactual grammar in which all nouns are feminine, all adjectives masculine, and all verbs active and transitive. Thus, woman is to be the substantive “modified” (impregnated) by the male adjective; or, alternatively, the passive subject acted upon by the male verb. Anomalies such as neuter nouns, deponent verbs, and reflexive constructions are not allowed to exist. In what seems like an elaborate joke, Natura presents this outlandish grammar as simple and normal; all deviations from it, symbolizing irregular sexual acts, constitute solecisms.

[Natura]: I taught [Venus], as if she were my pupil, which rules of grammar she should admit in the artful unions she constructs, and which she should exclude as anomalous, unredeemed by the excuse of any figure. Since Nature's scheme specifically recognizes two genders, to wit the masculine and the feminine, as grammar bears witness—although certain men deprived of their masculine endings could in my opinion be classified as neuter—I commanded Venus, with secret warnings and great thunderous threats, that in her conjunctions she should celebrate only the natural union of the masculine and the feminine gender, as reason demands. . . . For if

the masculine gender should, for some irrational reason, demand a gender like itself, no decent figure of speech could justify such a faulty construction, but it would be disgraced as a monstrous, inexcusable solecism.

Moreover, my teaching instructed Venus that in her constructions, observing the ordinary rules for subjects and predicates, she should assign the role of subject to the marker of the feminine sex, and place the specified masculine part above it in the predicate position, in such a way that the predicate cannot decline into the subject position, nor the subject migrate into the place of the predicate. And since each requires the other, the predicate (with the quality of an adjective) is urgently attracted to the subject (which retains the quality of a noun).

Furthermore, I enjoined Venus that her conjugations should never admit intransitive constructions, reflexivity, or roundabout passives, but should be content with the directness of transitive verbs alone. . . .¹³

Most critics have been so preoccupied with untangling this snarl of technical terms (which I have simplified slightly) that they have overlooked the obvious point: language simply does not work this way.¹⁴ In the terms of Alan's own metaphor, if heterosexuality is "natural" then grammar is not, and *vice versa*, as Gautier de Coincy would point out later in revisiting the trope:

La gramaire hic à hic acouple,
Mais nature maldit la couple.
La mort perpetuel engenre
Cil qui aimme masculin genre
Plus que le femenin ne face,
Et Diex de son livre l'efface:
Nature rit, si com moi sanble,
Quant hic et hec joignent ensamble;
Mais hic et hic chose est perdue,
Nature en est tot esperdue,
Ses poinz debat et tort ses mains.¹⁵

Grammar couples *hic* and *hic*,
But Nature curses this couple.
He who loves the masculine gender
More than he does the feminine
Engenders everlasting death,
And God erases him from his book.
Nature laughs, it seems to me,
When *hic* and *hec* join together;
But *hic* and *hic* are a lost cause.
Nature is utterly distraught by this:
She beats her fists and wrings her hands.

It is the vernacular poet, rather than the Latin scholar, who accords with the main line of medieval linguistic theory. Aristotle and Augustine had both taught that the rules of speech are conventional rather than natural, and this thesis remained current throughout the twelfth century.¹⁶ In fact, Natura herself seems to acknowledge the violence she is doing to language when she tries (in vain) to extort compliance from Venus “with secret warnings and great thunderous threats.” The spectacular failure of her whole metaphoric structure—which I believe the poet fully intended—parallels the discrepancy we noted earlier between Natura’s austere rhetorical precepts and her aureate practice. So, unless Alan of Lille was of Ganymede’s party without knowing it (which seems most unlikely), we must conclude once again that, in the very act of denouncing sexual sins, *De planctu* demonstrates Nature’s unreliability as a moral guide. Or, to put it differently, Natura cannot be simultaneously the goddess of normative sexuality and normative language.

In Nature’s Forge: From Alan of Lille to Jean de Meun

As we saw in Chapter 2, *De planctu Naturae* seems to have remained little known until the late thirteenth century, when the omnivorous Jean de Meun used it as a key source for his monumental *Roman de la Rose*. Jean adopted many of the goddess Natura’s features from Alan while significantly altering her character and values. Before we turn to Nature’s next metamorphosis, however, a brief summary of the famous poem is in order. Guillaume de Lorris, the shadowy poet who initiated the *Rose* circa 1230, conceived it as an allegorical dream vision in which a callow Lover (Amant) would receive instruction in the Ovidian art of love:

c'est li *Romans de la Rose*,
Ou l'art d'Amors est toute enclose. (ll. 37–38)

This is the *Romance of the Rose*
Where the art of Love is all enclosed.

Upon a May morn, a dreaming, nineteen-year-old Lover ambles into a Garden of Delight and there meets attractive courtly figures (such as Youth, Beauty, Gladness, Largesse) dancing a joyous carol. Idleness admits him to the garden, but uncourtly traits such as Old Age and Poverty (Figure 1.2) are depicted on its exterior wall, marking their exclusion from the realm of pleasure.¹⁷ Presently the Lover reaches the perilous fountain of Narcissus.

Gazing at two bright crystals within its depth, he sees the reflected garden and swiftly homes in on one particular rosebud, which will represent his erotic goal throughout the poem. The Lover's incipient passion is activated by the God of Love (Cupid), whose arrows prompt the smitten youth to do homage and accept the god's commandments. He then proceeds with his courtship of the Rose, but this lady never appears in the poem in her own person. Instead, her receptiveness to his overtures is personified in the masculine figure of Fair Welcome (Bel Acuel). Other characters of both sexes—Jealousy, Fear, Shame, Gossip (Malebouche), and Resistance (Dangier)—oppose the Lover's suit. After an amorous setback, he encounters Lady Reason, who does her best to dissuade him from the follies of love, but he rejects her counsel and seeks the more practical aid of his Friend (Ami). With the Friend's help the Lover manages to steal a kiss. But this act arouses the fury of Jealousy, who builds and garrisons a castle where she imprisons Fair Welcome, posting a canny old woman (*la Vieille*) as jailer and chaperone. Shut out of the castle with little hope of success, the Lover despairs of his plight, and after a little more than four thousand lines, Guillaume abandons his poem.

Jean de Meun, taking up the unfinished romance circa 1270–75, made its delicate plot the foundation of a vast, sprawling edifice that both dwarfs and deconstructs the original. More than seventeen thousand lines later, Jean finally gets the Lover into bed with the Rose, but very little of the intervening text advances the plot. Instead, Jean introduces six lengthy discourses by persons who claim various sorts of authority and purport to instruct the Lover. Lady Reason returns first, attempting to wean Amant's affections away from the Rose by offering herself as a superior *amie*, but he rejects her even more emphatically than before, making himself a case study in the ways of irrational love. Supplanting Reason, the Friend plays the role of an Ovidian mentor, offering cynical advice on erotic strategy interlarded with misogynist slurs voiced by a character of his own invention, the Jealous Husband. False Seeming (Fauseblant) and his female companion, Constrained Abstinence, satirize clerical hypocrisy with special reference to the beguines and mendicant orders, which Jean detested. *La Vieille*—who would serve as a model for Chaucer's Wife of Bath—next advises Fair Welcome, providing him/her with the same kind of tactical counsel that the Friend had offered the Lover. At this point the plot intervenes as the Lover rallies his forces to make an assault on the castle. In the aftermath of their failed raid, the God of Love and his barons realize they will never succeed without the help of his mother, Venus, who is summoned forthwith. Jean's last two speakers,

Nature and Genius, make their orations just before the dénouement, aligning themselves with the forces of Love. With their assistance, Venus sets the castle on fire and the Lover gleefully claims his prize.

Controversial almost from the moment of its publication, the *Rose* has never ceased to stir debate, and there is still no canonical “received reading.” From the *Querelle de la Rose* of 1400 to the critical disputes of the mid-twentieth century, much of the argument turned on the question of which speaker, if any, represents Jean de Meun’s “own” point of view. It is probably truest to say that all of them sometimes do and none of them always do. But the two leading contenders are undoubtedly Reason and Nature, in conjunction with her sidekick Genius.¹⁸ The problem is that these august dames take opposite sides: Lady Reason is an implacable foe of the God of Love, while Lady Nature supports him. This departure from Reason represents a novel and surprising turn in Natura’s history. After all, Bernard Silvestris had introduced the goddess as a daughter of Noys and an exemplar of rational inquiry. In “Ganymede and Helen,” Nature and Reason together decide the case in Helen’s favor, while in the *Anticlaudianus*, it is Natura who sends Prudentia and Ratio on their celestial journey. Although Reason does not appear as a character in *De planctu*, Natura there allies herself with Hymen and Chastity; as a spokesman for the sexual morality of the Church, she would no more endorse Amant’s brand of fornication than Ganymede’s. What, then, prompted Jean de Meun to set Nature and Reason at odds?

To understand Nature’s role in the *Rose*, it is helpful to have some idea of what the God of Love represents. Critics agree that in the original *Rose*, he stands for “courtly love” or *fin’ amors*, the stylized form of desire and courtship that lyricists conventionally opposed to *fol’ amors*. For Jean de Meun, however, this already clichéd distinction had no force: *fin’ amors* is by definition *fol’ amors*, as we see from the Lover’s decisive repudiations of Lady Reason.¹⁹ Thus the God of Love in Jean’s hands serves to debunk his own myth, for he now represents little more than male desire vis-à-vis the female brand personified by Venus.²⁰ More precisely, he stands for the sort of desire that self-serving and self-deluded lovers, such as Amant, pursue hypocritically under cover of *courtoisie*—just as False Seeming and Constrained Abstinence represent carnal desire hidden beneath the cloak of religion. Another complementary pair, the Friend and la Vieille, expose the realities masked by the God of Love’s allegorical fictions when they expound the actual stratagems used by unscrupulous men and women to achieve their desires. Love’s duplicity is further suggested by the ease with which he overcomes his initial scruples and welcomes False Seeming into his retinue.

In her unsuccessful preaching to Amant, Lady Reason tries to expose the Lover's own hypocrisy in a celebrated quarrel over language. While recounting the myth of Saturn's castration, Reason happens to use the colloquial words *viz* ("prick") and *coilles* ("balls")—a lapse at which the Lover professes shock and horror, protesting that such uncouth language hardly belongs in the mouth of a lady. Reason retorts that if there is no obscenity in the members themselves, which were created by God, her father and the fount of all courtesy, then there is nothing obscene about their names. "Balls" by any other name—relics, for example—would serve as well, and moreover it is she, Lady Reason, who invented language and gave everything its proper name, just as her Father taught her. Obscenity lies not in the mention but in the abuse of these members, so it is foolish of the Lover to take umbrage at *verba* when he would not hesitate to employ the *res* for which they stand. Though the Lover more or less concedes the point, he remains unshaken in his own preference for euphemisms. At the end of the romance, when he finally speaks in his own voice, he proves Lady Reason's point by recounting his sexual conquest of the Rose in a hilarious but superficially pious fable about relics, pilgrimage, and shrines. Thus, without using a single word of obscenity, he performs one of the most outrageously explicit sexual monologues in all premodern literature.

This seeming digression leads us straight back to Alan of Lille's Natura, with her strangely distorted relationship to language. As we have seen, Natura in *De planctu* creates a bizarre fantasy version of Latin grammar in order to prove that sexual couplings should be simple and "natural," and she exhorts Venus to use the plainest possible speech, even though Venus herself is a product of Nature's wish to "gild shameful things with the golden trappings of shamefast words," that is, to teach morality by way of mythology. Such antics must have struck Jean de Meun as ironic and irrational, for he gives Natura's *teaching* on plain language to Lady Reason, while permitting the foolish Lover to imitate her self-contradictory *practice*. This paradigmatic case illustrates what I take to be Jean de Meun's response to Alan of Lille throughout the *Rose*. A keenly observant reader of *De planctu*, he discerned the subtle ways that Alan's Natura is divided against herself, reproduced some of them in his own characterization of the goddess, and accentuated others by dividing Alan's material between Lady Nature and Lady Reason.²¹ It is Reason who undertakes the Lover's moral education, though it falls on deaf ears: she counsels him on virtuous love, friendship, and charity, while denouncing the kind of *amors* favored by the God of Love in a speech that Jean has translated verbatim from *De planctu*: "Love is amorous hatred,

disloyal loyalty, confident fear, desperate hope,” and so forth.²² Jean’s Nature, on the other hand, throws in her lot with Amant and the God of Love because her own interest in procreation happens to coincide with theirs in sexual pleasure.²³

When Dame Nature first appears in the *Rose* she is hard at work in her forge, hammering out new individuals to replace those killed by Death. This is the heroic goddess we have met before, the tireless vanquisher of Fate, but her new character as blacksmith proves to be yet another borrowing from Alan. In *De planctu*, we recall, pen and parchment serve as metaphors for sexual organs, doubled by the transparent images of hammer and anvil.

[Natura]: To assure that faithful instruments would preclude the corruption of shoddy workmanship, I assigned [Venus] two prescription hammers with which to undo the snares of the Fates and prepare many kinds of things for existence. I also gave her noble workshops with anvils suited for this craft, instructing her to apply the same hammers to the anvils and devote herself faithfully to the formation of creatures. By no means should she let the hammers stray from the anvils in any deviation.²⁴

The homosexual, of course, does let them stray; in Alan’s mixed metaphor he “strikes on an anvil that coins no sparks” (*semina*) until “his very hammer shudders in horror of its anvil.”²⁵

Jean was less interested in sodomy, but he adapted Alan’s metaphor of the smithy and made it a central feature of the goddess’s iconography. Since Jean had other uses for Venus, he placed the hammer in Nature’s own hand and thus created the phallic goddess who is so memorably pictured by illustrators of the *Rose*. Sometimes she is the cosmic artisan forging birds and animals in her smithy (Figure 3.1) against a backdrop that seems to belong in a Genesis illustration. The “sixth day of creation” image emphasizes Natura’s role as the *vicaria Dei* without whom all life would perish.²⁶ More often, however, she appears to be forging a baby (Figure 3.2). This image, seen in countless miniatures and woodcuts,²⁷ has a faintly disturbing edge. Not only does Nature, with her lithe feminine body, engage in the historically and archetypally masculine labor of the smith, but hers is the very craft the Greeks assigned to Vulcan, the deformed and cuckolded husband of Venus.²⁸ Moreover, if the image is read “literally,” the goddess’s uplifted hammer can take on a more sinister meaning. A slight change of perspective transforms Dame Nature into a most unnatural mother, a veritable Medea poised to smash the vulnerable infant on her anvil, while the floor of her



Figure 3.1. Nature at her forge making birds and beasts. *Roman de la Rose*. Oxford, Bodleian Douce 195, f. 114v. Photo: Bodleian Library.

smithy is strewn with dismembered baby parts. This is not to say that any medieval viewer consciously read the image in such a light, but such grim reverberations may explain why some authors pointedly rejected the figure of Nature the Smith and, as we shall see, gave her a more traditionally feminine craft. One maverick *Rose* illustrator bypassed the signifiers of hammer and anvil entirely, moving straight to the signified. Where the standard iconographic program called for an image of Nature at her forge, he or she depicted two lovers in bed (Figure 3.3).

At first blush, Jean's Nature seems an attractive and authoritative goddess, not far removed from Alan's. Her relationship to God is described in familiar terms, and the narrator waxes eloquent in praise of Nature's beauty, which artists imitate in vain. Jean even introduces a vignette of Art on her knees before Nature, begging for instruction (Figure 3.4):



Figure 3.2. Nature at her forge making a baby. *Roman de la Rose*. London, BL Harley 4425, f. 140r (Netherlands, ca. 1490–1500). Photo: British Library.

Touz jors martele, touz jors forge,
Touz jors ses pieces renovele
Par generacion novele . . .
Qui lor donne formes veroies
En coins de diverses monnoies,
Dont Art fesoit ses exemplaires,
Qui ne fait pas choses si vaires;
Mes par mout ententive cure



Figure 3.3. Nature at her forge (two lovers in bed). *Roman de la Rose*. London, BL Add. 42133, f. 105v (France, early sixteenth century). Photo: British Library.



Figure 3.4. Art kneels before Nature. *Roman de la Rose*. Oxford, Bodleian Douce 195, f. 115v. Photo: Bodleian Library.

A genouz est devant Nature,
 Si prie et requiert et demande,
 Comme mendians et truande,
 Povre de science et de force,
 Qui de sivre la mout s'efforce,
 Que Nature li veille aprendre
 Comment elle puisse comprendre
 Par son engin, en ses figures,
 Proprement toutes creatures. (l 16,010–28)

[Nature] is always hammering and forging,
 Always renewing her creation
 By new acts of generation . . .
 She gives her works true forms
 In coins of different denominations
 From which Art constructs her models—
 Yet the things she makes are not as true.
 But with the most attentive care
 She kneels before Nature,
 Begs and pleads and asks of her
 Like a miserable beggar,
 Poor in knowledge and strength,
 Trying so hard to imitate her,
 That Nature might deign to teach her
 How to subsume all creatures properly
 In her figures by her artistry.

Nature is capable of discoursing on a wide range of philosophical and scientific themes, including the heavenly bodies, elements, meteorology, mirrors, optical illusions, the reconciliation of divine foreknowledge with free will, destiny and contingency, true nobility, and the natural equality of human beings. Yet, in keeping with her subordinate status, she acknowledges her limitations and duly marvels at the Virgin Birth. There seems to be no direct irony in Nature's long philosophical speech. If she seems rambling and unfocused, as some critics have charged, she is no more so than Reason and other characters in the *Rose*, for the digressive style belongs to Jean de Meun himself.

Yet Nature's role is indeed ironic, and its irony arises from the dramatic context Jean creates for her discourse. In appropriating the character of Genius from *De planctu*, Jean retains his “priesthood” but carries it a step further. No longer does Nature merely summon Genius to excommunicate sinners; in the *Rose* she wishes to make a confession. This circumstance casts Genius and Nature in the roles of male priest/confessor and female penitent

(Figure 3.5), enabling Jean to extend the anticlerical satire he had begun through the characters of False Seeming and Constrained Abstinence. In that episode, Fausemblant in the guise of a friar, accompanied by Abstinence dressed as a beguine, had murdered Malebouche by first preaching to him, then persuading him to kneel and confess his sins, whereupon they strangle him and cut out his tongue. This “confession” sets an ominous precedent. Although Genius is no murderer, his priesthood is hardly more authentic than Fausemblant’s. No sooner is he called to Nature’s side than he begins preaching to her, delivering a vicious antifeminist rant addressed, with seeming irrelevance, to husbands. It culminates in the command to “flee, flee, flee, flee, flee” from the dreadful beast called Woman.²⁹ Genius proves to be just as hardened a misogynist as the Jealous Husband, and he even persuades Nature to agree with his assertion that “nothing swears or lies more boldly than a woman.” Worse still, she calls him “courteous and wise” for making such remarks.³⁰ After this preamble, Nature’s authority is hardly enhanced when she begins her denunciation of sin with the admission,



Figure 3.5. Genius gives Nature absolution. *Roman de la Rose*. London, BL Add. 42133, f. 127v (France, early sixteenth century). Photo: British Library.

Fame sui, si ne me puis taire,
 Ains vuel des ja tout reveler,
 Car fame ne puet rienz celer. (19,218–20)

I am a woman and cannot keep silent;
 From now on I wish to reveal everything,
 For a woman can keep nothing secret.

The scene of Nature’s “confession” is not merely anticlerical and anti-feminist. It has a more precise target, for Jean’s satire is aimed sharply and scathingly at beguine spirituality. Indeed, the situation has all the hallmarks of “abuse” that opponents of the beguine movement held up for ridicule.³¹ A loquacious, high-minded woman with pretensions to learning summons “her” priest for confession; he jumps at her bidding, yet does not trouble to hide his contempt for her sex; and she in turn uses confession as a pretext to instruct the priest, rambling interminably about high theological matters and boasting of her intimate relationship with God.

Nul autre droit je n'i reclaime,
 Ains l'en merci quant il tant m'aime
 Que si tres povre damoisele
 A si grant maison et si bele;
 Icis granz sires tant me prise
 Qu'il m'i a por chambrière prise.
 Por sa chambrière? Certes vere,
 Por connestable et por viquere,
 Dont je ne fusse mie digne,
 Fors par sa volenté benigne. (16,775–84)

I claim no other right from him,
 But thank him that he loves me so much
 That he has given me, such a poor damsels,
 Such a great and beautiful mansion.
 This great lord values me so much
 That he has taken me to be his maid.
 His chambermaid? Surely, in fact,
 His vicar and his châtelaine—
 A post which I by no means deserve
 Except through his gracious will.

For a moment Nature sounds like nothing so much as a mystical beguine—Mechthild of Magdeburg, for example—exulting that so great a Sovereign has brought so lowly a maiden to his court.³² But later in her “confession,”

when she is discussing dreams and hallucinations, Nature pauses to debunk religious visions. Some people, she says, through their “great devotion in excessive contemplation,” imagine they see “spiritual substances” and even “hell and paradise” as if they were truly present—yet all this is but “trifling lies.”³³ Nature’s credibility on this point might be challenged, since if a vision were genuinely supernatural, she would by definition be incapable of grasping it. But the satirical technique Jean employs here is one characteristic of him (and his disciple Chaucer), in which a personage simultaneously embodies and exposes the object of satire. Just as Fauseblant (or Chaucer’s Pardoner) explains his hypocritical wiles at the same time that he practices them, so Dame Nature plays the role of a deluded beguine even as she unmasks what Jean took to be the cause of such delusions.

A confession, of course, presupposes a sin. Like the false mystic she is satirizing, Nature takes much longer to parade her wisdom than she does to confess her supposed transgression—and when she finally does so, she reveals only the fallibility of her conscience. For the “sin” that Nature repents is nothing else than the creation of man. “Si m’äist Diex li crucefis, / Mout me repent quant homme fis” (“So help me God who was crucified, I am terribly sorry that I made mankind!” 19,209–10). At a stroke, this misplaced contrition dismantles all the authority Nature has thus far achieved for herself. Ordinarily, of course, man would be seen as Nature’s masterpiece—as indeed he is in the *Cosmographia* and the *Anticlaudianus*, works that Jean knew. If the goddess confesses any “sin” in *De planctu Naturae*, it would be her fateful mistake of deputizing Venus to be the arbiter of human sexuality. In the *Rose*, however, she shows her repentance by *committing* this very sin, for she commands Genius to go at once and bring her greetings to “my friend lady Venus” and her son, the God of Love, offering them her full support in the achievement of Amant’s quest.³⁴ Just as the skeptics always warned, too much intimacy between a woman and her confessor can only end in carnality. Genius for his part absolves Nature and gives her a penance that is “good and pleasing” (*avenant*), just as excessively lax friars were often said to do.³⁵ To crown the irony, her penance consists in resuming her labors in the forge—the very activity she has just confessed as sinful.

Nature’s parodic confession leads into Genius’s still more parodic sermon. Leaving Nature’s forge, he removes his priestly vestments and travels to Love’s camp in secular garb, but on his arrival, the God of Love immediately revests him with the addition of ring, crozier, and mitre—signifying that Nature’s priest has been elevated to the rank of Cupid’s bishop, much to the delight of Venus who “could not stop laughing.”³⁶ If we “translate” the

allegory at this point, Jean seems to be saying that Genius and Nature—or male and female fertility—willingly place themselves at the service of Cupid and Venus, or masculine and feminine desire. Accordingly, Genius in his preaching to Love's barons tells them exactly what they wish to hear:

Arés, por Dieu, baron, arés,
 Et vos linages reparés.
 Se ne pensés forment d'arer,
 N'est rienz qui les puist reparer.
 Rescorciés vous bien par devant,
 Aussi cum por coillir le vent,
 Ou, s'il vous plaist, tuit nu soiés,
 Mes trop froit ne trop chaut n'aiés. (19,701–8)

Ne vous lessiés pas desconfire,
 Grefes avés, pensés d'escrire.
 N'aiés pas les bras emmouflés:
 Martelés, forgiés et souflés. (19,793–96)

Plow, for God's sake, barons, plow,
 And renew your lineages!
 If you don't think of plowing vigorously,
 Nothing can restore them.
 Tuck up your clothes in front,
 As if to wanton with the wind,
 Or if you wish, go completely naked,
 But don't get chilled or overheated.

Don't let yourselves be vanquished!
 You have a stylus; think of writing.
 Don't let your arms be muffled:
 Hammer away, use forge and bellows!

This is “normative heterosexuality” with a vengeance: Genius’s aggressive sexual bravado will be echoed when Amant narrates his quasi-rape of the Rose. As in *De planctu*, the priest excommunicates sodomites, wishing them castration on earth and damnation hereafter. But the real point of interest is a novel one, for “by the authority of Nature” he also excommunicates virgins and celibates, reviving the old argument that, if all men vowed chastity, the human race would quickly die out. St. Jerome had long since refuted that objection with acid realism in his endlessly cited treatise *Against Jovinian*: “Be not afraid that all will become virgins: virginity is a hard matter, and therefore rare.”³⁷ No one, he goes on to say, can maintain

virginity without a special gift from God. But Genius in turn rebuts Jerome by appealing to a version of the categorical imperative. If God truly wills the good and loves all that he has made, he would desire the best path for everyone; but obviously not everyone is called to be a virgin; therefore virginity cannot be the right path for anyone; so “plow, barons, plow!”³⁸ In the eyes of Nature and Genius, procreation is the sovereign duty of man. Genius therefore ends his exhortation by promising heaven to all who toil zealously with their hammers and styluses. To the confusion of some readers and the dismay of others, his version of heaven—the Good Shepherd’s Park—is explicitly and favorably contrasted with the Garden of Delight as described by Guillaume de Lorris. According to Genius, the *locus amenus* where Amant first encountered the God of Love cannot hold a candle to the true Christian paradise that he and Nature have in their power to bestow. To him, the ideological difference between the Lover’s allies is an important one. Be that as it may, from the Lover’s perspective all four deities—Genius and Nature, Venus and the God of Love—collaborate to the same end. Amant’s desire for the Rose appears to be motivated neither by a reverence for ladies nor by zeal to propagate the race, but if he has gleaned anything at all from the ideological harangues he has heard, it is the supreme irrelevance of ideologies.

What of Jean de Meun, though? Since his *Rose* is satirical and didactic in equal measure, he is notoriously hard to pin down. But I would argue that, far from being a “naturalist,” Jean’s treatment of Nature shows that he has carried the supernaturalism of Alan of Lille even further. Alan had envisioned a Nature allied with Reason, but incapable of fathoming divine grace or the mysteries of theology. While Natura in *De planctu* is passionately committed to the natural law that decrees heterosexual union, we saw that her arguments for that law are fraught with contradiction. Jean’s Nature, despite her impressive knowledge of philosophy and science, seems even more limited than Alan’s in that she no longer holds any covenant with Reason. Their old alliance, dating back to the Stoics, has been broken: in the *Rose*, a life “according to Nature” is no longer a simple, rational, and virtuous life but one of promiscuous (though heterosexual) license. Thus the goddess degenerates into “a sort of arms-dealer supplying the wrong side in a war between body and soul.”³⁹ Nature and Genius will have no truck with celibacy because, for them, there is no difference between the Unnatural and the Supernatural: if same-sex relations are unnatural then so, a fortiori, is lifelong virginity. Even marriage has disappeared from the picture, for Hymen, a member of Natura’s retinue in *De planctu*, is nowhere in sight. The *Rose*, then, overtly

fulfills Alan's covert agenda of disabling Nature as a guide to Christian sexual ethics. Henceforth any poet who wanted to argue the compatibility of "natural law" with the Church's teachings on sexuality would, one way or another, have to confront the *Rose*.

Nature at the Court of King Richard: Chaucer's *Parlement of Fowles*

A century after Jean de Meun completed his mammoth oeuvre, two court poets took up the challenge posed by Nature's quarrel with Reason, even as they opened up the momentous question of her relation to Culture. Geoffrey Chaucer, writing at the court of Richard II, used the boy-king's proposed marriage to Anne of Bohemia as occasion for a graceful but searching meditation on the rituals of mating.⁴⁰ In his dream-poem of circa 1380, *The Parlement of Fowles*, "the noble goddesse Nature" (303) presides over a clash between the contingencies of marital politics, which include the inconvenient fact of female consent, and a fantasy of blissful, instinctive sexual love.⁴¹ About twenty-five years later, at a French court thrown into turmoil by the madness of Charles VI, Christine de Pizan would struggle mightily to re-enthrone Lady Reason, even if it meant challenging and redefining what virtually everyone took to be the order of Nature.

Chaucer's *Parlement* is, on the surface, a light and uncomplicated poem. Its narrator, one of those shy and bookish dreamers favored by the poet, begins with a review of his current reading, *The Dream of Scipio*. On retiring for the night, he himself dreams of Scipio Africanus. But the Roman, instead of guiding him through the heavenly spheres, shoves our timid dreamer through the gates of a garden, where he reads two contrasting inscriptions. One promises "that blysful place / Of hertes hele" (127–28), while the other threatens a lifetime of sterility and woe. Evidently both pertain to the Garden of Love, for either heaven or hell may await the lover there. The dreamer, like Amant in the *Rose*, finds himself in a paradisal park where "besyde a welle"—no doubt that of Narcissus—he sees the God of Love sharpening his arrows in the company of Plesaunce, Curteysie, and other less savory members of his troupe. But the dreamer himself is not Cupid's target. Wandering further, he comes upon a temple of brass, sacred to Venus and Priapus. In that luxurious but dismal place, the goddess reclines in *deshabille* in her darkened chamber, attended by her porter Richesse, while all around her the wall paintings tell grim tales of men and women who died for love. The dreamer

leaves this temple with relief and soon reaches a flowery hill where he finds the empress Nature holding her annual court on Valentine's Day—an amorous festival that Chaucer himself invented.⁴² A propos of the goddess, the poet does not disguise his debts:

And right as Aleyn, in the *Pleynt of Kynde*,
Devyseth Nature of aray and face,
In swich aray men myghte hire there fynde. (316–18)

The purpose of Nature's court is to oversee the ceremonial mating of birds, which in a well-established satirical tradition signify various social classes—birds of prey for the nobility, waterfowl for the merchants, and so forth. On her hand the goddess holds her own cherished pet, a beautiful formel or female eagle. She announces only two rules for the ceremony: first, mating will proceed down the social pecking order, beginning with the royal tercel; and second, no match will be concluded without the desired female's consent. Thereupon three eagles—Richard II with his French and German rivals—proceed to sue all day for the hand of the formel, making long courtly speeches to which she has no reply. The other birds finally grow impatient, until Nature allows them to form a parliament or representative assembly to resolve the disputed case. The falcon, speaking for the nobility, sees no alternative to battle—unless the formel herself chooses the suitor that is “worthieste / Of knyghthod, and lengest had used it, / Most of estat, of blod the gentilleste” (548–50). As the formel continues to hold her peace, a goose offers the commonsensical advice that the rejected suitors should give up and look elsewhere. All the “gentil foules” laugh her to scorn, and the faithful turtledove proposes as an alternative that they should serve the lady until they die, even if she “everemore be straunge” (584). A duck agrees with the goose; a cuckoo says that if the rivals can reach no accord they should all remain single. Nature finally reminds the formel of her right to choose, but adds the advice she would give “if I were Resoun” (632): namely, do as the falcon urged and choose the royal bird. Opening her beak at last, the formel declines all three suits, saying she “wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide, / Forsothe as yit, by no manere weye” (652–53). Undaunted, Nature grants her a year's reprieve, exhorting the three tercels to continue their love-service until she is ready to decide. Without further ado, the remaining birds merrily pair off and fly away, first singing a roundel “to don Nature honour and plesaunce” (676).

Several reasons for the anticlimactic ending can be offered, among them Chaucer's well-known avoidance of narrative and intellectual closure; the

literary fashion for *demandes d'amour* that a live audience might continue to debate;⁴³ and not least the likelihood that Richard's actual marriage negotiations were still pending at the time of the poem. But if we were to take the *Parlement* more seriously than it takes itself, we could point to certain deep-seated contradictions that make it impossible for Nature to resolve the dispute she has set in motion. For, despite the festive occasion and the lightness of tone, the goddess turns out to be under no slight ideological pressure. Most obviously, she is supposed to provide a clear alternative to Venus in her oppressive "temple of bras" (231).⁴⁴ As in *De planctu*, Nature represents wholesome, fertile sexuality as opposed to the destructive and barren sort that Venus governs: the hot sighs, pale faces, and broken lives on display in the temple contrast vividly with the leafy, blossoming glade where Nature rules. Nature's matches appear to be marriages rather than adulterous liaisons; and since the formel in particular is being groomed for queenship, some critics have gone so far as to equate the goddess's political match-making with that service to the "commune profit" that Scipio commands to his grandson (75).⁴⁵ Yet this antinomy is complicated by the ambiguous position of "Cupide, oure lord" (212), whose persona comes straight from the *Rose*. Although Venus is interpreted *in malo*, her son seems to be at least morally neutral. The three tercels all speak the language of *fin' amors*, while the reluctant formel equates the marriage she begs to defer with the service of "Venus [and] Cupide." In short, it is not clear whether the God of Love is a guest in Nature's garden or she in his.

Jean de Meun's Nature willingly aligns herself with Venus and Cupid, although her real interest lies in procreation and not *fin' amors*, much less marriage. But Chaucer, much as he admired the *Rose*, could not take it at face value. In fact, in the prologue to his *Legend of Good Women*, the God of Love appears to the poet and denounces him as a mortal foe for translating the *Rose* into English:

Thou maist yt nat denye,
For in pleyn text, withouten nede of glose,
Thou hast translated the *Romaunce of the Rose*,
That is an heresy ayeins my lawe,
And makest wise folk fro me withdrawe. (F prologue, vv. 327–31)

Chaucer's God of Love fears and despises the *Rose* because he understands that Jean was really on Reason's side and wrote the romance to dissuade potential lovers. Even though Chaucer protests as usual that he is just an innocent translator, Cupid presumably articulates the poet's own reading of

the *Rose* as ironic. To represent Nature as a sympathetic figure and love as a politically useful force, then, Chaucer would have had to distance his goddess from Jean de Meun's. He does so by making his Nature more "rational," less obsessed with sex and more attuned to the social niceties, but this new concern with propriety causes her no end of trouble.

On the one hand, the poem encourages us to see Nature as the embodiment of all that is simple, joyful, instinctual, and fertile. Under her blithe dominion the pairing of all birds, except for the long-winded tercels, goes off without a hitch: no duck would dream of refusing her drake. On the other hand, Chaucer's Nature makes herself a champion of Culture in the form of social hierarchy: it seems utterly natural to her that the birds should choose their mates "by ordre" (400). But naturalizing class privilege also means naturalizing the rules of the social elite, which are in this case the rules of the God of Love. Very little about this courtly code could be described as instinctual, and the bemused or angry reactions of the more plebeian birds hint that Nature ought to be on their side. Who after all is more "natural"—the tercels, who feel compelled to cloak their political desire in the language of erotic desire, or the waterfowl, who see no point in making a masochistic cult of unrequited love? Again, who is more "natural"—the lower-class birds flying off in unproblematic pairs, or the aristocratic formel who can scarcely bear the thought of her matrimonial fate? Nature is in no position to resolve this dilemma because it is of her own making. Her two stated principles—social hierarchy and female choice—conflict first with the principle of instinct that she is supposed to embody, and secondly with each other (for the formel disregards her advice to marry the "gentilleste" suitor). In any case, the appealing fiction occludes the fact that in real life Anne of Bohemia had little say about her marital "choice," which was a decision reserved for her brother, the Holy Roman Emperor.

Within the framework of Chaucer's fable, it is interesting that Nature commands the royal suitor only by stating what she would say "if I were Resoun." This concession acknowledges that considerations of political self-interest cannot always be reconciled with the heart's desire—and the formel's heart may have reasons that Reason knows not of.⁴⁶ Elaine Tuttle Hansen has recently asked if she does not refuse the three males because she prefers her current status as the darling of a great goddess. "Nature hireself hadde blysse," after all, "To loke on hire, and ofte hire bek to kysse" (377–78). So "why should the formel desire, instead of this divine adoration by one of her own sex, any of the three egotistical, scrappy eagles who care only for themselves, for each other, and for the prestige of possessing her?"⁴⁷

Whatever the formel might think, it is true that Nature—despite her well-known heterosexual tendencies—cherishes her more than she does any of the male birds. In this particular, the formel resembles many another romance heroine who is represented as Nature's special favorite, or the pride of her atelier. This connection of Nature's prowess with exemplary *female* beauty was not inevitable, for in both the *Cosmographia* and the *Anticlaudianus* we see the goddess laboring to produce a perfect *male* body. Far more common, however, are scenes such as the creation of the beauteous Virginia in *The Physician's Tale*:

Nature hath with sovereyn diligence
Yformed hire in so greet excellence,
As though she wolde seyn, "Lo! I, Nature,
Thus kan I forme and peynte a creature,
Whan that me list; who kan me countrefete?" (9–13)

This *topos* usually functions, as it does in both the *Parlement* and the *Physician's Tale*, to depict a woman as a supreme object of masculine desire. The only way to outdo the *topos* would be to describe a woman as so beautiful that she must have been made not by Nature at all, but directly by the hand of God, like Chaucer's Criseyde.⁴⁸ But—to carry Hansen's question a step further—what might happen if such a masterpiece were to become Nature's *own* object of desire, or if the goddess took particular delight in creating women like herself? These are questions that perhaps only a female writer could have thought to broach.

Nature and Culture: Christine's Revisionist Myths

Early in his career, Chaucer served his literary apprenticeship by translating the *Romance of the Rose*. Early in hers, Christine de Pizan achieved celebrity by her relentless attack on that poem. Her famous critique of Jean de Meun in the *Querelle de la Rose* need not be rehearsed here, but we should note its obverse: the strategy of writing her own allegories to undo the damage she believed Jean to have done in his.⁴⁹ In particular, she took pains to reinvent Jean's allegorical figures so as to make them serve feminist ends. Thus, in her *Epistle of the God of Love* (1399), she turns the tables by making Cupid himself “excommunicate” misogynists such as Jean de Meun and seducers such as Amant, in response to a series of complaints from women. In *The City of Ladies* (1405) she rehabilitates Jean's Lady Reason, whom she found all too

irrational in her defense of obscenity; and in two less familiar works, *The Book of the Mutation of Fortune* (1403) and *Christine's Vision* (1405), she takes up the cause of Lady Nature. Although the goddess occupies relatively little space in these texts, they mark a significant departure in her history. In them Christine articulates a new and strikingly feminized iconography for Dame Nature; reimagines her relationship to the divine; and repositions the goddess as a vehicle to discuss gender and culture rather than sexuality.

The Mutation of Fortune is an ambitious universal history prefaced by Christine's personal history, stressing the ambiguous role of Fortune in both narratives. The author represents her life as a tug of war between two goddesses: Lady Nature creates her to be a woman, but Lady Fortune has transformed her into a man. The autobiographical section begins with a eulogy for Christine's beloved father, "a noble and renowned man, who was known as a philosopher." Thomas de Pizan's legacy is symbolized by two priceless jewels, which stand for his twin professions of astrology and medicine. After a glowing account of her father's attainments, Christine launches into still more generous praise of her mother:

My mother who was great and grand and more valorous than Penthesilea (God had made her well!) surpassed my father in knowledge, power, and value, despite the fact that he had learned so much. She was a crowned queen from the moment that she was born. Everyone knows of her power and strength. It is clear that she is never idle, and, without being overbearing, she is always occupied with many, diverse tasks: her impressive works are found everywhere; every day she creates many beautiful ones. Whoever wanted to count all that she has done and continues to do would never finish. She is old without being aged, and her life cannot end before Judgment Day. God gave her the task of maintaining and increasing the world as He had made it, in order to sustain human life: she is called Lady Nature. She is the mother of every person: God thus calls us all brothers and sisters.⁵⁰

Christine gives herself a sublime and mythic parentage. Like Aeneas, she is the child of a goddess and a mortal man, albeit one of nearly superhuman virtues. In this way she occludes her biological mother who, as she later reveals, did not encourage her daughter's intellectual ambitions, though otherwise treating her kindly enough. So, to endow herself with a female parent worthy of her esteemed father, Christine laid claim to a whole series of allegorical mothers and mentors: the Sibyl in *The Path of Long Study* (Figure 1.5), Lady Philosophy in *Christine's Vision* (Figure 1.6), Lady Reason in *The City of Ladies* (Figure 1.4), and here Lady Nature.⁵¹ The goddess is depicted as an awesome virago, more valiant than the Amazon queen whom Christine would extol in *The City of Ladies* (I.19), while still playing her traditional role

as God's partner in creation. In reaction against Jean de Meun, however, Christine desexualizes Nature's creative work, suppressing the blacksmith image. To invest the goddess's universal motherhood with a moral rather than merely biological character ("God calls us all brothers and sisters"), she even paradoxically invokes Mark 3.35. In its biblical context that verse serves, like Christine's allegory itself, to elevate the spiritual at the expense of the natural family: Jesus rejects the claims of his own biological mother with the assertion that "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Thomas de Pizan, writes his daughter, strongly desired a son who could inherit his wealth (that is, his learning), but it was not to be:

He failed in his intention, for my mother [Nature], who had much more power than he, wanted to have for herself a female child resembling her, thus I was in fact born a girl; but my mother did so much for him that I fully resembled my father in all things, only excepting my gender. . . . But because I was born a girl, it was not at all ordained that I should benefit in any way from my father's wealth, and I could not inherit, more because of custom than justice, the possessions that are found in the very worthy fountain [of the Muses].⁵²

It is Nature who shapes Christine to be her father's daughter in mind and spirit, but Nature too who makes her a woman in her own image and likeness. Thus the writer carefully avoids blaming the goddess for her gender or hinting that femaleness is in any way a defect. Instead, she denounces the injustice that bars women from the learned professions.

While Christine clearly viewed sexism as unnatural, just what she considered to be "natural" is no easy question. Alan of Lille's Natura had acknowledged her ignorance of theology, while Jean de Meun's Nature not only opposed the counsel of Reason, but explained that rationality was a divine gift beyond her purview.⁵³ Christine seems at first to oppose Jean's position outright. She recounts that her mother Nature gave her a golden crown set with four precious jewels—not as precious as her father's, to be sure, yet more freely available. These gems are Discretion, Consideration, Recollection, and Memory, all endowments pertaining to reason. As if anticipating objections, however, Christine corrects herself with a more theologically precise explanation. Such qualities in fact belong to the soul, which is God's direct creation, for Nature fashions only bodies. Yet they are indeed her gifts insofar as the body's composition gives some people a greater receptiveness to intellectual gifts, while others have a diminished capacity for them. Thus, Christine concludes, "Nature allows or denies to us the opening of the

body to the goods of the soul, according to the diverse capacities of the body to receive them, although God sends the soul into the body.”⁵⁴ In this way she accounts for the natural inequality of human endowments while denying that gender is responsible for it, except insofar as “custom” or Culture distorts the intentions of Nature.

Yet Fortune giveth what Custom taketh away. When Christine reaches marriageable age, her “beautiful mother Nature” places her “in the service of a lady of high birth, who was slightly related to her, although they did not look at all like each other, and they were not cut from the same cloth.”⁵⁵ This lady is Fortune, a goddess of dubious provenance. Christine’s master Boethius had thoroughly discredited her, as had Alan of Lille in the *Anti-claudianus*, in a passage echoed by Jean de Meun’s Reason and later by Christine herself. By pointing out the distant kinship and lack of affinity between the two queens, Christine could only be disparaging Lady Fortune. Nevertheless, Fortune at first favors her, giving her ten happy years at the court of Hymen. But after the death of her husband, allegorized as a disaster at sea, Christine feels her ship to be floundering and nearly throws herself overboard in grief. At this point Fortune intervenes once more. In the most celebrated passage of her poem, Christine recounts the “mutation of Fortune” that transformed her into a man. A physical sex change supplies the metaphor for a change of vocation and gender roles, as the vicissitudes of fate—emotional loss and financial need—give Christine what her sex had initially denied her: the right and obligation to chart the course of her own voyage.

Wearied by long crying, I remained, on one particular occasion, completely overcome; as if unconscious, I fell asleep early one evening. Then my mistress came to me, she who gives joy to many, and she touched me all over my body; she palpated and took in her hands each bodily part, I remember it well; then she departed . . . I awakened and things were such that, immediately and with certainty, I felt myself completely transformed. I felt my limbs to be stronger than before, and the great pain and lamentation which had earlier dominated me, I felt to be somewhat lessened. Then I touched myself all over my body, like one completely bewildered. Fortune had thus not hated me, she who had transformed me, for she had instantly changed the great fear and doubt in which I had been completely lost. Then I felt myself much lighter than usual and I felt that my flesh was changed and strengthened, and my voice much lowered, and my body harder and faster. However, the ring that Hymen had given me had fallen from my finger, which troubled me, as well it should have, for I loved it dearly.⁵⁶

This startling sex change is framed and legitimized by Ovidian tales. Christine likens Fortune to Circe, noting that she can change men into beasts

and beasts into “lords so great that everyone tries to please them.”⁵⁷ From Ovid, too, come the metamorphoses of Tiresias and of Iphis, a girl raised as a boy to escape the wrath of a tyrannical king, then changed into an actual boy on the eve of his wedding.⁵⁸ In ascribing these mythic transformations to Lady Fortune, Christine opposes a powerful counterforce to Lady Nature: identity is shaped not only by birth, but just as much by random chance and political circumstance. In her own case, the trope of “becoming a man” means much the same as it did in early Christian hagiography: the martyr Perpetua dreamed that she had become a man on the eve of her battle with wild beasts in the arena, while the transvestite monks Marina and Euphrosyna (both commemorated in *The City of Ladies*) lived out their entire religious lives in male garb.⁵⁹ In this context the virile woman is one who possesses the intelligence, courage, and integrity that cultural norms denied to women as such. Yet why would Christine, with her insistence on the natural worth and equality of women, have felt the need to describe her transformation in such terms? The answer seems to be twofold.⁶⁰ First, she had represented her period of mourning as a near-suicidal depression, curable only by radical means: only by ceasing to be a woman at all could she cease to be a helpless widow and thus acquire control of her life. She needed to be released not from womanhood as such, but from what contemporary moralists stigmatized as “womanish grief.” Second and more obviously, the new social roles she would undertake—as poet, scholar, political adviser, and primary wage-earner for her family—were in all eyes the roles proper to a man.

But Christine ends her account on a note of resignation and wistfulness:

As you have heard, I am still a man and I have been for a total of more than thirteen full years, but it would please me much more to be a woman, as I used to be when I used to talk with Hymen, but since Fortune has transformed me so that I shall never again be lodged in a woman’s body, I shall remain a man, and with my Lady Fortune I shall stay.⁶¹

Does the lady protest too much? Even though she notes that the jewels in her mother Nature’s crown, that is, her rational faculties, “grew much bigger” when she became a man, the protagonist Christine feels nostalgia for her original gender and still uses feminine adjectives (*estrangiee*, *logiee*) to modify her “virile” persona. Meanwhile, the author Christine is still casting about for a feminine—and feminist—poetics. In her two great works of 1405, *The City of Ladies* and *Christine’s Vision*, she would find one.⁶² So her metamorphosis, like that of Tiresias, proves to be transient after all: Lady Fortune will be cast out as Lady Nature returns triumphant.

Lavision-Christine deals primarily with French politics, but begins with an original and puzzling allegory of Nature. Midway through the pilgrimage of life, as Christine writes in homage to Dante, she has a marvelous dream, in which she beholds a Cosmic Man whose head pierces the clouds, while his feet span the abyss and his belly is wide as the earth. His eyes radiate brightness and his mighty breaths fill the world with freshness. With his insatiable mouth he takes in “material and corruptible bodies” as nourishment, and from his lower orifice he purges himself.⁶³ The Cosmic Man is dressed in a beautiful, subtly colored robe of silk, and on his forehead are stamped five letters spelling the name C*H*A*O*Z. Beside him stands “a great crowned shade in the form of a woman” who resembles a powerful queen.⁶⁴ Although this lady is never named, she is obviously Nature. Her duty is to attend to the continual feeding of Chaos, and for that purpose she is surrounded by cooking utensils, which Christine compares to the waffle irons one sees in Parisian shops. In her cosmic kitchen she compounds a “mortar” of bitter, sweet, heavy, and light (“fiel, miel, plomb, et plume”) and pours it ceaselessly into her molds, which she then bakes in the enormous, furnace-like mouth of Chaos. As soon as she takes them out, little bodies spring from the molds, but immediately Chaos swallows them alive into his vast belly. Day and night the lady continues to feed him. As Christine’s spirit draws nearer to witness the marvel, it falls into the hands of Nature, and she too is molded and baked like the others. At the lady’s express wish “and not because of the mold,” Christine is given a female body.⁶⁵ After she has been swallowed up by Chaos, the lady’s chambermaid comes and gives her a sweet liqueur to drink. Nourished within the body of Chaos, she matures and begins to learn about “the diversity within the figure’s belly,” that is, the world.

Christine’s original myth may have been distantly influenced by Plato’s *Timaeus*, in which the world is called a living animal, but it stands self-consciously aside from the tradition of Bernard Silvestris, Alan of Lille, and Jean de Meun. The figure of Chaos is the first surprise, for male mythic figures of this type are much rarer than goddesses in medieval literature. The closest analogue to Christine’s Chaos may be the Cosmic Man who dominates Hildegard of Bingen’s *Liber vite meritorum* (*Book of Life’s Merits*). But Hildegard’s figure signifies God, while Christine’s emphatically does not. In fact, the single reference to God in her myth occurs in the modesty preface, where she defends her vision on the ground that “the secrets of the Most High are not hidden from the most simple.”⁶⁶ Apart from this covert claim to authority, Christine’s revisionist myth makes no attempt to insert itself into a Christian world-picture. Her Chaos is an insistently material deity; his oven-like mouth represents the womb and his belly the world. The male, not

the female, is thus made to signify corporeality, insatiable appetite, and inexhaustible plenitude. In a delightful inversion of the scatology such a myth might lead us to expect, the “excrement” of Chaos is pure spirit, for only departing souls can leave the world-system in which all matter is endlessly recycled.

Strangely, however, Nature herself has become incorporeal. Christine calls her an *ombre* or shade (recalling Dante’s disembodied spirits) and emphasizes that she had “no visible or tangible body.” The materiality of Chaos and the spirituality of Nature go some distance toward reversing traditional gender stereotypes. But in other respects, Nature seems more feminine than in the myth elaborated by Jean de Meun. No longer a hammer-wielding smith, she is now charged with the typically female tasks of cooking and feeding a man. As Sylvia Huot has perceptively observed, the use of this metaphor for Nature’s creative work subordinates the act of sexual intercourse to the gestation of the fetus in the womb. “From the male perspective, procreation is centered on the moment of sexual conquest . . . From the female perspective, however, procreation is a process of growth which begins with fertilization . . . and ends with fruition, itself a new beginning.”⁶⁷ In the *Rose* a phallic Nature with her hammer and anvil had informed a poetics of male desire (Figure 3.2); in *Christine’s Vision* Nature in her kitchen assimilates the work of reproduction to everyday female labor.

Once again Christine stresses the intentionality of Nature in assigning gender to bodies. As in *The Mutation of Fortune*, she is born female because Lady Nature wills it so, not because of any defect or irregularity in the “mold.” Here Christine implicitly rejects the Aristotelian view of women as deficient males, an idea sanctioned by Thomas Aquinas and refuted by Reason in *The City of Ladies*.⁶⁸ The unnamed “chambermaid” of Nature, a “wise woman” who feeds the newborn babe with a “sweet and very mild liquid,” must be Christine’s biological mother, now given a modest role to complete the myth’s validation of maternity above virile potency.⁶⁹

Much later in the text, Nature makes one more brief but telling appearance. Christine is recounting the first stages of her career as a scholar and writer. As she begins to deepen her knowledge of poetry,

Nature rejoiced in me and said: “Daughter, be happy when you have fulfilled the desire I have given you, continue to apply yourself to study, understanding the writings better and better.” All this reading was not enough to satisfy my thoughts and intelligence; rather, Nature wanted that new books should be born from me, engendered by study and by the things I had seen. Then she said to me: “Take your tools and hammer on the anvil the matter I will give you, as durable as iron: neither fire nor anything else can destroy it; from this you should forge delightful things. When

you carried your children in your womb, you felt great pain when giving birth. Now I desire that new books should be born from you, which you will give birth to from your memory in joy and delight; they will for all time to come keep your memory alive before the princes and the whole world. Just [as] a woman who has given birth forgets the pain and labor as soon as she hears her child cry (John 16.21), you will forget the hard work when you hear the voices of your books.”⁷⁰

This is Nature’s first appearance as a literary muse. With remarkable economy Christine links a number of her central insights about vocation and gender. In the first place she stresses, as in *The Mutation of Fortune*, that it is Nature herself who endowed her with an aptitude for learning: thus the goddess’s old covenant with Reason, broken by Jean de Meun, is back in force. By identifying her intellectual ability as Nature’s gift, this time without qualifications, Christine defuses the objection that scholarship and writing are unnatural activities for a woman. No longer does she have to become a man in order to write: what need is there to “father” books when she can mother them? So, in the second place, she revises the ancient analogy between creation and procreation. Alan of Lille had used writing as a metaphor for sex; Christine reverses tenor and vehicle to make childbirth a metaphor for writing. Even as she adapts the hammer-and-anvil image from the *Rose*, she desexualizes it and strips away the salacious innuendoes with which Jean de Meun had invested the writing process. Unlike Jean’s goddess Nature at her forge, forever toiling to produce ephemeral bodies, Christine as Nature’s protégée will forge something indestructible and “durable as iron”—namely her books—to attain the same immortality sought by her male precursors. Finally, as she so often does at crucial junctures in her work, she invokes the Gospel and the long monastic tradition that contrasted the pain of carnal childbirth with the joy of spiritual motherhood. Her labor pangs as a writer are to issue in transcendence and eternal memory, in a sublimation of maternity that proceeds from the same feminine Nature who gave her a female body in the first place. Transcending the dichotomy of Nature and Culture, Christine now depicts the rehabilitated goddess prompting her to take the first steps on a path that will lead to the most sublime of her mentors, Lady Philosophy—and that goddess, as we saw in Chapter 1, “is properly God.”

Testing the Norms: Nature, Nurture, *Silence*

All the antinomies we have seen within Nature’s compass—heterosexual versus homosexual desire, biological versus social gender, reproduction versus

abstinence, plain speech versus linguistic play, female achievement versus unjust laws—converge almost uncannily in *Silence*, a French romance from the second half of the thirteenth century.⁷¹ By a fluke of literary history this poem, which survives in a single manuscript,⁷² was lost until 1911, first published in an obscure serial in the 1960s, roundly ignored for twenty more years, then “discovered” by feminist and poststructuralist critics in the 1980s. But the romance’s belated critical reception is not the only reason it seems fetchingly postmodern. Its transvestite hero/ine is called “Silence” and its authorship, fittingly enough, remains shrouded in mystery. “Master Heldris of Cornwall,” the self-identified poet, is otherwise unknown. Linguistic features indicate that the text originated in Picardy, not Cornwall, and the poet’s name is almost certainly a pseudonym, possibly that of a woman.⁷³ Since Heldris uses masculine pronouns for the biologically female Silence,⁷⁴ I will return the compliment by using feminine pronouns for the culturally male author, whose “true” identity eludes us. Whoever Heldris was, she knew *De planctu Naturae* and may have known the *Roman de la Rose*. Although we cannot be sure which poem is earlier, *Silence* can be read as an elaborate, ambivalent gloss on a speech Jean de Meun puts in the mouth of la Vieille:

Touz jors Nature retorra,
Ja por habit ne demorra.
Que vaut ce? Toute creature
Vuet retourner a sa nature,
Ja nou lera por violence
De force ne de convenience.

* * * * *
Trop est fors chose de Nature:
Nature passe norreture. (14,025–38)

Nature always comes running back:
No habit will ever chase her out.
What is that worth? Every creature
Wishes to return to its nature;
It will never forsake it through the violence
Of force, promise, or convenience.

* * * * *
Too mighty a force is Nature:
Nature surpasses Nurture.

The maxim that “Nature passe norreture” was proverbial,⁷⁵ but no text prior to *Silence* constructs “Norreture” as an allegorical character. In Heldris’s romance, Nature and Nurture come onstage in person to argue about the protagonist’s gender.

But first the plot. The tale begins when Ebain, King of England, ends a war by marrying the ironically named Norwegian princess Eufeme (“good wife” or “alas, woman!”).⁷⁶ Soon afterward two counts are slain in a duel over the inheritance of their wives, and Ebain in his anger decrees that “no woman shall ever inherit again / in the kingdom of England” (RM 314–15). This rash law sets the stage for all that follows.⁷⁷ When the brave, handsome Sir Cador slays a dragon and nearly dies of its venom, he is healed by the beautiful, learned Eufemie (“good speech”).⁷⁸ The two fall in love in proper courtly fashion and Ebain arranges their marriage, allowing Eufemie—an only child and now the bride of his heir apparent—to inherit Cornwall from her father. Cador and Eufemie also produce one child, a daughter, but they are determined to circumvent the king’s decree and make her their heir. Hence they name the child “Silence” and disguise her from birth in boy’s clothing.⁷⁹ Silence receives a chivalric education and soon demonstrates great skill in jousting and other knightly sports. Upon reaching puberty, s/he ponders the wisdom of remaining disguised, but quickly realizes that “a man’s ways are worth more than a woman’s” (2637–38). Nevertheless, Silence runs away with a pair of traveling minstrels in order to learn some gender-neutral skills that will stand him in good stead if he is ever unmasked. In minstrelsy he quickly surpasses his masters and, fleeing their murderous envy, strikes out on his own.

Silence eventually makes his way to the court of Ebain, where he has the misfortune to become the love-object of Queen Eufeme. Silence does not reciprocate her passion but pleads feudal honor, so the queen—unaware that she herself loves a woman—accuses Silence of being a homosexual and even a male prostitute.⁸⁰ Eufeme tries to avenge herself on the unwilling boy by staging a fictive rape and accusing him. When her “Potiphar’s wife” scheme fails, she sends Silence to the king of France with a forged letter demanding the bearer’s execution. But the canny French king, wiser than Ebain, defies the order and grants Silence knighthood instead. Summoned back to England, the new knight heroically saves the king’s life in a battle against rebellious counts. Now in high favor with Ebain, Silence is victimized once again by the wrathful Eufeme. This time she tries to get rid of him by sending him on a quest to capture Merlin, knowing that only a woman can succeed in that task. Silence does catch the sly master of disguise, with Merlin’s own help, but his success inevitably leads to his exposure. In the final scene, a laughing Merlin appears at court and unmasks not only Silence but also Eufeme—who turns out to have been keeping a male lover disguised as a nun for many years. Enraged, Ebain has his queen and her

lover put to death, repeals the law against female inheritance, and marries the newly regendered heiress, Silence.

This tantalizing tale has been diversely interpreted. Some critics read the ending as a victory, others as a defeat for Silence, while Heldris has been variously hailed as a protofeminist, denounced as a misogynist, and post-modernized as a champion of ambiguity and indeterminacy.⁸¹ The reading I will propose stands at an oblique angle to most others, for, rather than focusing on the central figure, I will read *Silence* as if its protagonist were Nature herself. From the vantage point of this study, it is Heldris who, more than any other medieval poet except Alan of Lille, most fully probes the dilemmas posed by Nature: How far does her power extend and what are its limits? How much that goes by the name of “nature” is actually due to nurture, or to human choice, custom, or chance? If it is possible to tamper with Nature’s will, is it ever desirable? If indeed “Nature / Signorist desor Noreture” (“Nature has lordship over Nurture,” 2423–24), is her sovereignty benign or despotic? The goddess’s contested terrain in *Silence* turns out to involve not only gender, but also class, morality, and even species.

Heldris highlights the significance of Nature by using the word more than forty times in the prominent end-rhyme position. In at least eight of these occurrences, *Nature* is made to rhyme with *aventure*—the element of chance, high-stakes gambling, and open-ended questing central to romance.⁸² For Nature in *Silence* is playing against the odds, like a famous but aging knight who must fend off all challengers to retain his title. The goddess stakes her all on her masterpiece, the lovely child in whom she means to show the full extent of her power, but she brooks a forceful challenge from her adversary, Nurture, and loses the first several rounds of the fight. Nature bides her time angrily and at length emerges triumphant, only to carry off a pyrrhic victory that would not have been possible without Merlin’s clairvoyance and Ebain’s heavy-handed authority—two forces that are not at all “natural.”

The question at stake in Nurture’s challenge is whether anyone can or should be “denatured,” temporarily or permanently. The possibility first arises at the stereotypical moment when Cador falls in love and complains that he is no longer able to nurture (*norir*) his own flesh:

S'en moi peüst valoir *Nature*,
 Ja voir si estrange *aventure*
 A mon las cor n'en avenist . . .
 Mais jo sui tols denaturés
 Et si cuic estre enfaiturés. (1027–32)

If Nature could prevail in me,
 Such a strange adventure
 Would not be happening to my weary body . . . ,
 But I am all denatured:
 I think I have been bewitched.

Cador's "denaturing" is conventional and of short duration, yet Heldris implies that if love had not defeated nature in him, Silence would never have been begotten. The tale of the hero/ine's own, much less conventional, denaturing is introduced with the same rhyme pair when Heldris remarks, after Silence's christening,

Or vos ai jo dite la some,
 L'equison de ceste *aventure*,
 Com cis ouevrent contre *Nature*,
 Ki l'enfant on si desvoié . . . (2252–55)

Now I have told you the whole
 Reason for this adventure:
 How [Cador and Eufemie] worked against Nature
 When they made the child deviate from Nature's path . . .

After eighteen years of this deviant life, the almost fully denatured Silence finds himself in combat, fighting to save his own and Ebain's life, and sends up a hasty prayer:

Silences dist: "Bials Dex, chaieles, . . .
 Cho qu'afoblle en moi *Nature*
 Cho puist efforcier T'*aventure*." (5604–8)

Silence said, "Dear God, I beg you, . . .
 What Nature has made weak in me
 Your own *aventure* can make strong."

Here even God seems to be enjoying Silence's adventure and raising the stakes against Nature. Our virgin warrior is briefly aligned with all the female saints and martyrs who revealed God's "strength perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12.9), even if the weakness s/he claims at this juncture is purely rhetorical. Heldris remarks a few lines later, after the hero has happily lopped off a few more arms and legs of the enemy, that "God was on Silence's side, as you can plainly see, for he won the war" (RM 5646–47). If Nature is to prevail in this contest, her victory will be at least as hard won.

The goddess makes her first appearance in the scene of Silence's birth.

Heldris's Nature, like Christine de Pizan's, is a bakerwoman.⁸³ Proud of her art, Nature announces her intention to create a masterpiece (*ouvre forcible*): she is tired of crude, vulgar work and resolves to use only her finest white flour and her most exquisite mold. With her own hand she inscribes (*escrit*) the girl's delicate features and paints her face with lilies and roses, asserting that "once in a while I must show what I can do" (RM 1885). Having invested so much in Silence, Nature sees the child as her own little girl ("sa puciele," 1868; "ma mescine," 1873; "ma fille," 1927). Thus she is furious when Cador and Eufemie deface her art by "changing her daughter into a son" (RM 2263). What seems to irritate her most is that Silence's lovely complexion will be damaged, for as a boy he must be tanned by the sun and hardened by winds. This concern recurs throughout the text and surfaces once more at the end: after Silence is revealed to be a woman, Nature takes three days to "repolish" her entire body, removing every trace of suntan, before she can marry the king. This obsession with surfaces suggests that gender itself is a superficial matter: Silence's core identity cannot or does not change, but a new dress and a makeover suffice to restore her womanhood.

The scene set in Nature's bakery serves Heldris for an extended commentary not on gender but on class. The narrator explains that Nature has many grades of dough or flour: "She always makes quality folk from the refined clay, and riff-raff from the coarse" (RM 1833–34). Deviations from the expected norm—aristocrats aren't always noble, nor peasants base—are explained by defects in the baking process: if a little coarse matter is mixed in with the fine, it goes straight to the heart and sullies the whole creation. Conversely, some men of low birth possess a noble character because they have, by accident as it were, a bit of fine clay in their makeup. In Silence's case, for once, character and status are perfectly congruent, since she is made from only the purest material. After Nature has sifted her flour and kneaded her dough she proceeds to mold, inscribe, and paint it. Heldris seems here to be making a distinction analogous to the Aristotelian dichotomy of form and matter, though with antithetical meaning. Silence's matter—the fine white flour—represents her noble character, while her gender is signified by the inscription and coloring, or superficial form, stamped upon that matter. This unusual privileging of matter over form explains why gender is more mutable than character.

But Nature, a goddess scorned, does not like her work to be altered in either respect. After Silence's fateful baptism as a boy, she vows to prove that she is stronger than Nurture:

“Il ont en mon desdaing cho fait
 Quanses que miols valt Noreture
 Que face m’uevre!” dist Nature.
 “Par Deu! par Deu! or monte bien!
 Il n’a en tierie nule rien,
 Ki par nature ait a durer,
 Ki puist al loing desnaturer.” (2266–72)

“They have done this to spite me,
 As if the work of Nurture
 Were worth more than mine!” said Nature.
 “For God’s sake! A fine state of affairs!
 There is nothing on earth
 Living in Nature’s realm
 That can be denatured for long.”

Heldris quickly chimes in to second Nature’s complaint: “Segnor, par Deu, Nature a droit!” (“Lords, by God, Nature is right!” RM 2295). But critics who charge her with essentialism fail to notice that these editorial comments have nothing to do with gender. They deal instead with morals—and here Heldris shows herself to be an essentialist of the most pessimistic stripe. Nurture, she says, can make a person of “vile nature” behave honorably for years, but nature will out at last and he will die a villain. Moreover, bad nurture can corrupt an inherently fine and generous nature, yet no amount of fancy education “can mend a heart intrinsically evil” (RM 2342). Nature will later use Adam as a case in point: God created him good but he was spoiled by Nurture, in the person of Satan (6035–84). The logic is not altogether consistent, however; as Silence is quick to observe, Nature speaks in sophistries (2540). In denying responsibility for Adam’s fall, she claims that even the most hardened sinners, for whom evil seems to be second nature, are in reality corrupted by nurture. Here she skirts the question of original sin, as if to say that no one is “born bad”: a high crime rate is due to unemployment, bad schools, and dysfunctional families, not to some hereditary taint. But this “liberal” stance contradicts the narrator’s earlier “conservative” explanation of evil, namely that the hearts of mortals are inherently good or bad because of the fine or coarse material used by Nature to fashion them. So, even though Nurture loses points with the exemplum of Adam, their debate must on logical grounds be judged a draw.

This unresolved argument about *human* nature further problematizes the utterances about *female* nature proclaimed by the misogynist narrator and various male characters, including Ebain and Cador. In the meantime, we are

left to decide for ourselves whether Silence's masculine nurture qualifies as "good" or "bad." Nature of course thinks it bad because it is *contra naturam*, and even Silence, when he adopts a secondary disguise as a minstrel, takes the stage name of Malduit or "badly brought up."⁸⁴ But Silence's education in itself seems excellent. Like Tristan, on whom his character is partly based, he acquires a superb knowledge of the liberal arts, languages, and music as well as chivalry and sports. Indeed, this "nurture" is far superior to the training he would have received as a girl, so that—*pace* Nature—in his case an outstanding education seems to have improved upon an already splendid nature.

Like Alan of Lille, Heldris links offenses against Nature with the artful manipulation of grammar. In a witty and oft-quoted passage, Cador outlines his plan for the naming of Silence:

"Il iert nomé Scilenscius;
 Et s'il avient par *aventure*
 Al descovrir de sa *nature*
 Nos muerons cest -us en -a,
 S'avra a non Scilencia.
 Se nos li tolons dont cest -us
 Nos li donrons natural us,
 Car cis -us est contre nature,
 Mais l'altres seroit par nature." (2074–82)

"He will be named Silentius;
 And if it happens by chance
 That his nature is discovered,
 We'll change this *-us* into *-a*:
 She will be called Silentia.
 If we take this *-us* from her,
 We will give her natural usage,
 For this *-us* is against Nature,
 But the other would accord with Nature."

The Latin masculine ending *-us* coincides with the Old French noun *us*, meaning usage or custom (from Latin *usus*). Thus maleness, as in Christine's *Mutation of Fortune*, is linked with the hegemony of Nurture, femaleness with that of Nature. But as Erin Labbie reminds us, the hero/ine normally evades this dilemma by using a gender-neutral French name that can translate either of the Latin forms and thus "includes both feminine and masculine attributes as 'natural' to Silence's identity."⁸⁵ The Latin names recur only at the end of the romance and in the celebrated Nature-Nurture debate that takes place when Silence reaches puberty.

At this point Nature appears and visits the boy-girl with sharp reproaches. She is wasting her fabulous beauty and deceiving the “thousand women” who have allegedly fallen in love with her; she should abandon her free-wheeling forest life and “go to a chamber and learn to sew” (RM 2528) because, after all, she is not really “Scilentius”—it is all a fraud. Silence is puzzled by this charge: “Donques sui jo Scilentius, / Cho m'est avis, u jo sui *nus*” (2537–38). It is a brilliantly punning line: “Either I am Scilentius, so I think, or else I am no one / or else I am nude.” Without his carefully nurtured masculine identity, Silence is either a social nobody or a naked female body—which may after all amount to the same thing.⁸⁶ This sober reflection enables Nurture to frame her counter-argument: she commands Nature to “leave [her] nursling alone” because Silence has been completely “denatured” and will always resist her. Both ladies have become fiercely possessive about the youth: as Nature had once called her “my daughter,” Nurture now calls him “my foster-child” (*noreçon*, 2593). Punning in turn, Nurture boasts that she can succeed perfectly in turning a *noble enfant* into a *malvais home* (2602). The vaunt is both true and false: Silence may indeed be a “defective male” but s/he is hardly a “bad man.”⁸⁷ Further slippage arises from the context. Nurture claims that she can make “a thousand people” work against Nature, just as Silence does, but since we do not know if the natures they were born with are good or bad, we cannot decide whether her power is beneficial or harmful. Nurture, like Nature, is a morally ambiguous force.

When the two adversaries have argued to a standstill, the debate is resolved by Reason, who—here as in the *Roman de la Rose*—sides against Nature. Heldris’s Reason is no celestial daughter of God; she represents something more like shrewd pragmatism. Nevertheless, her victorious arguments should preclude any simplistic reading of Nature as the poet’s mouth-piece. Reason’s case reinforces Nurture’s on three counts. First, Silence at twelve already understands that in his society a man’s life is valued far more than a woman’s: “miols vaut li us d’ome / Que l’us de feme, c’est la some” (2637–38). Since he is now on top, why should he willingly step down? “Deseure sui, s’irai desos?” (2641). In addition, he remembers the law that initially prompted his disguise: he does not want to lose his inheritance or prove his father a liar. Finally, as a youth governed by Reason, Silence has no taste for the games of Cupid: his “mouth [is] too hard for kisses, / and arms too rough for embraces” (RM 2646–47). This declaration can be read as a rejection of female sexuality, for Silence insists that he is really a boy, not a girl (“vallés sui et nient mescine,” 2650). Yet Nature’s promptings never go so far as to awaken desire for *any* partner in the young hero. The opposite

of Jean de Meun's *Amant*, he heeds Reason and resolves to renounce sexuality altogether: "C'onques ne fu tels abstinence" ("Never was there such abstinence," 2659). It might be objected that Silence is only twelve, after all; but s/he is eighteen by the end of the romance and still completely sexless. Heldris's Nature is so eminently resistible that, by the time Silence is knighted, he no longer has the least regret about his exceptional *usage* (5178).

The final Nature-Nurture debate concerns not Silence but Merlin, who has also challenged the "nature of man." Like the protagonist, the wizard is ambiguously gendered. Though male, he is neither a warrior nor a father, and in traditional Arthurian lore (adopted by Heldris from the *Estoire Merlin*), he is fated to be undone by the woman to whom he reveals his secrets. As Eufeme tells Ebain, the wizard can only be captured by a "woman's trick" (*engien de femme*, 5803). Yet since Merlin himself devises this trick and explains it to Silence, he must be at least dabbling in womanhood.⁸⁸ Even more fundamentally, he straddles the boundary between human and animal: "Ne sai s'il est u hom u bieste," says Silence ("I don't know whether he's man or beast," 5908).⁸⁹ The ruse by which he is captured turns on this double ambivalence. Since Nature has made Merlin a man (human and male), he has the same carnivorous instincts as any other man. But Nurture—that is, his own predilection—has taught him to live like a beast in the forest, subsisting on a vegetarian diet. Silence, tutored by Merlin in the guise of an old graybeard, lures Merlin the Wild Man with roast meat, which he cannot resist. But the salted meat induces a great thirst the wizard tries to assuage with the honey, milk, and wine that Silence has laid out in succession, until he collapses in a dyspeptic, drunken stupor. Seeing Merlin thus turn away from the *noreture* (food/training) to which he had long been accustomed, Nature gloats in triumph. But what we actually see in the episode is not so much a one-sided victory for Nature as a Lévi-Straussian synthesis. The foods that Silence uses to ensnare the wizard are coded both masculine and feminine: roast meat and wine evoke the warriors' banquet hall, milk and honey the female body. Likewise, cooked meat and wine are processed foods, raw honey and milk unprocessed, symbolizing the spheres of Culture and Nature respectively.⁹⁰ But to confound any simple resolution, Heldris has tied Merlin's human "nature" to culture—the world of the court, to which he must now return—and his "nurture" to the wilderness of a self-imposed exile. As a final paradox Merlin, captured with his own complicity, is on the one hand completely helpless, on the other in complete control. Though bound and threatened with death, he laughs heartily at all he sees, "for he knows already where the story is going" (6160).

In effect, Silence and Merlin trap one another (6457–58), so it would not be amiss to read Merlin’s ending as a mirror image of Silence’s. Nature humiliates both of them, seizing Merlin by the scruff of his neck to thrust him toward the meat, and compelling Silence to bear the shame of a public disrobing. But the goddess, though vindicated, does not have the final word, for by dint of their nurture and their wits, both Silence and Merlin manage to remain “on top” in spite of their apparent undoing. Just before the capture scene, the disguised Merlin tells the disguised Silence not to abandon hope:

Jo ai veü jadis enter
 Sovent sor sur estoc dolce ente,
 Par tel engien et tele entente
 Que li estos et li surece
 Escrut trestolt puis en haltece. (5916–20)

I have often seen
 a young bud grafted onto a sterile stock
 with such skill and purposefulness
 that both stock and graft
 soon grew and flourished. (trans. Roche-Mahdi)

Grafting is a classic image for the propensity of art, or nurture, to improve on nature. It is no coincidence that in *The Winter’s Tale*, one of Shakespeare’s masquerade plays, the disguised king of Bohemia tells the disguised Perdita:

You see, sweet maid, we marry
 A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
 And make conceive a bark of baser kind
 By bud of nobler race. This is an art
 Which does mend Nature, change it rather; but
 The art itself is Nature.⁹¹

Heldris proclaims no such elegant synthesis, but in *Silence* the story itself is often wiser and more sophisticated than its narratorial voice.⁹² Interpreting Merlin’s metaphor, we might say that Silence is the sweet young bud and King Ebain the sterile stock, but we might also call the graft an image of female nature “changed and mended” by masculine nurture, in such a way that Nature is still allowed to take credit for it.

If, as many critics have noted, the romance retreats in the end from its radical premise, it does not retreat nearly as far as some have claimed. Much discussion of the text has been bedevilled by a confusion of the nature/nurture question with the problem of misogyny. It is true that *Silence* does

not ultimately challenge the medieval gender hierarchy. Heldris and most of her characters, including the protagonist, remain convinced that men's lives, opportunities, and achievements are more valuable than women's. Within that framework, however, *Silence* does demonstrate that the best man for the job might be a woman, given sufficient scope—that is, nurture—to exercise her talents. As for the opaque ending, with the self-revelation and concomitant silencing of Silence, very few alternatives would have been available to the poet. Since Silence cannot escape discovery by becoming a monk, thus disabling himself as heir of Cornwall, s/he must eventually marry, and with marriage, some resolution of the sex/gender ambiguity is inevitable. In two fourteenth-century transvestite romances, the cross-dressed hero marries a woman and is magically transformed into a male, but that possibility either did not appeal or did not occur to Heldris, a writer who generally eschews the supernatural.⁹³ The only other possible outcome would have been exposure followed by punishment: life imprisonment or death for violating the king's decree. Yet neither Silence nor her parents are punished for the gender masquerade; she is in fact rewarded, in the only terms a thirteenth-century audience would have recognized.⁹⁴ If not for the ministrations of Nurture—for the eighteen years she lived as a male—Silence could never have become either Ebain's most valiant knight or his queen, nor could women have regained their inheritance.

In a problematic disclaimer at the end of the poem, Heldris praises the woman who “works well against Nature,” adding formulaically that no “good woman” should be offended by the disgrace of bad women like Eufeme.

Maistre Heldris dist chi endroit
 C'on doit plus bone feme amer
 Que haïr malvaise u blasmer.
 Si mosterroie bien raison:
 Car feme a menor oquoison,
 Por que ele ait le liu ne l'aise,
 De l'estre bone que malvaise.
 S'ele oueve bien contre nature,
 Bien mosterroie par droiture
 C'on en doit faire gregnor plait
 Que de celi qui le mal fait. (6684–94)

Master Heldris says right here
 That one should love a good woman more
 Than one hates or blames a bad one.
 I will show you exactly why:
 For a woman has less occasion

(If she has the opportunity at all)
 To be good than to be wicked.
 If she works well against Nature,
 I will show as a matter of right
 That one should take more account of her
 Than of the one who does evil.

Freed from the confusion created by an early editorial mistake,⁹⁵ this oft-reviled passage actually softens and nuances the apparent triumph of Nature. Silence, Heldris suggests, qualifies as a “good woman” precisely *because* she “works well against Nature,” that is, against the devalued *us de feme* (“women’s ways”) that Nurture and Reason had taught her to reject. This is necessary not because “female nature” is intrinsically evil, despite the misbehavior of Eufeme and the misogynist generalizations it elicits from Ebain and the narrator. Rather, the problem is that female *nurture*—misinterpreted as nature—gives women like Eufeme so many occasions to do harm, and so few to perform acts of conspicuous valor and virtue. Thus Silence, like Christine de Pizan in *The Mutation of Fortune*, finds that “becoming male” allows her to reveal the sterling stuff of her *human* nature in the public sphere, the only space that counts. If in the end, like Christine in *Lavision*, she reverts to her “natural” womanhood, it is only after her gender masquerade has deconstructed the forced reduction of a noble and aspiring nature (what Christine would call *la femme naturelle*) to a limited and constricting nurture (*us de feme*). So, even though Nature claims the victory in her *aventure* with Silence, mollifying any conservatives in the audience, the romance as a whole embodies a far more ambivalent version of the proverb it dramatizes: “Nature passe nourriture / Et nourriture survainc nature” (“Nature surpasses Nurture, and Nurture vanquishes Nature”).⁹⁶

The Realm of the Natural

At this point it may be useful to step back from the trees for a glance at the forest. Nature, we have noted, is a goddess of the normative, but the norms she embodies are not always the same. In “The Dispute between Ganymede and Helen,” she aligns herself with Reason on Helen’s side, representing heterosexual as opposed to same-sex desire, as she will continue to do in *The Complaint of Nature*. In the *Roman de la Rose* the goddess is still proudly heterosexual, but Jean de Meun alters the emphasis to make her stand for procreative sex, as opposed not only to sodomy but also to chastity—and the

promptings of Reason. Jean's Nature is a divinely ordained, necessary, but irrational and therefore amoral force, easily manipulated by the unreliable God of Love. To rehabilitate this somewhat degraded goddess, Chaucer tries in *The Parlement of Fowles* (though with limited success) to reconcile her role as a proponent of instinctual sexuality with due respect for the class hierarchy, while Christine de Pizan brings Nature back into Reason's camp. In *Silence* and *The Mutation of Fortune*, the goddess signifies anatomical as opposed to socially constructed gender. More precisely, she signifies *female* anatomy: the term *natura* was routinely used in gynecological texts as a synonym for the vagina, and this usage may well have inflected the goddess's interest in assuring that women continue to dress and behave like women.⁹⁷ In defiance of Nature, Silence's masquerade and Christine's fictive sex change both prove that anatomy does not have to be destiny. By the time she wrote *Lavision*, however, Christine had changed her strategy and turned Nature into an all-purpose figure of female creativity, whether expressed through motherhood, domestic labor (Nature's kitchen), or intellectual work (her own writing).

One factor that remains constant through all these vagaries is an affirmation of Nature's "givensness." She is always prior and often superior to some force representing Culture, and is therefore associated with a poetics of simplicity. In "Ganymede and Helen," the sexuality favored by Nature is artless, linked with animals and peasants, whereas gay sexuality is artful, connected with playfulness or sport (*ludus*) as well as social prestige. Jean de Meun would continue to oppose Nature and Art, although he also introduced the topos of Art imitating Nature (Fig. 3.4), which in the thirteenth century was not yet a cliché. While the forces supporting Amant's quest eventually make common cause in the *Rose*, there remains a conceptual distinction between the raw sex advocated by Nature and her ally, Genius, and the artful, cunning, Ovidian desire personified by Cupid. Significantly, it is also Genius who extols the naturalism of the Golden Age, a time of bucolic simplicity when Saturn reigned and the corrupting arts of civilization had not yet been invented. Chaucer attempts a fusion of Nature and Culture, integrating the rituals of courtly and political mating into a green world of springtime innocence, though the result does not come off quite as Nature intends it.

As the goddess whose work precedes and surpasses the artifice of mortals, Nature stands in a particularly vexed relationship to grammar, the first and most purely conventional of the seven arts. For the "Ganymede" poet, what is grammatically natural (*hic et hic*) is sexually unnatural and vice versa.

In his difficult and often misunderstood tour de force, *De planctu Naturae*, Alan of Lille appears to argue the contrary, forcing an alliance between grammar and Nature, but he succeeds only in demonstrating the unnaturalness of poetic language and the unreliability of Nature as a guide to sexual ethics. His goddess Natura makes a speech in praise of plain style and simple, elementary syntax, yet the poem itself (like “unnatural” love) is characterized by rhetorical excess, aureate style, and complex figures of speech. In *Silence*, too, the parents’ decision to “denature” their child involves them in complicated language games, linking the masculine ending *-us* with the social and behavioral norms that determine gender (*us*). Interestingly, though, the play on *Silentius* and *Silentia* depends on a bilingual pun, for the French name *Silence* conceals the hero/ine’s gender just as effectively as his masculine garb. In this case, at least, the vernacular tolerates greater ambiguity than Latin.

Christine de Pizan modified the traditional dialectic of Nature and Culture. Although she still used Nature to represent what is given, or created at least indirectly by God rather than mortals, she did not set Nature against rhetoric, art, or learning. In *The Mutation of Fortune*, the rationality of Nature is opposed to the folly of Custom (the oppression of women) and later to the random if ethically neutral machinations of Fortune. Christine’s sex change may be “unnatural,” but it is not morally good or bad: it is a survival strategy necessitated by circumstance. Only in *Lavision* does all opposition between Nature and Culture cease. In this highly atypical work, Nature is a promoter of culture and specifically of women’s cultural achievements—a role she shares with her old friend Reason in *The City of Ladies*, a book completed in the same year. This revisionist view of Nature was a vital plank in Christine’s feminist platform. In fact, she may well have been the first thinker to understand how readily dichotomies between Nature and Culture tend to marginalize Nature’s “own” sex.⁹⁸

In tracing Natura’s trajectory from the twelfth century through the early fifteenth, we have observed a progressive secularizing of the goddess and her concerns. The wide-eyed celestial voyager of Bernard Silvestris gives way to Alan’s fallen goddess, Jean de Meun’s apostle of free love, and Heldris of Cornwall’s champion of anatomical destiny. By the time of Chaucer and Christine de Pizan, Dame Nature had become a seasoned habitué of court life, more at home with the politics of matchmaking than with the stars in their courses. Although she would always retain her theological niche as God’s daughter, Natura’s most enduring literary function proved to be removing sex and gender from the sphere of primary divinity—that is, from

the dictates of biblical and ecclesiastical ethics—and setting them in a semi-autonomous realm of discourse where the interaction of biological with social determinants (Custom, Nurture, Fortune) could be frankly discussed. The goddess would hold her own within this realm of secondary divinity until the nineteenth century, when the Romantics tried once again to merge Nature with Nature's God, and the Victorians in anguish rediscovered their conflict.