The Non-Existent Knight: Adventure in *Le Roman de Silence*

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If Marie's *Lais* present a deliberately configured narrative space that relocates a feminized sense of adventure commensurate with the restricted lives of her heroines, Heldris's *Silence* takes the opposite tack by presenting a conservative message through radical feminine *aventures*. A reconsideration of the names of Heldris's protagonists helps to unlock further layers of interpretation. (CAJ)

Erich Auerbach, in his classic formulation of chivalric romance, shrewdly identifies as Yvain's prime objective the portrayal of a narrow and aestheticized feudal class through a literary world of 'knightly proving' (136). Such proving is articulated as a seemingly endless concatenation of adventures, purposefully woven in the sense that anything extraneous to adventure as the narrative's driving force is eliminated. The resulting literary model of contemporary political and social realities enhances the image of the lone hero, for whose success every detail of the paradigm is orchestrated. 'Aventure' in Old French designates any happening or occurrence, but in the context of the *roman courtois* it takes a much more specific meaning, as happenstance builds into a deliberately-ordered narrative structure. More than the expression of the ethos of a limited class, however, adventure is also determined by gender, since focusing on the activities of knighthood necessarily relegates the feminine to the middle ground as a supporting accessory.

Chivalric romance is such a masculine genre that even in modern times the striking novelty of such texts as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Calvino's *The Non-Existent Knight* is that they feminize romance, and thereby disconcert and challenge the reader's literary expectations. In medieval fiction, women are most often a catalyst or reward for the hero, forming part of what Auerbach classifies as the 'exterior forms of life' (136). Though they are decorative and valuable, their contributions—such as greeting guests, removing armor, conducting graceful conversations, and dispatching heroes on quests—all leave the modern reader desiring more substance and activity from women. Even

such active adjuvants as Chrétien's Lunete, and such heroines as Nicolette, who supplements her lover's sporadic lapses in courage and dynamism, and (like Silence) dons disguise as a minstrel, leave us to wonder if there is a deeper, more significant kind of feminine *aventure* in courtly literature. If there is, how do we define it? Heldris's romance and Marie de France's *Lais* attempt to supply some answers. Both rely on a fundamental principle of displacement, since prioritizing the feminine requires the destabilization of romance convention; in particular it calls for a re-evaluation of the meaning of adventure.

I am interested here in the general form of the *Lais* rather than in their substance in order to examine how Marie streamlines the romance to reorient the message and focus of her texts. The total number of lines contained in the twelve *Lais* and their Prologue—nearly six thousand—roughly equals an average romance. Through its very composition the collage of twelve stories avoids the potentially constricting interlace of the longer *roman courtois*, providing instead a supple experimental form that frames variations on familiar courtly themes, centering on climactic events and turning points, rather than on a narrative mechanism designed to produce a linked and sustained sequence of adventures. While the interlace technique is a relative innovation in Marie's time, both oral and written chivalric narrative already assumed recognizable shape when the *Lais* were written, constituting an available model that Marie chose to avoid. In the *Lais*, to borrow Chrétien's terminology, *sens* wins over *conjointure*, and the dominant narrative shape is that of the minimal triangle that forces a multi-levelled confrontation between man, woman, and obstacle (a physical barrier, a moral or social obstruction, or a husband). Many *lais* leave interpretive space in their conclusions, and several offer the reader at least one title, which has the effect of temporarily refocusing the narrative.

Because of this closely delimited and problematized courtly space there is greater scope for introducing unusual narrative angles, and more space for involving women protagonists. These techniques are especially apparent in the opening lines of Eliduc:

> D'eles deus ad li lais a nun
> Guildeluëc ha Guilliadun.
> Elidus fu primes nomez,
> Mes ore est li nuns remuez,
> Kar des dames est avenu
> L'aventure dunt li lais fu. (21–26) [1]
>
> [From those two the lai takes its name 'Guildeluëc and Guilliadon.' It was first called 'Eliduc,' but now the name is changed, because the original adventure of the *lai* came from the ladies.]

Signalling the change in title forces us to redefine what *aventure* means in the text, so that while attentive to Eliduc we concentrate carefully on the female characters, even though his actions still shape and control the unfolding of events. The hero follows a recognizable trajectory, but the female protagonists do not behave as expected. Having rescued her rival, the mature wife cedes her place to the beautiful mistress and then retires to a nunnery, to be later joined by her replacement when Eliduc too enters the cloister after a long and happy second marriage that has served the common good. The interference of an exemplary mode more typical of hagiography decenters the female characters and ultimately the text itself.

This ending, full of *courtoisie* and family values, is an example of how Marie reconfigures our women-related sense of adventure not as the exteriorized pursuit of material and moral goals, but as a more subtle form of agency by which female characters, limited to relative passivity, rise and respond to the challenge of events. They cope with what is imposed on them in a setting often resembling more the real world than the fantasy landscape of romance (*e.g.*, *Fresne* or *Chievrefoil*). Similarly, *Eliduc* exemplifies how deceptively conventional romance *topoi* frame narratives seeking to reshape the stereotypical form of *roman courtois* without shattering its perfect narrative illusion. Often Marie's characters remain nameless, or else fairly impersonal even when named. She presents a full range of both sexes with varying degress of virtue, intelligence, and maturity, but emphasizes a portrayal of women through positive and negative *exempla*. From the *malmariées* in *Guigemar*, *Yonec*, and *Laüstic*, to the vain and indecisive châtelaine in *Chaitivel*, and from the bad wives of *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* to the patient mistress in *Fresne* or the faithful lover in *Milun*, we see a spectrum of secular feminine exemplarity. Flashes of insight into contemporary life reveal a feminine world of proving set indoors in Marie's *Lais*, while her architectural spaces reinforce our sense not only of the condition but also of the restriction of women. They appear in towers, sealed chambers, bedrooms, even in a figurative chastity belt, but almost always in domestic, cloistered spaces.

If showing female characters in limited settings is typical of romances, in most cases a sense of continually moving adventures counteracts the stasis; in the *Lais* the absence or reduction to background detail of such narrative links throws the intervening static episodes into even sharper relief. Emblematic of the claustrophobic surroundings are the detailed descriptions of the lady's quarters in *Guigemar*, a compendium of images of confinement that mirrors the stifled emotional and physical life of the anonymous heroine. Few of Marie's heroines break out from their interior lives, and then only temporarily.

The future mother of Yonec jumps from her locked tower to follow her lover, but finds no escape—the symbolic landscape of romance so easily accessible to male characters is hostile to her. She must return to the harsh reality of a loveless marriage, aided only by an absurd ring which will make her husband forget what has happened, while she cannot. The freest of Marie's characters is the *fée* who rescues Lanval and escorts him off to Avalon—an ironic twist, since it implies both that the only possible wish-fulfillment setting is an improbable twilight world, far removed from even such a stylized representation of real experience as is Arthur's court, and that the only women with full self-determination exist on a similarly remote plane.

Tests of endurance and virtue requiring patience, strength, and determination abound for Marie's heroines, but there is little free agency. She is concerned with the effects of courtliness rather than its elaborate causes; while subtly critiquing her *matière*, she avoids any open revolution. The potential subversiveness of the *Lais* lies in the space invoked in the Prologue, where she calls for future interpretation:

> Custume fu as ancïens,
> Ceo testimoine Precïens,
> Es livres ke jadis feseient,
> Assez oscurement diseient
> Pur ceus ki a venir esteient
> E ki aprendre les deveient
> K'i peüssent gloser la lettre
> E de lur sen le surplus mettre. (9–16)

[As Priscian demonstrates, it was the custom of the ancients to express themselves obscurely in the books they wrote long ago, so that those who were to come, and to learn from them, would be able to make their own commentaries, and bring the added dimension of their understanding.]

She appeals to those *sutil de sens* (20) who will know what to make of her writing, although the reader suspects that this strategy is as much her own invention as a gleaning from the patriarchal models of the past. Her inspiration derives in part from the traditional sources she cites, but the male authorities she acknowledges veil a more individual agenda: not just to portray tales of a distant past, but to use them to disguise her depiction of contemporary social reality. She is thus conservative in outward appearance and experimental in content.

She does not use overtly radical plots to construct the *Lais*, as Heldris does in recasting a reversed romance with a heroine as the protagonist. Instead, what Auerbach terms the 'exterior forms of life' are discreetly brought to center-stage, while the stereotypical knightly adventures take place at the edge of

narrative interest, like marginal decoration. Although they contain elements associated with conventional narrative modes, the *Lais*, with the exception of *Guigemar*, do not strictly adhere to the pattern of *Bildungs-* or *Erziehungsromane*. While her astute use of cosmetic conformity conceals a second level of interpretation (and suggests that any deviation from the norm might have startled contemporaries), Marie never tackled a subject like that of the *Roman de Silence*, which has the temerity to allow its heroine to grow up as a man. Marie's heroines endure with dignity, some even triumph, while her negative women characters fail; but apart from Guildeluëc and Guilliadon, who are permitted to age as well as mature, few give the impression of evolving through their experience, an illusion allowed to many of their male counterparts in *romans courtois*. The conclusion of *Eliduc* leaves us to re-read the *Lais* and *gloser la lettre* once more in an attempt to understand how, or indeed if, romantic love, desire, and daily life are compatible, and to what end. One of Marie's many achievements is that she articulates her ideas through a scale-model of feminized *aventure* that realigns the parameters of narrative expectation, so that we speculate that the originality of her complementary sequence as a fragmentary, dialogized form of romance, derives either from her gender or from her authorial interest in gender. The claustrophobic space that constitutes the natural environment of Marie's heroines is communicated on the level of structure: the *Lais* themselves are a set of intricate yet limited poetic spaces, in which only a reduced form of adventure is possible.

Heldris gives us, in effect, the opposite phenomenon: inside his remarkable and almost avant-garde treatment of the extended romance form and its classical themes, and in spite of the mitigating effects of the romance's ambiguous ending, there is a conservative message trying quite successfully to get out. From the many subtexts and intertexts in the *Roman de Silence*, an important Biblical inspiration is found to be Paul's First Epistle to Timothy:

> Mulier in silencio discat cum omnia subjectione. Docere autem mulieri non permitto, neque dominari in virum: sed esse in silencio. (vv. 11–12)
>
> [Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. I do not allow women to teach, nor to take authority over men: but to be in silence].[2]

The sermons on feminine exemplarity contained in *Silence*, both overt and subliminal, together with the word-play in the name of its heroine, confirm a close fundamental adherence to contemporary, misogynistic church doctrine destined to control the 'dangerous' nature of women.[3] Heldris's treatment of Silence is sympathetic, but his conceptual point of departure is traditional and doctrinal, even if his relationship to his own material sometimes appears troubled, even contradictory.

In Heldris's romance Silence follows Paul's pattern: she learns in *silencio*, just as readers of the text are to find a didactic example in *Silencio*. She is the central figure in a *Bildungsroman* focused not on the education of a hero, but of a heroine who experiences different structures of power without permanently appropriating them, and in so doing learns to submit to them. However progressive her liberation seems from stereotype, the disappointing end to the romance reveals that the aim of her unconventional sentimental education is to prepare her for a pre-determined conventional role, not for any lasting subversion of the courtly ideal. In the words of Paul's *Epistle*, she can learn only in deference to surrounding masculine power, beginning with the father who dreams up the scheme of concealing her gender, through the untrustworthy minstrels who teach her until her skills threaten theirs, and ending with the king who marries her. Ebain paraphrases Paul's passage when he admonishes his wife for interfering in court affairs:

> '...Ne sui jo sire?
> Moi lasciés convenir et dire,
> Faire mon bon et mon plaisir.
> Sens de feme gist en taisir.
> Si m'aït Dex, si com jo pens,
> Uns muials puet conter lor sens,
> Car femes n'ont sens que mais un,
> C'est taisirs. Toltes l'ont commun,
> Se n'est par aventure alcune,
> Mais entre .m. nen a pas une
> Ki gregnor los n'eüst de taire
> Que de parler.' (6395–406)[4]
>
> ['...Am I not lord?
> Let me decide and pronounce,
> do my own good and pleasure.
> A woman's wisdom lies in being silent.
> So help me God, as I believe,
> a mute could recount their wisdom,
> for women have only one,
> and that is silence. They all share it,
> and it is not by chance
> that not one in a thousand wouldn't receive
> greater praise for being silent
> than for speaking.']

Given his stance, what better wife than Silence? Here Simon Gaunt is incisive:

> This, in a romance in which the heroine is called Silence, is highly significant, prefiguring the way in which Silence silences herself at the end of the text: 'jo

> n'ai soig mais de taisir' (6627) (I only care to be silent). If women cannot speak they cannot threaten. Silence is a good woman because she is loyal and has dutifully assimilated male values, but also because she sacrifices her right of access to language. (213)

She becomes what Jane Burns terms 'a non-body, a non-person, and further an unknowing body,' a being who exists on 'the interface between the biological and social' (243). Burns shows how the problematized space occupied by the female body can be the site of innovative subjectivity, as well as of misogynistic battle. At the same time, Silence stands as a perfect model for women despite appearing as a man in all but the closing lines of the text. Not surprisingly, after a swift and unconvincing dénouement involving Merlin, Eufeme, a transvestite nun (whose lack of virtue in disguise cancels any opprobrium that could darken Silence's virtuous self-concealment), and the wedding of the heroine to Ebain, the romance concludes with a final *excursus* on good behavior for women.

As in the *Lais*, with characters like Fresne, using a common noun depersonalizes a protagonist, distances the reader from involvement, and raises the character to a universal, emblematic plane. Textual nominalism in the case of Silence leads to a cunning complicity, since with the exception of her parents and nurse, only the reader is aware of her true sex. The naming of Silence and its textual implications figure prominently in the recent critical reassessment of the romance.[5] Attention focuses chiefly on the passage in which Cador names the infant:

> 'Il iert només Scilenscius;
> Et s'il avient par aventure
> Al descovrir de sa nature
> Nous 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 true nature is discovered,
> we will change the -us to -a,
> and she will be named Silentia.
> If we remove this -us from her
> we will give her more natural custom [us],
> for this -us is against nature,
> but the other would be according to nature.']

Modern and postmodern implications of the passage, with its ingenious weaving of gender, nature and custom are often invoked. One might also note that Heldris does not let grammar stand in the way of a good pun: medieval Latin attests a feminine form *silentia*, formed through assimilation to the plural of *silentium*, which, as far as I can ascertain, has always been a neuter noun and not masculine (Souter). Heldris could modify the adjective *silentus* here, but there may be a further resonance to Silence's name making a more specific and subtle use of silence's inherent gender neutrality. Cador's remark just before this excursus on the facility of changing endings provides a clue:

> 'Sel faisons apieler Scilense
> El non de Sainte Paciensce,
> Por cho que silensce tolt anse.' (2067–69)
>
> ['We will name her Silence
> in the name of St. Patience,
> because silence relieves care.']

Beyond euphony, no apparent connection links Silence with St. Patience; the phrase *silensce tolt anse* exudes ambiguity. What kind of anxiety ceases to exist when the fear of discovery is ever present, whatever the name? If the mere addition of a feminine ending resolves matters, then calling her Malduit from her infancy would be just as effective. The chosen signifier may indicate a suitable sense of heroic self-effacement and an absence of textual identity, but the signified, Silence herself, is far from tacit, even though she dutifully maintains an uneasy silence about her gender. Indeed, her chosen career as a minstrel is incompatible with the notion of silence, and time and again in the narrative she uses verbal dexterity to save her life.

Masculine or feminine, the indeterminacy of Silence's name reminds the reader of the continual contradiction that governs her life; it also suggests another dimension, as she embodies not only an absence of speech, but also personifies a legal principle that prevents Cador from being guilty of fraud and perjury. According to his initial reasoning, if circumstances change, or if word gets out *par aventure*, then they will simply rectify matters by the addition or subtraction of letters, while the basic name and person will remain. The fact that Cador has defrauded the king and lied to everyone does not disturb him unduly. Legal casuistry proves him right, as we find in the *Digest* of Justinian:

> Qui tacet, non utique fatetur: sed tamen verum est eum non negare.[6]
>
> [He who is silent does not always confess; still, it is true he does not deny.][7]

Thus, in addition to temporarily suspending the bearer's gender, the name Silence implies legal neutrality in the event of a dispute, and might indeed technically absolve Cador, since where there is silence there is no guilt, even if the truth is suppressed. Because silence carries its full weight as a grammatical and legal substantive, more than the ending of the word is at stake.

Cador frequently uses language cavalierly, going so far as to coin the verb *desvaleter* (2047) to denote the simple transition from man to woman required to set matters right. As Simon Gaunt argues (207 and n.14), this unusual word conforms to the contemporary notion that women were perceived as castrated men, and the text supports this view of them as male derivatives in the long passage devoted to the formation of Eve (1701–24). [*D*]*esvaleter* becomes an important example of Heldris's linguistic double-standard, since it stands out as a concept when we compare it to its gender-reversed term, *depuceler*; while one conveys pragmatic innocence and revalidation, the other does not share the same value in social currency.

Medieval law is relevant to Silence, in light of the prologue—Ebain winning Eufeme in a settlement to his war with Norway—and of the ensuing episode—Ebain disinheriting the women of England after a territorial dispute over the status as heirs of twin sisters. Interestingly, the ruling that precedes the consideration of silence in the *Digest* states:

> Anything which is established against a rule of law should not become a precedent.(1)

> Two heirs of the same person cannot each become the heir to his entire estate. (# 141, p. 311).

This scenario recalls the impasse sweepingly resolved by Ebain's devaluation of daughters after the tragic end to a seigneurial conflict. The ruling following the one on silence is also appropriate to Heldris's romance, since it declares that

> Anything which will bar persons who have entered into a contract will also bar their successors (# 143, p. 311),

just as Cador and Eufemie risk their estate and future in concealing Silence's identity. It would be pure speculation to suggest that Heldris had an intimate or professional expertise in law, but it is a possibility given this evidence along with the episode in which the king of France frets over the legal obligations incurred after having bestowed a feudal kiss on Silence. Thus, in naming the heroine, Heldris does more than social engineering, and implies more than case endings, even though he maintains inscribing silence as an exemplary quality for women as a prime narrative objective.

Previous propaganda culminates in Heldris's final reminders:

> 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 ouevre bien contre nature. (6684–91)
>
> [Master Heldris says here and now
> that one should love a good woman more
> than one should hate or revile a bad one.
> And I would show you the true reason:
> for a woman has less opportunity
> to have the time and chance
> to be good than to be evil,
> if she works diligently against nature.]

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, the good end happily, and the bad unhappily, which is, after all, what fiction means; but beneath the sympathy of Heldris's peroration lies an unappealing belief that women have to labor against the 'natural' disadvantage of being female in order to attain virtue, and even good women are exhorted to try harder:

> Se j'ai jehi blasmee Eufeme
> Ne s'en doit irier bone feme.
> Se j'ai Eufeme moult blasmee
> Jo ai Silence plus loëe.
> Ne s'en doit irier bone fame,
> Ne sor li prendre altrui blasme,
> Mais efforcier plus de bien faire. (6695–701)
>
> [If I have seemed to blame Eufeme,
> no good woman should be angry about it;
> if I have blamed Eufeme greatly,
> I have praised Silence more.
> No good woman should be angry about it,
> nor take another's blame on herself,
> but work harder to do good.]

Given Heldris's basic conservatism, it is interesting that he chooses to explore exemplary femininity in role reversal, and thereby with the temporary subversion of the ideal of masculine knightly adventure. Gender confusion is an unlikely strategy for reasserting the norms of courtly literature, yet Heldris manages just that.

Precedents abound for female characters donning masculine dress, and an abundant source for these is found in saints' lives, where women often disguise themselves to preserve their virtue and keep their faith, or have their gender miraculously altered for the same reason.[8] Silence must keep her estate intact. Ironically, dressing as a man protects her from potential intimacy with men, but it imperils her with women like Eufeme. Actual gender reversal and transvestism are rare in medieval literature. As Michèle Perret cogently argues, using this narrative strategy always seems to have its textual limits,

> comme si ces textes exploraient les possibilités de rôles sexuels différents et le problème de l'identité sexuelle et sociale de la femme, pour finir par renforcer le status quo. (329)
>
> [as though these texts explored the possibility of different sexual roles and the problem of the sexual and social identity of women, just to end up reinforcing the status quo.]

Perret demonstrates that female transvestism has different implications from male, in that for men such episodes coincide with periods of intense sexual activity, while for women the reverse is true (329). The association of the word abstinence with the heroine as she reaches an age of sexual maturity (ll. 2616, 2659, 2674) perhaps indicates that Silence represents a type of secular sainthood, combining virtue and duty in a severe personal test destined to reap a material rather than spiritual reward.

While transvestism is rare, there are less extreme ways of confusing gender boundaries. In *Aucassin et Nicolette* reversal of behavioral stereotypes occurs when, on their arrival in Torelore, the protagonists find the king in the throes of an aggravated *couvade*, while his wife is out defending the realm. The curious parody shows that gender inversion is outside acceptable boundaries—the weapons used in battle (cheese, apples, and mushrooms) are comically domestic unlike the queen herself—and demonstrates how ridiculous and chaotic society would be if any redistribution of gender roles were made permanent.

Heldris's aims in using the role-reversal topos appear to be twofold. First, like Marie, he demonstrates a fascination with portraying the social experience of women. In his introduction, Thorpe notes the author's dilettante interest in everything—battle, the minutiae of court life, breadmaking, seasickness, and the reality of childbirth. Heldris also shows a Chrétien-like concern for conveying what he sees as the dysfunctional workings of society (15), and often intrudes as a strong narratorial presence. He also shows us Silence's experience focussed through his/her perspective, thereby constructing a partially feminized or neutral gaze within the text that sets it apart from the masculine norm. Like Marie, he finds the unusual angle in conventional

material. There is comedy in the narratorial tone of *Silence*, and a narrator who often appears to contradict his own pronouncements *sotto voce*. Since Heldris does not exploit the vast farcical potential of Silence's transformation, he seems to have a second narrative motive: to reconfigure adventure and renovate chivalric clichés that were already well-worn by the first half of the thirteenth century. Instead of male heroism we find female exemplarity, or a paradoxically active secular quietism, on the part of Silence. Otherwise the skeletal *topoi* remain the same: a child experiences exceptional *enfances*, grows up to be separated from court and parents, proves ingeniuous and skillful, endures physical trial and moral temptation, leaves on a quest, and returns against the odds to find the customary reward of marriage. At the same time Heldris writes a courtly romance that is not primarily about love: the romantic interest comes in final, perfunctory fashion, with no prior courtship. For most of the romance we do not perceive the heroine as being half of an ideal union, and as Anita Benaim Lasry notes, 'there is no individual male with heroic attributes comparable to those of Silence' (237). Heldris toys with gender, genre, and the paradigm of adventure, and his text aims to chart what Howard Bloch typifies as 'the search for ancestral property and a proper name' (87) with an added narrative twist. Recast with a heroine, each component of the romance formula becomes a novelty.

For all his conservatism Heldris demonstrates a natural sympathy for the dispossessed, beginning with his prologue (reminiscent of Colin Muset's complaints) on the niggardly treatment of minstrels in a society reduced through its own corruption to a muckheap, presided over by the text's first female personification, lady Avarisse (39). Heldris portrays society as having no moral values, and like Chrétien, contrasts contemporary reality with a fictitious, idealized model of feudal economy, this time at Ebain's court, where largesse prevails on an Arthurian scale. The triple opening of the romance provides at least two pretexts to Silence's tale.

The first opening evokes the masculine ethos of the *chanson de geste*: Ebain weds Eufeme as a feudal solution to a political conflict, showing the bride as 'the rightful booty of a warrior' (Brahney 55). Ebain openly declares that his wish is 'par us d'eglise od li gesir' (184) [to lie with her with the church's sanction], showing her as the object of male desire and control, and he weds her three days after her arrival, 'car forment l'avoit golosee' (248) [for he had desired her greatly]. This is no love match, but it shows women acting as a force of political and social cohesion, in contrast with the subsequent episode in which the dynastic feud between two brothers-in-law leads to the disinheritance of all English women.

In this first episode Eufeme has no definable character, and gives no hint of her future treachery. Interestingly, Eufeme begins the romance as Enfeme (165, 229), and only becomes Eufeme after the introduction of Eufemie, Silence's mother. Medieval literature often produces such character doublings, encouraging comparisons, as do the two Iseuts in the Tristan romances. On the other hand, the name Enfeme may have been scribally polluted by confusion with Eufemie. The latter literally translated, is a stereotypical 'good woman.' Bloch cryptically suggests that her name evokes 'euphemistic inflation' (86). The pair Enfeme/Eufeme has distinct resonances, and I disagree with Peter Allen, who claims that her 'name suggests that speech is positive' (107), since in Enfeme we have a perfect homophone with the Old French noun *infame* and verb *enfamer*, denoting treachery and dishonor. If we miss the pejorative potential of her name, there is little to suggest her later transition to a predatory seductress. Before her wedding, Enfeme is described only in relation to her father, as *la fille Beghe* (165), or *la fille au Norois* (231); afterwards she becomes *la reine*, and only after she acquires power can she begin to abuse it. The story of her marriage is described in masculine terms as a public merger inscribing a limited, passive space for women, in which their chief value is to ensure the circulation of land and goods.

Similarly, the second narrative, involving the two counts, also belongs to the paradigm of the *chanson de geste* and its traditional subject matter of dynastic feuding. Once more, women denote access to power and wealth without possessing either themselves. Reversing the first beginning, the twin daughters destroy social cohesion instead of cementing it; they seem unfairly punished, since it is the counts who provoke the inheritance dispute. As a result of this episode, which bears a certain resemblance to that of the daughters of the lord of Noire Espine in Chrétien's *Yvain*, the counts pay the ultimate price for their folly. Ebain punishes all women instead of just the two sisters, as if the romance posited a kind of secular as well as religious original sin for women. The drastic measure of total expropriation in part morally justifies Cador and Eufemie's later actions in concealing their daughter's birth.

The devaluation of daughters and the unsettling of the court provide the backdrop for the third opening describing the union of Silence's parents, whose circumstances belong as much to courtly romance as the previous segments belong to the more inflexible ethos of the feudal epic. The narrator characterizes their story (337-1650) as a *mervellose aventure* (344) which spans the length of a typical *lai*, and in tone, style and subject matter recalls Marie's works. The serpent that Cador encounters in the forest of Malroi echoes the civil discord of Ebain's realm; the hero saves the king from certain peril, but his exploits are

tinged with comic irony, for Cador dispatches the dyspeptic dragon with perfunctory ease. The preamble provides the excuse for Cador to be nursed back to health by Eufemie, and also for the repetition of a string of commonplace *topoi* about love-sickness, as the drastic effects of smoke inhalation are replaced by those of overwhelming love for Eufemie. Knightly adventure gives way to feminized *amor* as the angst-ridden lovers strive to bring about their wedding. Typical of the *lai*-type narrative is the way in which the enclosed space of the bedchamber inscribes the intimate boundaries of their interaction, culminating in one of the longest kisses in medieval literature (1090–1154). Unlike Enfeme / Eufeme, Eufemie is a strong desiring subject: she languishes naked in bed, longing to pluck up the courage to go to Cador, even at the risk of compromising her virtue (825–38). Cursing her own skill as a physician, she experiences groundless fears that her attempts to cure Cador will prove a *male aventure* (821). The lovers unite, but not before Heldris has pursued a long allegorical digression on the baseness of court morality, using personifications of the virtues and vices (1552–75). Depicted as either seductresses or wronged, chaste women, the negative forces of *Faintise*, *Vilonie*, and *Lozenge* (1552) triumph over the impoverished *Valor* and *Amor*, while *Verité* is devalued in favor of *Honte*, an old maid kept jealously at home and court, and desired by all despite her ugliness and sterility. These allegorical figures reflect the general dichotomy of the text in its treatment of women, and provide a blueprint for Eufemie and Eufeme (and to a lesser extent, Silence and Eufeme), who divide into the opposition of Eve / Mary so common to medieval culture.

Significantly, Silence is born into a literary space that slips between the paradigms of feudal epic and of the *roman courtois*. From the time of her birth, women occupy the narrative foreground, while the male characters are reduced to Auerbach's accessorial plane, and effectively become the 'exterior forms of life.' Cador, Ebain and his courtiers, the duke of Burgundy, and the king of France remain relatively static in spite of the power they wield; when there is a flurry of knightly activity during the uprising in Ebain's kingdom, it is only to showcase Silence's superior worth, and does not bring them forward from the middle ground of the narrative.

Of the central women characters only Silence occupies the privileged space in which adventure is possible, and her freedom of movement contrasts strongly with the confinement of her mother and foster-mother. Eufemie gives birth alone, with Cador's cousin as her only aid. The narrator conveys the intensity of the labor with terse, sympathetic realism, just as he discreetly underlines the dependent state of Cador's relation. She typifies the fate of a nobly-born woman relegated by circumstance to the margins of feudal society: the widow

of a slain knight, she is left pregnant with a son who subsequently dies in early infancy, depriving her of any future; she has no choice but to be gently coerced into Cador's subterfuge out of a sense of family obligation and financial expediency. With a pecuniary interest in the success of her entrusted mission, she is isolated in a remote lodging worthy of Marie's walled heroines. With no access road, her house is built of wood, surrounded by a wall and palisade (2224), fortified with a strong gate, double bolts and locks. Strangers will be kept away, even at the risk of stigmatizing her (2170–74). On the surface, it is because of her rank that she feels shame in raising the child, but as Silence's identity remains a mystery, there must be the implication that the widowed woman has given birth to an illegitimate child. Hers is a small life, but one that features unsentimentalized aspects of the harsh reality of some women's experience: her case may serve as a warning regarding the potential fate of an underprivileged silent minority that the heroine could easily join. In a strikingly modern soliloquy Silence later voices an awareness of the oppression of women in society, in terms that relate to power in general as well as to sex:

Donques li prent a sovenir
Des jus c'on siolt es cambres faire
Dont a oï sovent retraire,
Et poise dont en son corage
Tolt l'us de feme a son usage,
Et voit que miols valt li us d'ome
Que l'us de feme, c'est la some.
'Voire,' fet il, 'a la male eure
Irai desos, quant sui deseure.
Deseure sui, s'irai desos.
Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.
Nel sui, par foi, ains sui honis
Quant as femes voel estre onis.' (2632–44)

[Then he began to remember
the games people play in private,
which he had often heard described,
and he weighed in his heart
the woman's role against his own,
and saw that a man's life is better
than a woman's, all things considered.
'Truly,' he said, 'in an evil hour
will I go underneath, when I am on top.
I am on top now, and I would have to go beneath.
Now I am most valorous and strong,
but I wouldn't be any longer; rather, in faith,
I'd be shamed if I wanted to be like the women.']

'A la mal eure' denotes the inauspicious moment of sexual and social submission, as she recognizes all the advantages of her borrowed gender, and the deliberate play on the adjective *male* reminds the reader that in addition to describing the unlucky hour at hand, it reinforces the masculine determinism of time and space.

Once she begins to grow, Silence is termed a neutral *enfes*; at the appropriate age she dresses as a boy and begins her education. From the outset she is endowed with male virtues, and called *vallans* and *pros* (2398) as epic and courtly heroes are. In one ironic scene, Cador gives his child a non-traditional version of the father-son lecture concerning the ways of the world and, in this case, why he cannot be a girl. Cador peppers his speech with designations like *biaus fils* (2448) and even *biaus dols chers fils* (2454), recalling similar parental speeches given by the hero's mother in Chrétien's *Perceval*, that build to an almost ludicrous effect by the time he finishes: he is clearly attempting to convince himself as much as Silence that, counter to popular wisdom, manners indeed make the man, and that *l'habit fait le moine*. Sexuality does not become an issue until Silence reaches puberty at the age of twelve, when Nature warns her of the unwelcome amorous interest she will arouse because of her beauty and on account of the mixed signals she will send (2513-22). On a grammatical level, the use of masculine and feminine pronouns continually reflects Silence's gender turmoil as her designation as *he* or *she* varies according to circumstance, and the level of compromise that her situation creates.

Like language and clothing, exposure to the elements aids Silence's transformation:

> Sel mainne plus sovent el halle
> Por cho qu'il violt faire plus malle. (2473–74)
>
> [He took him most often out in the sun
> to make him look more like a boy.]

Halle/malle is a frequently recurring rhyme, and a reminder that the outside world is a male preserve, while, as Nature later states, women belong indoors:

> 'Va a la cambre a la costure,
> Cho violt de nature li us.' (2528–29)
>
> ['Go to the chamber and sew, for nature's custom demands it.' (my translation)].

Why chambers belong to Nature rather than to the artificial and comfortable realm of Nurture is never explained. However, since much has been made of the role of Nature and Nurture and their debates, I only underline their importance and note that pragmatic Raison (2609), mindful of the

undesirability of being poor, overrides even biological instinct and social conditioning. The same reason governs Silence's choice of career, as she offsets the possibility of being a bad knight and an insufficiently feminine woman by finding a neutral artistic territory. The complex *enfances* of Silence would, in a more conventional romance, merit only a cursory paragraph, but here they constitute a morally, socially, and ethically testing adventure in their own right.

From androgynous puberty to concealed womanhood, Silence leads a double life, taking overt risk in external adventure, and hidden risks of being discovered *par aventure* (2571). The *topos* of cloaking her real name is troped yet again when she assumes the name Malduit, and travels on yet another *mervellose aventure* (2689) with the two minstrels. Howard Bloch sees a thematics of poetry and desire, and an urge to fill the silences and find sexual fulfilment, lying at the heart of both Silence's apprenticeship and Heldris's profession (90–91), which would thus make *Silence* a writerly text concerned with writing just as it is a readerly text about reading and misreading. More simply, however, Silence's choice of profession is suitable since the public voice of the *trouvère* is also a neutral space where masculine and feminine voices blend, and where speaking through another gender is an acceptable artifice, legitimizing Silence's artful deceit just as it permits male poets a woman's disguise in many lyric genres. Her androgynous beauty, technical skill, and musical prowess account for her popularity as a performer. If we consider her teachers as representatives of the poetic language and lyric system created by male poets, her success is due in part to the extraordinary circumstances that enable her to ape masculine poetic discourse and at the same time give a more authentic expression to the woman's voice so prominent in the lyric ethos. Her natural superiority over more experienced but conventional masters is not fully understood by the implied audience in the text, but can be by its readers, particularly twentieth-century ones.

Returning home to an unusual recognition scene that reveals her name but not her nature (3640–44), Silence embarks on a connected series of episodes with Eufeme that are characterized as a *mesaventure* (3697). Twisting the conventional seduction scene of courtly romance, this form of *male aventure* contrasts with the outdoor active kind, and involves the potential sexual compromise of the heroine. Indeed, her encounters with the queen seem to occupy the central space reserved in other narratives for combat episodes. Edward Gallagher cogently points to the parallel between *Silence* and Marie's *Lanval* with regard to the queen's treatment of the heroine, and her accusation of homosexuality (3935–54), when Silence refuses her advances (32). The

parallels run deeper than just the charge laid against Silence. Heldris, like Marie, turns this episode into a test of loyalty and defuses its eroticism. The claustrophobic, interior nature of this adventure also harkens back to the style of Marie's *Lais*.

Once Silence and Eufeme are enclosed in the 'cambre painte et celee' (3727) [the painted hidden room], the vocabulary used of the queen recalls that used of the serpent. The beast of Malroi shares Eufeme's carnal and voracious nature, and her inner and outer blackness. The narrator says of her that 'le cuer el ventre a noir' (3716) [her heart was black in her chest]. Furthermore, the dragon exhales smoke from its venomous mouth, while the queen burns with *rage* and *ardure* (3698), and uses dangerous wiles to poisonous effect. Although she protests, 'Jo ne sui mie mordans beste' (3831) [I am not a biting animal], her mordant behavior contradicts that claim. Because Heldris turns the episode into a test of loyalty to Ebain, and uses almost mock-heroic language to convey Silence's staunch resistance, one might forget that the heroine is female were it not for the continual reminders of her predicament in the form of juxtaposed gender terms:

> Et li vallés qui est mescine
> Est moult en dure discipline,
> Qu'il volroit miols estre .c. liues
> U il eüst et pais et triues
> Que en la cambre en tel anguisse,
> Que il ne set que faire puisse. (3785–90)
>
> [The boy who was a maiden
> was in a terrible predicament,
> for he would sooner be a hundred leagues off,
> where he could have peace and quiet,
> than in this chamber in such anguish
> that he did not know what to do.]

Silence thinks in masculine, chivalric terms and longs for escape from the predatory Eufeme, who plots a further *male aventure* (3965) with another *locus classicus* of chivalric romance, the staged rape.

Eufeme embodies an extreme version of the negative stereotype drawn from misogynistic literature: she weeps, cajoles, seduces, feigns her emotions and plots to procure her own sexual satisfaction. Chaste Silence personifies loyalty, abstinence, self-control. Reasoning like the man she is, she prepares to accept the blame *in silencio* at whatever the personal cost. Their encounters provide frequent opportunities for the narrator to remind the audience about the corrupt nature of women, in all their Ovidian-inspired shrewishness, a view perhaps best and most succinctly expressed by Ebain's chancellor when he realizes Eufeme has duped him with the double-letter trick:

'Car feme nen est pas laniere
D'engiens trover en tel maniere.
Engignose est por home nuire
Plus que por un grant bien estruire.' (5013–16)

['For women are not slow
to invent ruses of that kind.
They are more ingenious for men's undoing
than for their profit.']

Women's creativity is in the destruction and not instruction of men and, as in Paul's letter, they cannot teach, although they ought to learn. The conflict between the two women is one of the four narrative epicenters of the romance. The first, with the minstrels, tests Silence's intelligence; the second, with Eufeme, tests her loyalty and discretion; the third is the ultimate test of her manhood in battle; and the last, with Merlin, gauges the true measure of her femininity. Of the four, the scenes with Eufeme are the most important; they display a feminized form of *aventure*, showing Silence passively fending off attack rather than actively defending herself in a weaponless battle of the sexes, while she learns by negative example about the feminine ideal she will personify by the end of the romance.

As if this and her subsequent stay in France were the final rites of passage leading to adulthood, Silence is quickly knighted by the French king at Pentecost, in keeping with the traditions of chivalric fiction. She casts off her minstrel *persona* and becomes the accomplished knight she feared she never would be; this is the beginning of a short, intense period of glory rather then the initiation of a long series of adventures (5135–44). The narrator gives one last speech on the anomaly of a woman training in masculine pursuits, but rather than the usual tone of bemusement, he strikes a note of admiring acceptance (5145–75). The dichotomy between Silence and the rest is no longer primarily sexual, but moral and ethical:

Et savés que dist mes corages?
Que bien ait tols jors bons usages.
[Car] bons us tolt moult vilonie
Et fait mener cortoise vie. (5165–68)

[Do you know what I say to that?
Blessed be good habits for ever.
For good habits remove much villainy,
and lead one to live a courtly life.]

What was once a dubious *us* becomes exemplary practice, and beyond the bedchamber the measure of Silence is through her actions, and her sex becomes a secondary consideration. Silence has risen to the peak of knightly perfection

and her greatest level of gender neutrality as the French court bemoans her imminent departure:

> 'Ah!' font il, 'quel noreture
> Et quels atrais est d'estrange home
> Quant on l'a norri, c'est la some!
> Et miols apriés, sil pert on donques.' (5280–83)
>
> ['Ah!' they cry, 'That's just the way of it!
> What nurturing and what generosity towards a foreigner!
> And later on we lose him.' (my translation)]

Silence graduates to the status of 'estrange home,' an appellation that encompasses more than one form of foreignness, and a more telling remark than the French courtiers can possibly appreciate. Although in her encounter with Eufeme the narrator plays on the difficulties posed by her gender, he does not do so in the extended battle-scene, largely because gender has temporarily ceased to matter, as *virtus* transcends it.

The civil strife in Ebain's kingdom marks a return to the style, vocabulary, and tone of the beginning of the romance. This section is patterned after the *chanson de geste*, and contains more than a passing reference to the *Chanson de Roland* in the Saracen sword brandished by the heroine whose battle-cry is *Monjoie* (5643), as well as in narrative focus and the use of many formulaic expressions. The episode allows Silence to triumph in a man's world in the same way that she extricates herself against all odds from Eufeme's feminine trap. Silence's *male aventure* with the queen is a passive test of her loyalty and resistance, while the externalized physical combat is an active challenge to the values Silence has espoused constituting a true male *aventure*. The war is a necessary narrative means of restoring Silence to England and to the heart of Ebain's court, where she will become Eufeme's unwitting rival for the king's attention. However, it is during this episode that Heldris most praises his unusual creation, and that Silence imposes herself as she has not previously. Perhaps because of its epic conventions, with the external conflict on the battlefield, the war has received less critical attention than other episodes; however, it describes a vital stage in Silence's development. It is only here that she is allowed a full-scale, integrated adventure of the kind reserved in chivalric romance for her knightly counterparts.

The Merlin episode closes the narrative circle by re-introducing the forest and the *merveilleux*, countering the ethos of epic with the *topoi* of romance. Initially, even in the context of the established narrative framework, tacking Merlin and the Arthurian otherworld onto the conclusion of *Silence* seems incongruous. The magician arrives almost *ex machina* to restore order by

glossing the mysteries that motivate the plot and eventually bring its confusions to a halt. This occurs both because once the war is over there is no conflict to motivate the story, and because the scenes between Silence and Eufeme are set to repeat themselves until the deadlock is broken by some revelation, which in turn entails the long-awaited resolution of the inheritance question. Like Merlin, Heldris has to conjure a narrative miracle, even if a borrowed one, in order to bring events to closure.

In a final adventure, one that can be achieved uniquely 'par engien de feme' (5803) [by a woman's trick], involving biological femininity rather than the acquired sexual lures of Eufeme, Silence coaxes Merlin from his back-to-nature phase as she conversely embarks on her return to a 'natural' state. Merlin represents a perfect transitional figure because he too has been the site of a struggle between Nature and Nurture, and is Silence's omniscient otherworldly double, existing on the blurred boundary between Nature and her rival. In a sense he reverses their polarity and significance, since for Silence civilization and social conditioning constitute the nurturing that has enabled her to disguise her nature, while for Merlin nurture is found in the wild forest that distracts him from his nature, which instinctively answers the call of civilization. Furthermore, both Merlin and Silence are termed *salvage*, he for being a wild man, and she for seeming male. His marginality and protean power of transformation make him the perfect foil for Silence; his revelation mirrors her concealment. Merlin presides over the unravelling, quite literally the defrocking, of the narrative. As with Cador's initial adventure with the dragon there is little excitement in the successful completion of Merlin's capture. An old man—in all probability Merlin himself—provides the vital information for Silence's uncomplicated entrapment, and all she must do is wait. The requirement that a woman capture Merlin seems by-the-by—the episode is fundamentally underwhelming.

His return to court, with folkloric anecdotes involving the peasant with new shoes, the begging leper, and the weeping nobleman at a funeral illustrate the text's underlying philosophy: it is futile to attempt to manipulate fate and circumstance. The embedded parables illustrate the transience of life, and the illusion of man's attempt to order nature. In the form of Merlin, Heldris introduces a fitting peal of carnevalesque laughter as an implied commentary on all previous events in the text. This liberating humor disrupts the narrative order and upturns all previous reversals of gender and fortune. In generic terms, the ending constitutes another return from Torelore, and Ebain's meting out of just deserts brings his realm to its pre-lapsarian state before the original dispute disinheriting women. This is not however consonant with a return to

a just world, for in righting itself, society redraws boundaries of language and puts Silence back in her place. In spite of its honor, for Silence to become queen seems worse than a consolation prize.

This last act is the true silencing of the heroine, effacing all traces of her heroic journey: it makes her a non-existent knight, disarms her, and realigns Heldris's romance with normal generic expectation. As Heldris reverts to mirroring contemporary misogynistic sensibilities, we are treated to what Simon Gaunt wittily describes as '...the deafening thud of Heldris's attempt to justify his sex' (213) at the expense of his heroine, who must return to the limited space and power configured for her.[9] For all this, as critics and especially Gaunt have indicated, Heldris is fascinated with the possibilities of altering sexual roles and stereotypes, but not in any drastic way. If, at the close of the text, Silence's 'gender trouble' has served no obvious purpose beyond affirming the status quo, what is left? First, I agree with Psaki that in spite of his conservatism, Heldris produces a text that is 'at least proto-feminist' in its outlook (xxx). The corrective *coda* of the romance comes too swiftly and too late to undo the previous narrative; this is one reversal too many in a text already riddled with them. Among extant texts, Heldris is next best to Marie de France in the way he explores the realm of the feminine.

It is debatable what a reading of *Silence* contributes to our appreciation of the political and social status of women, although what it fails to achieve in *Realpolitik*, it wins in altering our perspective of the romance as a singularly masculine genre. That Silence fails to fulfill herself in as radical a way as the modern reader might wish is offset by a consideration of what she manages to achieve, which is at least as much as Marie's heroines. In terms of form, where Marie inscribes a space around convention, Heldris goes to the heart of the romance genre with a radical substitution that forces us to reevaluate its *conjointure* as well as its meaning. Moreover Silence, the embodiment of the eternal gap in the text, fuses hero and heroine and re-genders the romance as a by-product of her adventures. The boundaries of gender mirror the hazy frontiers of genre, as the narrator slips between epic and romance and highlights disjunctions between genres, genders, and conventions, creating an awareness of the artificial nature of fiction, and nurturing a space that allows a playful sense of experimentalism, with its renewal of the standard features of courtly romance. The traditional thin plot concerning the quest for identity and recognition takes on a special significance when the challenges are met by a central character who hitherto had no place in undertaking it at all. As Heldris's other women characters show, the customary place for women in medieval fiction leaves no space for development, and little access to the *aventures*

necessary for conveying an impression of spiritual or individual growth. If only temporarily, Silence is freed from her stereotypical bonds and the interior world of heroines, and allowed into the narrative light. Her *aventures* waver between those we could classify as *mervelloses*, and those considered *males*, between closed and open spaces. In spite of the narrator's professed misogyny, she is permitted to triumph. The only way she can do this is to become a man and don armor, a necessary precaution for the vulnerable, or as Calvino's clever cross-dressing narrator Sister Theodora says herself when contemplating the invisible knight Agilulf:

> ...ché senza quella [armatura], coi tempi che correvano, anche un uomo che c'è rischiava di scomparire, figuriamoci uno che non c'è... (37)
>
> [...for without this [armor], given the nature of the times, even a man who existed risked disappearing, so imagine one who did not...]

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NOTES

1 All references to Marie's *Lais* are taken from Jean Rychner's edition, and translations are mine. For a full treatment of Marie's narrative artistry see Bruckner (1993), ch. 5.

2 Roberta Krueger (1993, 101) also associates the biblical passage with Ebain's comments. The full passage runs: 'Similiter et mulieres in habitu ornato, cum verecundia et sobrietate ornantes se, et non in tortis crinibus, aut auro, aut margaritis, vel veste pretiosa. Sed quod decet mulieres, permittentes pietatem per opera bona. Mulier in silentio discat cum omnia subjectione. Docere autem mulieri non permitto, neque dominari in virum: sed esse in silentio. Adam enim primus formatus est, deinde Heva. Et Adam non est seductus: mulier autem seducta in praevaricatione fuit' (9–14). I translate: 'Similarly, let women adorn themselves with modesty and sobriety, and not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or expensive dress, but that which becomes women professing piety, with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. I do not allow women to teach, nor to take authority over men, but to be in silence. Adam was created first, then Eve. And Adam was not seduced: but the seduced woman was in the wrong.' Further echoes of this passage occur in *Silence*, particularly in the references to and invocations of Adam in the text.

3 The link between subjection and silence is also found in the cloistered setting of the monastery. The Rule of St. Benedict observes: 'Speaking and teaching are

the master's tasks; the disciple is to be silent and listen. Therefore any requests to a superior should be made with all humility and submission [*cum subiectione reverentiae*]' (Fry 191).

4 All quotations from the *Roman de Silence* are drawn from Lewis Thorpe's edition, and all English translations from Psaki unless otherwise indicated.

5 For example, Gaunt, Cooper, Bloch and Allen.

6 D. 50, Title 17, ch. 142 (Arangio-Ruiz and Guarino, 454). I thank Professor James Brundage of the University of Kansas for his help in finding the legal sources of *Silence*.

7 *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, vols. 9–11, 311.

8 The *Biblioteca Sanctorum* gives numerous examples prior to the Middle Ages, *e.g.*, Saints Appolinaria, Euphrosyne, Anastasia, Marina, Theodora, Pelagia, and Eugenia.

9 See Ferrante (1988) for a broader consideration of this issue.