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Silence in Debate: The Intellectual Nature of the *Roman de Silence*

VENETIA BRIDGES

The history of Heldris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence*, appropriately enough, is one of centuries of apparent silence followed by decades of excited debate. From its probable thirteenth-century composition to the end of the twentieth century it left no lasting trace, but the advent of Lewis Thorpe's edition in 1972 (and others subsequently) has generated over fifty publications at the time of writing.[1] Most of this modern critical interest has understandably focused on the prominent issue of gender and its expression, with a spectrum of opinion that ranges from, at one end, seeing *Silence* as ultimately presenting a protofeminist victory of sorts for its flexibly gendered protagonist to, at the other, claiming it as a more conservative work.[2] The second dominant tendency of critical studies has been to highlight *Silence*'s concern for inheritance and social hierarchy, themes aligned with that of gender.[3] These critical tendencies thus firmly situate *Silence* within romance culture and the pervasive concerns

[1] Thorpe published his edition in various issues of *Nottingham Medieval Studies* during the 1960s before the full edition appeared in 1972. Since then, two other editions, two special issues of *Arthuriana* and over thirty stand-alone pieces have been published according to the *International Medieval Bibliography* (accessed 16 November 2020).

[2] An example of the more positive interpretation is Lorraine K. Stock, 'The Importance of Being Gender "Stable": Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana*, 7 (1997), 7–34, and representative of the more antifeminist tendency is Simon Gaunt, 'The Significance of Silence', *Paragraph*, 13 (1990), 202–16.

[3] This observation is made by F. Regina Psaki in the introduction to *Arthuriana*, 12 (2002), 3–5 (3). The work has also been read in terms that emphasize the text's queer potential beyond these apparent binaries of gender and social roles: examples of recent criticism that unites gender, social concerns and 'queer' fluidity are Robert L. A. Clark, 'Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana*, 12 (2002), 50–63; and Jessica Barr, 'The Idea of the Wilderness: Gender and Resistance in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana*, 30 (2020), 3–25.

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about gender roles and social hierarchy with which so many romance works engage. Although there has been some discussion of the work's intertextualities, *Silence*'s relationships with other forms of wider literary culture have not been analysed in detail, despite critics calling attention to some important points of comparison.[4] This essay seeks to highlight one particular parallel by considering *Silence* in the context of the scholastic culture of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, interpreting the romance as an active participant in that culture and hence demonstrating the wider point that the genre is intimately enmeshed within apparently quite different literary contexts. This approach is especially apt given Elizabeth Archibald's interest in Latin literature, medieval romance and gender, and her personal encouragement for my research in these areas, for which I continue to be extremely grateful; the current attempt to read them in creative dialogue is in great part inspired by her example, although of course she bears no responsibility for the results.

The intellectual culture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was defined by the philosophical, theological and literary studies of the monastic and cathedral schools and the first universities, studies characterized particularly during this time by interest in newly available learning from antique texts and thus by the creative interplay between a wide variety of works from different eras. This multifaceted and complex situation in turn spread from ecclesiastical schools and universities into different communities, including regal and ducal courts. These communities, mixed socially and educationally, encouraged scholastic learning to interact with other textual cultures, such as romance. For example, the household of Henry I 'the Liberal' of Champagne (1127–81) and his wife Marie is a plausible origin for Chrétien de Troyes' romances but may also have supported the Latin poet and scholar Walter of Châtillon, a frequent textual presence on thirteenth-century school curricula; it is not difficult to imagine Heldris of Cornwall, the author of *Silence*, in a similar context.[5] In Henry the Liberal's circle, Latin intellectual culture, French romance works and their respective authors co-existed and must surely

[4] Examples include lyric poetry, hagiography and Arthurian narratives (those of Chrétien de Troyes): see Christopher Callahan, 'Lyric Discourse and Female Vocality: On the Unsilencing of Silence', *Arthuriana*, 12 (2002), 123–31; Lynne Dahmen, 'Sacred Romance: *Silence* and the Hagiographical Tradition', *Arthuriana*, 12 (2002), 113–22; and Karen Pratt, 'Humour in the *Roman de Silence*', *Arthurian Literature*, 29 (2003), 87–103.

[5] On Marie's patronage activities, see June Hall McCash, 'The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women: An Overview', in June Hall McCash, ed., *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women* (Athens, GA, 1996), 1–49 (19). For an overview of the Champagne court, see Venetia Bridges, *Medieval Narratives of Alexander the Great: Transnational Texts in England and France* (Cambridge, 2018), 111–12.

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have given rise to mutual creativity.[6] So the famed 'Renaissance of the twelfth century', traditionally conceived of as Latinate, ecclesiastical and 'intellectual', in fact extended into multilingual and plural literary environments that in turn adapted it creatively for their own ends.

The influences of this culture beyond the schools were therefore multiple. Early romances such as the *romans antiques* draw the stories of Thebes, the *Æneid* and Troy from their Latin sources and retell them in French for courtly audiences, potentially Henry II of England's well-known literary circle, but the impact of scholastic culture did not stop at the provision of source material and intertextual relationships.[7] The effect of the schools upon literature in terms of epistemological process has received much less attention than either sources or interpretative traditions, and yet is equally as important. The process through which learning was gained, the characteristic habits of thought and speech formed by and used in the schools, is more difficult to trace within vernacular literature; commonalities between the format of philosophical discussions and the narratives and themes of romance may seem unlikely. Yet the style of such scholastic discussions is a feature of romance and other vernacular genres, and is particularly relevant for *Silence* in terms of subject matter as well as approach. The following analysis will focus on *Silence*'s interactions with wider intellectual culture from this perspective.

Disputed Debate: The Twelfth-Century Schools, the *Roman d'Enéas* and the *De planctu Naturae*

A key aspect of both this intellectual culture and *Silence*'s narrative is debate. In its school contexts, debate became 'a formative practice in the scholastic culture of medieval Europe, eventually transcending the frontier between private and public spheres and extending to multiple levels of society'.[8] Debate

[6] A better-known example of this multifaceted and plural literary culture is Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine's court, but Henry the Liberal's household shows that the regal court's catholic literary character, if extreme, was far from unique. See Ian Short, 'Literary Culture at the Court of Henry II', in Christopher Harper-Bill and Nicholas Vincent, eds, *Henry II: New Interpretations* (Woodbridge, 2007), 335–61. Short characterizes the court as a 'galaxy of celebrities' that included John of Salisbury, Peter of Blois, Gervase of Tilbury, Gerald of Wales, Walter Map, Wace and Benoît de Sainte-Maure (341).

[7] For a review of Henry and Eleanor's potential patronage activities, see Karen Broadhurst, 'Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine: Patrons of Literature in French?', *Viator*, 27 (1996), 53–84.

[8] Alex J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014), 2.

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as a practice was of course not new, but in the twelfth century it became a key part of intellectual life in more rarefied form, characterized in this context as an especially 'argumentative and disputative' form of enquiry (*disputatio*).[9] It was closely identified with a dialectical approach, in which arguments for and against a particular proposition were advanced to test its validity, often in the form of a dialogue.[10] Both an intellectual process and a rhetorical practice, debate in this dialectical sense underpinned scholastic discussion of all the subjects of the curriculum (beyond the standard *trivium* and *quadrivium*). However, it was a contested approach. The bitter theological battle during the 1130s between Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux, in which the latter accused the former of heresy, was as much about the form of Abelard's enquiries as their content; for Bernard, Abelard's dialectical habit of opposing contradictory statements in order to establish truth, the *solutiones contrarium* as seen in his *Sic et non*, was 'an inappropriate method of instruction in the study of Christian doctrine'.[11] Scholastic debate as a process of discerning truth involved contradiction and instability, aspects which some figures evidently found problematic in theological study.[12] The art of *disputatio*, itself disputed, therefore created cultural and theological anxiety as well as inspiring intellectual creativity.

Beyond this immediate scholastic context, debate is important in a creative sense for wider literary culture, as seen in the increasing number of works (both Latin and vernacular) that use dialogue between oppositional pairs as a structural principle, known as debate poems or dialogues. Disputes in the form of dialogues between body and soul, wine and water, winter and summer, and an array of other topics are common, demonstrating the creative and structuring role of debate within literary processes.[13] However, debate is also a thematic presence in texts that are not oppositional dialogues. In *Silence*, debates

[9] Novikoff, *Culture of Disputation*, 63.

[10] On the intersection of debate, dialogue and dialectic, see Novikoff, *Culture of Disputation*, 70–75.

[11] Another well-known example is Gratian's *Concordia discordantium canonum*, which engages with contradictions in legal texts: see Novikoff, *Culture of Disputation*, 85 and 93.

[12] Hugh of St Victor also criticized the habit of disputation in *De vanitate mundi* (itself a dialogue between Reason and Soul): see Novikoff, *Culture of Disputation*, 74–75.

[13] On the body and soul debate tradition, see for example David P. Baker and Neil Cartlidge, 'Manuscripts of the Medieval Latin Debate Between Body and Soul (*Visio Philiberti*)', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 60 (2014), 196–201. For an example of the genre in one vernacular tradition, see Thomas L. Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia, MO, 1990).

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between Nature and Nurture are a crucial narrative element, indicating that *disputatio* was not confined to works that used it as their main structural principle but was also present, and potentially influential, within different genres. Particularly important for *Silence* in terms of literary antecedents are moments of debate within two key areas, namely romance works and philosophical texts discussing the role of nature.

A striking example of debate within early romance occurs in the *Roman d'Enéas* (*c*. 1160). In a lengthy episode inspired by Ovid's erotic poetry, Lavine and her mother twice debate the value of love, and then Lavine and Enéas, would-be lovers, each hold discussions with their internal selves.[14] Although much of this passage is monologic, there are moments that express the protagonists' mental suffering using question and answer dialogue between the divided halves of the self, with personified Love sometimes cast in the role of a teacher. In other words, the style deliberately replicates that of the scholastic classroom, as is seen most clearly in this exchange between Lavine and Love:

'Tu [Amors] m'apreïs or grant leçon,
Onc n'i ot vers se de mal non.
Car m'aleges de ta mecine!'
'Repose toi, fole Lavine,
Ceste leçon doiz molt fermer.'
'Trop la sai ja bien recorder.'
'Antan i molt, se la retien.'
'Tot sai lo mal, po sai del bien.'

('Love, you have taught me a great lesson;
every line of it was ill.
Now heal me with your medicine.'
'Rest, foolish Lavine,
you must learn this lesson very thoroughly.'
'I can remember it only too well.'
'Pay close attention to it, and retain it.'
'I know all of the bad, but little of the good.')[15]

This exchange uses not only the language of learning (*leçon*, *recorder*, *retien*) but also its form, the dialogic debate. Importantly, it also uses the language of

[14] *Le Roman d'Enéas*, ed. and trans. Wilfrid Besnardeau and Francine Mora-Lebrun, Champion Classiques Moyen Âge (Paris, 2018), 7771–9108. All quotations are taken from this edition.

[15] *Enéas*, 8343–50. The English translation is that of John A. Yunck, *Eneas: A Twelfth-Century Romance* (New York, 1974), which uses different line numbers from the French text; those quoted here are 8431–38.

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dialectic to make its points (*mal* and *mecine*, *mal* and *bien*), pairing opposed concepts in a subtle stylistic reminiscence of *solutiones contrarium*. Although Lavine's suffering here is great, the form of its expression is knowing and humorous, a deliberate parody of contemporary intellectual habits within an erotic context. The form of a scholastic *disputatio* has been transferred into a romance narrative, a witty mode of *translatio studii* that surely would have added to Bernard of Clairvaux's anxieties about the improper use of debate culture outside as well as within theological study if he had read the romance (an unlikely prospect). This witty *translatio* is important in terms of the precedent it may set for other romance works, including *Silence*.

Scholastic debate culture is also influential within philosophical works of nature, which are relevant to *Silence* given its extended consideration of *nature* and *noreture*. R. Howard Bloch and Simon Gaunt have both noted the possible impact of Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae* (composed in the 1160s; henceforward *DPN*) upon the thirteenth-century work, but Bloch's analysis, which does not focus primarily on the process of debate, remains the only detailed comparison of the two, and Gaunt considers that there are crucial differences between Nature in the *DPN* and *Silence* without developing his arguments at length.[16] An in-depth comparison of the two Natures is outside the scope of this essay, but it is notable that the *DPN*'s incarnation is heavily invested in language and debate culture.[17] Nature in Alan's text is characterized as *Dei auctoris vicaria* ('the vicar of God the creator'), queenly, in control, and with authority derived from God. In this role she instructs Venus, who is charged with *rerum propaginem* ('the generation of creatures').[18] Crucially, this instruction is described in terms of the scholastic arts of grammar and *disputatio*; Venus is commanded to allow only grammatically correct

[16] On the date of the *DPN*, see *Literary Works: Alan of Lille*, ed. and trans. Winthrop Wetherbee, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 22 (Cambridge, MA, 2013), x. All quotations and translations are taken from this edition. Bloch claims that '*Le Roman de Silence* reads, in places, like a vernacular version of the *Planctus Naturae*' in *Etymologies and Genealogies* (Chicago, IL, 1983), 197, and reads the *DPN*'s depiction of Nature alongside *Silence* in 'Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère', *Yale French Studies*, 70 (1986), 81–99, where he concludes that the romance is 'is in fact all about misreading' (98); Gaunt, 'Significance of Silence', refers to these analyses at 209 and n.8. The *Roman de la Rose* is another important model for *Silence*, as both Bloch and Gaunt acknowledge, but since the *DPN* is the mutual source for both French works the *Rose* will not be considered separately here.

[17] Both Bloch and Gaunt note the *DPN*'s interest in language without explicitly considering how this relates to debate as a practice; see Gaunt, 'Significance of Silence', n.8.

[18] *DPN*, 6.3 and 10.3, 78–79 and 122–23.

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unions and must defend her decisions *agonisticae disputationis ingressuram conflictum* ('in a war of strenuous disputation'), an art in which she has been instructed by Nature herself.[19] Nature goes on to describe *disputatio* in its most noble form, which might suggest that in *DPN* the cultural anxieties about the practice highlighted earlier are absent. Yet Nature follows this description with an explicit expulsion of *quasdam gramaticae dialeticaeque observantias* ('certain practices of grammar and dialectic') from Venus's schools, indicating that despite her adoption of *disputatio* as an activity leading to truth (here depicted as procreation), the debate process might be flawed.[20] In addition to this rejection of some dialectical habits, Venus subsequently fails at her task out of idleness, and this failure is again portrayed in terms of 'bad' sexual grammar and dialectical practices; she is *gramaticis constructionibus destruens, dialeticis conversionibus invertens, rethoricis coloribus decolorans* ('destructive in her grammatical constructions, perverse in her dialectical conversions, using rhetorical colors only to discolor'), and as a result gives birth to a bastard child.[21] While the irony of describing the misuse of scholastic skills using those same skills at their most stylistically florid is palpable, such passages and the discomfort with *disputatio* that they reveal should not be dismissed as merely witty parody; the theological insights that these scholastic approaches were intended to promote connect the process of debate directly with divine truth, raising the process to a serious level but still uneasily mixing it with humour (in this instance). Nature in Alan's text, then, depicts scholastic debate culture as capable of producing both truth and error (a bastard), reflecting the fact that it remained a disputed practice in the later twelfth century after Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux's struggle had ended with the former's condemnation.

These two examples from very different modes of literary discourse demonstrate two key points. First, they highlight the importance of scholastic debate as a creative source beyond debate poetry proper, whether in depictions of erotic love or in philosophical musings on the natural order. Second, they reveal that cultural anxieties about such debate (expressed via humour as well as by accusations of 'corrupt' usage) are part of its creative power. Since both romance and natural philosophy are antecedents for *Silence* generically and thematically, these important points suggest that the thirteenth-century romance may reflect similar attitudes.

[19] *DPN*, 10.6 and 10.7, 126–27.

[20] *DPN*, 10.7–8 and 10.9, 126–29.

[21] *DPN*, 10.12, 132–33. On Alan's grammatical analogies, see Jan Ziolkowski, *Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex: The Meaning of Grammar to a Twelfth-Century Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA, 1985).

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Debate in the *Roman de Silence*

Silence's thematic connections to scholastic culture are evident even before considering the role of debate in the narrative in detail. This is particularly clear in the romance's interest in the linguistic arts so fundamental to that culture, as seen in characters' names. Although the romance is composed in French, Silence's name is given in its Latin and therefore visibly gendered form ('Silentius/Silentia', male/female) at several points to highlight the appropriate grammatical relationship between language and gender, despite the fact that s/he is most often named in the text using the effectively gender-neutral French version, 'Silence'. This unnecessary gendering within the French-language romance is reminiscent of Alan's portrayal of sexual behaviour using grammatical analogies; the author uses the different inflectional endings to highlight but also to problematize the apparent binary of gender.[22] The names 'Eufeme' and 'Eufemie' ('Alas! woman!' and 'use of good speech') are used to define individuals' natures and thus their moral valency.[23] In addition, the fact that *Silence* is so explicitly interested in the large question of nature vs. nurture, and explores it so deliberately, further aligns the romance with works of scholastic philosophy more widely.[24] The romance is therefore thematically inclined towards contemporary intellectual culture beyond the immediate context of its debates.

[22] Silence's Latin name's potential to denote either gender depending on grammatical ending is noted at baptism (2074–82), referred to at the end of Nature's scolding of Silence (2541) and features again at the romance's denouement (6666–68). On the possible ambiguities of this in both its Latin and French versions, see Peter L. Allen, 'The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing, and *Le Roman de Silence*', in Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Rony, eds, *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Syracuse, NY, 1989), 98–112 (105–06, 109); and Peggy McCracken, '"The boy who was a girl": Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*', *Romanic Review*, 85 (1994), 517–36 (526); Gaunt, 'Significance of Silence', conversely interprets the phenomenon as a paradoxical critique of ambivalence (207). On grammar in *Silence* and *DPN*, see Katherine R. Terrell, 'Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Romance Quarterly*, 55 (2008), 35–48 (36–37). All quotations and the translation are taken from *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing, MI, 1992).

[23] See *Silence*, ed. and trans. Roche-Mahdi, xx–xxi.

[24] The idea that the work was explicitly designed to provoke debate on this question is advanced by Kristin L. Burr, 'Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*', in Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan, eds, *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honour of E. Jane Burns* (Cambridge, 2016), 33–44 (33, 44).

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There are two major debates between Nature and Nurture in *Silence*. The first occurs when Silence reaches puberty. The two antagonists state their respective positions, which are the ones that are to be expected: Nature wants Silence to resume the female form, and Nurture encourages him/her to maintain the male persona. However, the debate is more consequential than the individual positions taken by the opposing sides reveal. In reply to Nature's scolding and gendered instruction that Silence *Va en la cambre a la costure* ('go into a chamber and do needlework', 2528), which ends with the claim *Tu nen es pas Scilentius* ('you are not Silentius', 2530) the youth produces a confusing set of statements:

> Tel n'oï onques!
> Silencius! qui sui jo donques?
> Silencius ai non, jo cui,
> U jo sui altres que ne fui.
> Mais cho sai jo bien, par ma destre,
> Que jo ne puis pas altres estre!
> Donques sui jo Scilentius,
> Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus.
>
> (I never heard that before!
> Not Silentius? Who am I then?
> Silentius is my name, I think,
> or I am other than who I was.
> But this I know well, upon my oath,
> that I cannot be anybody else!
> Therefore, I am Silentius,
> as I see it, or I am no one.)[25]

Silence's response here is marked by logical impossibilities (*jo sui altres que ne fui*, 'I am other than who I was'; *jo sui nus*, 'I am no one'). In both cases, these statements form the second half of an 'either/or' phrase, the first part of which refers to Silence's identity in a logically possible sense (*Silencius ai non*, 'Silence is my name'; *sui jo Scilentius*, 'I am Silentius'). The complete phrases therefore juxtapose an argument with its counter-argument, holding them in tension, which results in a finely balanced contradiction: 'I am Silence | I am no one.' This is reminiscent of scholastic *disputatio*, in which the practice of aligning contradictory statements was key in reconciling them via the process of *solutiones contrarium*. Silence's situation is summed up here using a stylish display of contemporary intellectual technique, which situates the youth's dilemma

[25] *Silence*, ed. and trans. Roche-Mahdi, 2531–38.

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even more strongly within a scholastic environment than the simple fact of a debate between Nature and Nurture indicates.

However, this sense of balanced paradox, of logical opposites held in delicate mutual tension, disintegrates under closer scrutiny. The first part of each phrase (*Silencius ai non*, 'Silence is my name'; *sui jo Scilentius*, 'I am Silentius') is in fact also a logical impossibility when the concept of 'Silence' is considered. The truth claims of both identities rest on the idea that 'Silence' is a coherent identity, whereas of course the act of claiming this identity in speech is inherently contradictory: how can anyone (regardless of gender) say that they are named Silence? The act of claiming this identity thus actually negates it.[26] So the first part of each phrase, the thesis, is not able to balance the second half, the antithesis (itself an impossible statement), and the delicate tension that holds both halves of the paradox together is destroyed; we are left with the hollowed out form of a *disputatio* whose sense has collapsed under the weight of its own internal contradictions. The idea of clearly defined, oppositional pairs or binaries, on which this *sic et non* approach relies, is depicted as invalid.[27]

This is an illustration of the impossible narrative situation that Silence experiences, but it is also an indictment of the process of *disputatio* itself, in line with the cultural anxieties about the impact and dissemination of the practice discussed above. I have used the word 'indictment' here rather than 'parody' because although there is humour involved in what is a ridiculous situation, there is also an innate seriousness to this emptying out of meaning from an intellectual process that was so important within high medieval culture, a seriousness that the contemporary anxieties mentioned above highlight. *Disputatio* was intended to lead to greater insight into the truth; if the process could be distorted or shown to be flawed in its assumptions about the possibility of *solutiones contrarium*, then the concept of truth itself was at stake.

The disintegration of what looks like an elegant if ludicrous argument here is underlined firmly in the same scholastic terms by the idea that *Nature li fait sofime* ('Nature has constructed a sophism', 2540). In fact, Nature's argument – that Silence's outward appearance should conform with biological sex – is the one that will triumph at the end of the romance, and can be said to be foreshadowed throughout it.[28] The word *sofime*, redolent of the schools, is misapplied here: despite the narrator's accusation, Nature's argument is not

[26] This paradox is discussed in detail by Allen, 'Ambiguity of Silence', 104–06.

[27] Gaunt, 'Significance of Silence', 202 and 209; and Terrell, 'Competing Gender Limitations', 39, also address this question of collapsing binaries but with reference to gender.

[28] Gaunt, 'Significance of Silence', 204–05.

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deceptive or false, but conversely accurately predicts what will happen to Silence later in the romance (the idea that women will love and then loathe him/her because of his/her inability to love them in return is of course the precise scenario Silence encounters with Queen Eufeme). If anything, the charge of sophism is itself a sophism, the equivalent of the false accusation of 'fake news' against verifiable fact so frequently made in the twenty-first century. The whole passage, then, is its own *sic et non*, simultaneously establishing debate as the means of discerning truth and also deconstructing it as a process that can do so.

The next section, the counter-argument advanced by Nurture, rejoices in similar paradoxes (*Jo l'ai tolte desnaturee*, 'I have completely dis-natured her', 2595), but without the idea of *solutiones contrarium* seen in Silence's own response.[29] In this case, it is personified Reason who ultimately persuades Silence that s/he should remain masculine, using practical considerations (for example, *Ja n'ieres mais vallés apriés*, 'you will never train for knighthood afterwards', 2620). It is notable that Reason does not use the intellectual habits of *disputatio* to do so; on the contrary, Reason herself arrives after the scholastic process that defined Silence's earlier response, indicating her absence during it and thus indirectly highlighting the process's flaws, since debate should be grounded in rationality. In addition to using Reason's absence to imply the problematic nature of debate as a process, the text here suggests she herself does not act with wholly positive results. Although Silence makes a rational choice to be *deseure* ('on top', 2640 and 2641) in the hierarchy of gender, this choice causes him/her pain and suffering, and again is exposed as the 'wrong' choice at the end of the work. Reason's rational approach leads to an irrational result, a paradox that exposes the intellect's limitations in a more general sense than the specific critique of scholastic methodology discussed above.

To make the point even clearer, this passage ends with a vivid depiction of the combined emotional impact of Silence's scholastic argument and Reason's flawed rationality: *le cuer diviers* ('a divided heart', 2681), which, far from leading to truth, causes pain.

> Et tols jors ert pres a contraire
> A cho que ses cuers voloit faire.
> Et qui ouevre contre voloir
> Soventes fois l'estuet doloir.
>
> (He was always ready to go against
> what his heart wanted him to do,

[29] *Silence*, ed. and trans. Roche-Mahdi, 2547–614.

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and whoever works against his will
finds himself often in a state of unhappiness.)[30]

The idea of balanced opposites, so important in Silence's scholastic rebuttal to Nature earlier, does not lead to truth here, but rather to secrecy and grief. Even though the heart is described as a *creäture | Mervelles d'estrange nature* ('creature | of a wondrous and strange nature', 2667–68) that harms itself through excessive thinking (2669–72), it is the unnatural division of Silence's heart, not its fundamental 'nature', that causes pain. In an emotional context, then, this conclusion to the first debate episode underlines the point made throughout: that the division habitual and crucial to scholastic debate does not lead to greater insight into perfect truth, but rather exposes the rational limits of debate as a process, and, in terms of the heart, may cause acute suffering.

Debate in its scholastic form, and the binary opposites upon which it relies, is thus exposed as a process that conceals rather than reveals truth within this important episode. This position is exemplified more starkly in the second major debate, in which Nature and Nurture fight over Merlin. As has been pointed out by others, Nature and Nurture's positions appear to contradict their traditional attributes.[31] Nurture begins by trying to persuade Merlin that his life *noris en bos* ('nurtured in the woods', 6003) means he should reject the food of civilization (honey, milk, wine and cooked meat), as his forest upbringing means that *herbes* and *rachines* ('herbs and roots', 6010) are his food. This position seems the reverse of what might be expected in a definition of 'nurture', and in fact might more accurately reflect humanity's 'natural' state. Similarly, Nature (who ultimately triumphs) is represented by this food of civilization rather than by the foraged roots and herbs that might seem more apt to her definition; moreover, she violently pushes Merlin towards the former in a passage that underscores the powerful 'natural' pull of civilized food. However, this passage not only plays with the reversal of nature and nurture's characteristics as seen in their swapped positions; it also demonstrates that the very distinction between the two concepts has become problematic:

Et Nature, qui le venqui,
Tient Merlin por maleöit fol,
Si l'a enpoint deviers le col
Et tant le coite et tante le haste
Qu'il va si tost enviers le haste

[30] *Silence*, ed. and trans. Roche-Mahdi, 2677–80.

[31] See especially Clark, 'Queering Gender', 59; and also Gaunt, 'Significance of Silence', 209; and Terrell, 'Competing Gender Ideologies', 39.

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Que les ronsces et les espines
Ronpent ses costés, ses escines.

(And Nature, triumphant,
treated Merlin like a wretched madman:
she grabbed him by the scruff of the neck
and pushed and shoved him along so fast
toward that piece of meat
that the brambles and thorns
tore his back and sides.)[32]

Although Merlin's 'natural' state is apparently civilized (as exemplified by his preference for cultivated food), the violent desire that the food induces makes him almost bestial, reducing him to an uncivilized state that for him is 'unnatural'. Merlin's behaviour, driven by blind greed, not only exposes the deliberate inversion of 'nature' and 'nurture' but also highlights the fact that the accepted distinctions between the two are collapsing, as it emphasizes that 'natural', civilized behaviour can look perilously like 'unnatural', bestial urges. If this is the case, then the traditional binary between the two states is being deconstructed, not just reversed.

This deconstructed binary is important beyond the immediate circumstances of Merlin's state because it again demonstrates that the process of debate, which relies on clearly defined positions and their opposites, may lead not to truth but to confusion. Nature's 'triumph' over Nurture in their debate results in the questioning of the mode by which she has gained her victory, a clear example of the end undoing the means. Yet this paradoxical outcome is not the only representation of debate in the episode. Ironically, the actual arguments made by the two participants are logical, consistent, and rely on biblical interpretation. Both Nature and Nurture use the Fall of Adam and Eve in defence of their positions, Nurture claiming that human nature caused them to err (*Quant par Nature de pute aire* | *Comencierent le mal a faire*, 'When through treacherous, base Nature | they began to sin', 6039–40) and Nature insisting that as God cannot create evil the Devil's temptation of the pair was due to Nurture (*li diäbles le norri* | *Par son malvais consel porri*, 'the devil nourished him | with evil, rotten advice', 6069–70). Whatever the outcome, the arguments made and their basis in logic and rationality are clear, and the use of authoritative sacred textual culture is orthodox and conventional. Preceding the implicit questioning of debate as a guide to truth just discussed in Merlin's behaviour at the end of the scene, this straightforward representation of

[32] *Silence*, ed. and trans. Roche-Mahdi, 6090–96.

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the process of discernment ends up adding to the resulting confusion about debate's status and power. A clear process has led to a clear result (Nature wins), but this result is paradoxical (Merlin's 'civilized' nature is bestial) and depends on the blurring of boundaries between concepts of nature and nurture that are themselves the reverse of what we might expect.

This second episode, then, is contradictory in its presentation of debate as a means of discerning truth. Its demonstration of orthodox *disputatio* ends in a victory for Nature that undoes the *sic et non* binary necessary for debate itself, therefore both upholding and undermining the process. This is of course reminiscent of the first dispute over Silence's future, but a key difference is that here there is a strong contrast between straightforward process and paradoxical result, which leads to a greater sense of confusion about the status of debate: who or what has actually 'won', and what is the import of that victory? In practical terms, Nature's triumph allows Silence to capture Merlin and thus leads to the revelation of the narrative's various secrets at his hands, but this question about the grounds of her victory means that Merlin's 'nature' is still unclear: is he civilized, or not, or some hard-to-define combination of the two? This question has a direct impact upon his role as truth-teller at the denouement of *Silence*, and thus upon the reassertion of apparently correct order in terms of gender roles and social hierarchy that occurs at his hands.[33] If Merlin is not clearly the representative of 'civilized' Nature because of the confusing presentation of this by the end of the second debate scene, then is his reimposition of 'natural' law and order upon Silence and the narrative in fact natural? Is the ending perhaps profoundly 'unnatural' in terms of tension between the narrative's earlier apparent tolerance of gender fluidity and this reversion to conservative positions, as several critics have felt?[34] By highlighting these questions with reference to Merlin's role, the *sic et non* nature of debate that the Merlin scene in particular has established affects the romance's ending, and therefore its overall interpretation.

Conclusion

In *Silence*, the process of scholastic debate is used to deconstruct the binary categories (including 'nature' and 'nurture') upon which that very process relies, calling into question not just the concept of a stable outcome itself but

[33] On Merlin's role here, see Sarah Roche-Mahdi, 'A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana*, 12 (2002), 6–21 (17–18); and Pratt, 'Humour in Silence', 100.

[34] See for example Burr, 'Nurturing Debate', 40; and Pratt, 'Humour in Silence', 101–03.

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also the relationship of any such outcome to the process that has produced it. In this sense, the tension between the ending's clear assertion of traditional social roles and categories and the apparently fluid, unstable nature of these throughout much of the romance is highly appropriate; the inconsistency between process and result (narrative and resolution, in textual terms) actively highlights the fact that the production of truth from the messiness of *disputatio* may be entirely accidental, even arbitrary. The *Roman de Silence* goes further here than either the *Enéas* or the *De planctu Naturae*, since neither of those works suggests that truth itself is fluid or that its discernment via *disputatio* is unstable; they demonstrate that *disputatio* may be misused as a process (*DPN*) or (mis)applied in a different context for humorous purposes (*Enéas*), but they stop short of attempting to deconstruct an epistemological system in its entirety.

This may seem a bold claim to make on behalf of a romance, a genre seemingly so different in themes and focus from the philosophical and theological debates of the schools, but that generic difference is more superficial than profound, as the extra-textual interactions of scholarly and courtly circles also highlight. Although the stakes in play in *Silence* are not theological niceties but social and gender roles, those roles were also part of the divine ordering of the world, ruled by Nature under God; the romance's exploration of social hierarchy and the intellectual enquiries of the schools were both subject to God's 'natural' law, simply in different contexts. Just as educated clerics heard, read and composed romances, so too might individuals in secular households be interested in philosophical and theological discussions, especially if these were intimately intertwined with familiar romance themes. This perspective admittedly claims *Silence* as an unusually intellectually engaged romance, but, given the work's pervasive interest in aspects of scholastic culture and the fluidity of romance in generic terms, this eccentricity should not be a surprise. Although Bernard of Clairvaux disapproved of scholastic methods of debate, other authors, including Heldris of Cornwall, thankfully took a less stringent and more creative view.

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