

Peggy McCracken

"THE BOY WHO WAS A GIRL": READING GENDER IN THE ROMAN DE SILENCE

Medieval romances contain few obvious narrative challenges to the status of the body as the origin of gender: in fiction, as in other cultural discourses, gender identity and social roles are defined by sexual characteristics inscribed on the body at birth. There is, however, a group of narratives in the romance corpus that calls into question the simple equation of body and gender. Transvestite romances, stories of women who dress and act as men, directly challenge the primacy of the body in determining gender. **These narratives suggest that gender is not essential but performative, that the enactment of a gender through performance and dress may have an authority equal to that of anatomical characteristics in determining gender identity.**



Transvestite romances question the nature of sexual difference by valorizing the role of performance in gender identification. In their relocation of gender identity from the body to a performance they represent the possibility of an ambiguously gendered being whose convincing performance as a man is contradicted by anatomical features classified as female. The crossdressed heroine disrupts gender categorizations that are based on a reading of anatomy and suggests that all gender roles are performative, that any gender identity is fabricated through corporeal signs and through discourse.¹

The medieval transvestite romance presents a profoundly troubling spectacle to an aristocratic society founded and maintained by dynastic marriage and succession because ambiguous gender threatens the disruption of dynastic structures—a woman dressed as a man cannot engender a child. The anxiety provoked by the transvestite heroine must be contained in these romances through a restoration of "proper" channels of reproduction and succession. **Yet although body and performance are realigned once the discrepancy between them is discovered, the realignment does not always conform to a "natural" gender dictated by the body.** In a few narratives the disjunction between the gendered body and the gender performance is convincing enough to require a miraculous regendering of the body to conform to its dress. **In another romance, the thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence*, a cross-dressed heroine's appropriation of a masculine identity is successful enough to subvert her assumption of a female identity at the end of the story.**

1. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble; Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 136.

Transvestite romances recount the process of bringing the body and performance into line according to a cultural imperative grounded in and maintained by marital alliances and dynastic succession. Yet in the initial disjunction they set forth between the gendered body and a performance of gender, and in the importance they give to performance in the identification of gender, transvestite romances reveal the constructed nature of the gendered subjectivity of all romance characters. They suggest that the idea of a “natural” sexual difference indicated on the body is part of the ideology that supports the founding institutions of medieval aristocratic society: marriage and succession.

Naming Gender

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have begun to question the commonly invoked distinction between sex, a biological identity, and gender, a social identity. Biologists, for example, have used studies of children born with ambiguous genitalia to show the importance of socialization in determining both sex and gender.² Even in cases of children with clearly defined sexual characteristics, biological and social identifications may reinforce each other, obscuring origins while reinforcing cultural definitions of male and female:

If a society puts half its children in skirts and warns them not to move in ways that reveal their underpants, while putting the other half in jeans or overalls and encouraging them to climb trees and play strenuous outdoor games; if later, during adolescence, the half that has been in trousers is exhorted to “eat like a growing boy,” while the half in skirts is warned to watch their figure and not get fat; if the half in jeans trots around in sneakers or boots, while the half in skirts totters around on spike heels, then these two groups of people will differ biologically as well as socially. Their muscles will be different, their reflexes, posture, arms, legs, feet, their eye-hand coordination, spatial perception, and so on. In other words, sex differences are socially constructed not only in the sense that society defines sex-appropriate behaviors to which each of us learns to conform, but also in the sense that those

2. Discussed by Ruth Hubbard, “Constructing Sex Difference,” *New Literary History* (1987), 129. Hubbard cites John Money and Anke A. Ehrhardt, *Man and Woman, Boy and Girl* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972) and Barbara Fried’s critique of Money’s and Ehrhardt’s study in “Boys Will Be Boys Will Be Boys: The Language of Sex and Gender,” in *Biological Woman—The Convenient Myth*, ed. Ruth Hubbard, Mary Sue Henifin, and Barbara Fried (Cambridge, MA: Schekman, 1982).

behaviors affect our biology—bones, muscles, sense organs, nerves, brain, lungs, circulation, everything.³

The social prescription of gender identity, prompted by a reading of anatomical features, reshapes the body to heighten or even to create those features. The process of acculturation follows a binary organization of male/female which requires a coordination of genitalia and body and which excludes any third term as "deviant," as a contradiction of a "natural" system.⁴

Gender identity is the product of a system of classification that is itself already embedded in a larger symbolic system. Judith Butler has suggested that since even the most "natural facts" of sex are produced in discourse and are therefore potentially influenced by political and social interests, perhaps "this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender ... the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all."⁵ The binary system of gender is authorized by particular social institutions that are in turn maintained and legitimized by the definition of sexual identity that promotes difference between male and female, and that valorizes heterosexuality. Cultural intelligibility is defined according to conformity with one sex or the other.

Theoreticians of modern gay and lesbian crossdressing practices have claimed the third "deviant" term created by exclusion from a dual-category system of gender as a privileged site from which to expose the ideological forces that maintain and enforce the opposition male/female. As a practice situated outside the binary framework of sexual difference, transvestism disrupts gender categories, undermines the authority of the body, and suggests that gender is a performance. The transvestite's appearance clashes with forms defined as intelligible by a restricted cultural system of gender, and embodies the possibility that gender is not limited to an anatomical definition. In its disruption of gender categories, the crossdressed body poses the question of who may identify gender and according to what criteria. To claim the authority to reinterpret gender categories is a political act because it threatens the social institutions that depend on a strictly defined opposition between male and female. The need or imperative to identify gender according to a binary of male/female is no less politically motivated.

Medieval romances about transvestite heroines are profoundly implicated in the politics of gender identification. Although the transvestite may seem



3. Hubbard, "Constructing Sex Difference," 131.

4. Hubbard, "Constructing Sex Difference," 129.

5. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7. See also p. 25: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."

to challenge traditional definitions of social roles according to anatomy, at the end of her/his story the crossdressed heroine is always integrated into an aristocratic society whose stability is maintained through marriage and reproduction. The possibility that the transvestite figure may represent an alternate gender is not admitted in medieval romance. Stories about crossdressing may question the location of gender identity, but they do not blur gender categories. In the aristocratic society of medieval romances characters who dress as men are perceived to be men, characters in women's dress are taken for women. Gender may be hidden by disguise, but the disguise itself is not recognized as an expression of ambiguous gender or as a performance of an alternate gender that obscures or plays on the binary division of male/female. The gender disguise that might express a sexual orientation is also foreign to medieval representations of crossdressing: the woman whose masculine dress might express a sexual desire for women is an unintelligible figure in the world of medieval romance.⁶ While stories about crossdressed heroines may gesture toward a representation of homoeroticism otherwise suppressed in medieval narratives, in these romances crossdressing is always undertaken for some pragmatic end, and crossdressed women are sexually abstinent.⁷

The earliest medieval examples of transvestite narratives are hagiographic accounts of female saints who dressed as men in order to escape a marriage or join a religious community.⁸ The saint's female body is discovered only when the masculine clothes are removed after the saint's death. In the *vitae*

6. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136-141; Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 74-89.

7. Michèle Perret, "Travesties et transsexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine," *Romance Notes* 25 (1985), 329; Valerie Hotchkiss, "Clothes Make the Man: Female Transvestism in the Middle Ages," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1990, 194-215. Nancy Vine Durling notes that in *Yde et Olive*, "Olive...loves another woman; Yde's own emotions, however, remain curiously unengaged...Yde is never presented as a desiring subject; rather, she is consistently portrayed as the object of a desire that is dangerous." ("Rewriting Gender: *Yde et Olive* and Ovidian Myth," in *Romance Languages Annual* 1989, ed. Ben Lawton and Anthony Julian Tamburri [West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Research Foundation, 1990], I: 261.) These observations apply equally well to *Silence*.

8. Some scholars have related the crossdressing practices of female saints to medieval descriptions of women's aspirations to sanctity as "becoming male." See Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Random House, 1989), 53-77; Hotchkiss, "Clothes Make the Man," 14; John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator* 5 (1974), 1-37; Vern Bullough, "Transvestites in the Middle Ages," *American Journal of Sociology* 79 (1974), 1381-94.

and in medieval transvestite romances anatomy and a gender performance are usually brought back into alignment at some point in the heroine's story. The heroine in masculine dress is spied on or undressed before witnesses and his or her "true" gender is discovered. However, as several of the romances explicitly set forth, uncovering the body, or stripping the body of its performance, may not be the best way to find evidence of an original, "natural" gender. In the case of the cross-dressed heroines in two fourteenth-century narratives, at the moment of discovery the body itself is miraculously transformed to correspond to its performance. Huon de Bordeaux's *Yde et Olive* recounts the story of Ydé, the crossdressed Yde, who marries an emperor's daughter in her masculine disguise. When the emperor suspects that his son-in-law may be a woman and that he and his daughter have been duped, he threatens to burn Yde/Ydé at the stake if her/his body does not conform to its clothes. The heroine is saved when an angel visits Ydé and adds to her body "all that a man has of his humanity."⁹ Another miraculous regendering is found in *Tristan de Nanteuil*, where Blanchandin, the cross-dressed Blanchandine, receives a masculine body to conform to the male identity she has adopted and which led to her marriage with the daughter of a sultan.¹⁰

What these romances imagine, however fantastically, is a body whose sexual features conform to a gender performance. The initial discrepancy set forth between anatomy and disguise displaces the body as the location of gender, and the fiction of the regendered body undermines the notion of a stable, unchanging anatomy that defines a permanent, verifiable identity. The transformation represents the possibility of mutable sexual characteristics and of a body that is secondary to performance. Yet even the mutable body retains the authority to determine gender. Whether the body is changed to conform to the clothes or the clothes to conform to the body, gender ambiguity is always eliminated. The romances insist on the uniformity of anatomy, performance and gender identity in their resolutions, and the body's (changed) sexual characteristics authorize a gender identification.

Medieval romances about transvestite heroines may be seen to participate in a wide cultural discussion about the nature of sexual difference. Joan Cadden has recently shown that medieval natural philosophers and medical authors had a flexible understanding of "masculine" and "feminine" traits and values. She notes however that

9. *Esclarmonde, Clarisse et Florent, Yde et Olive. Drei Forsetzungen der Chanson von Huon de Bordeaux*, ed. Max Schweigel (Marburg: Elwert, 1889), vv. 7222-35. For a discussion of gender change in *Yde et Olive* and its relation to the myth of Iphis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Durling, "Rewriting Gender," 256-62.

10. *Tristan de Nanteuil, chanson de geste inédite*, ed. K.V. Sinclair (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1971), vv. 16194-16204.

Neither the flexibility and diversity of application...nor particular variations in the specific traits and values associated with “feminine” and “masculine” swamped the duality with which persistent sex distinctions colored gender notions. Although some scientific and medical models implied the existence of a continuum of sexual differentiation or the existence of a middle term, the characterization of properties, behaviors, and beings did not easily admit of mediation. Physically ambiguous organisms and behaviorally ambiguous individuals did indeed exist in the eyes of medieval writers. But however plausible the naturalistic explanations for their existence, their ambiguity met with responses that reflected less acceptance than discomfort or hostility.¹¹

The anxiety caused by the culturally unintelligible or the “deviant” is precisely the disruption that medieval transvestite romances work to contain. This containment is no less active in medieval intellectual traditions, as Cadden emphasizes:

In the extent to which various sectors of society condemned those whose bodies were beyond the borders of clear sex definitions or whose actions were beyond the borders of clear and, for all their variations, binary gender definitions, we have a crude indicator of the late medieval determination to enforce restrictive norms of sex and gender.¹²

The definition of “normal” sex and gender allowed the exclusion of the “abnormal” and provided a way to eliminate the anxiety that an ambiguously gendered body might provoke in the aristocratic society that read its self-representation in medieval romances. Stories about transvestite heroines recount the interdependence of proper gender definition and proper government, which are both linked to reproduction and succession.

Since a woman disguised as a man cannot engender a child, and a cross-dressed man cannot give birth, the transvestite figure disrupts the distribution of reproductive roles and frustrates the exchange of women in marriages that worked to create and ensure dynastic alliances. The disjunction between anatomy and a gender performance must be eliminated so that the ambiguously gendered individual might take his or her “proper” place in the succession of property and titles. In the story of the realignment of performance

11. Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages; Medicine, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 209.

12. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 214.



and genitalia, transvestite romances expose how social forces influence the gendering of the body and how the power relations that produce, maintain, and depend on a properly gendered body are hidden through the naturalization of anatomy as the primary evidence of gender identity.¹³ When the body's (hidden) sexual characteristics are authorized as the location of gender, the social and political relationships that determine how the body's gender should be read are lost to view, and although social and political concerns are profoundly implicated in the identification of the body's gender, they are nowhere evident in its establishment.

The unstable relationships between men and women, the subversion of reproduction possibilities, and the threat to patrilinear succession suggested by ambiguous gender are specifically the concerns that motivate the decision to disguise the identity of the heroine in the *Roman de Silence*. This thirteenth-century romance by the otherwise unknown Heldris de Cornuälle recounts the story of a girl raised as a boy so that she might inherit her family's property. Silence is educated as a boy; she is socially conditioned as masculine, and in debates about the child's gender identity between the allegorical figures *Nature* and *Noretur*, the body is represented as a malleable surface on which gender is inscribed by social forces. By representing the dispute between Nature and Nurture (Environment) as the conflict of rival claims to identify the child's gender based on female anatomy or on masculine performance, the romance suggests that the gendered body constituted by performance and dress may have an authority equal to that of anatomical characteristics in determining gender identity. Silence's ambiguously gendered body is ultimately identified as female when the disputed relationship between the cross-dressed heroine's clothes and anatomy is resolved at the end of the romance. However, the story's neatly sewn up ending leaves gaps and dangling threads that dispute the "naturalness" of Silence's reclaimed female gender and show that the gender identification is closely bound to a desire to integrate the newly reconstructed woman into society.

Long neglected by literary scholars and first edited only in 1972, the *Roman de Silence* has recently been the subject of a number of studies. Critics have shown how misogyny structures the text's representation of "woman" and "Nature,"¹⁴ and how the ambiguous construction of the heroine, Silence, pervades the representational program of the romance and of its manuscript

13. Butler (after Foucault and Nietzsche) has called this process a "genealogy of gender identity." *Gender Trouble*, x-xi.

14. Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101-27; Simon Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," *Paragraph*, 13 (1990), 202-16.

format.¹⁵ Silence's spectacular performance as a man has led several critics to read her story as an endorsement of the "natural" capacities of women,¹⁶ but in fact the gender ambiguities in the *Roman de Silence* work to undermine this kind of rigid classification of gendered behavior and values.

The *Roman de Silence* recounts the process of integrating Silence's body and gender performance into a dynastic aristocratic society that requires "proper" (heterosexual and reproductive) gender identities. "The boy who was a girl" cannot be identified according to a binary system of gender, yet the romance does not admit any possible categories outside of this system. The extended debates over the gender of Silence's body question the primacy of anatomy in assigning gender and more importantly, they speak the political and ideological grounding of the cultural imperative that locates the identification of gender in anatomy. ★

Naming Silence

The creation of the body of the child Silence by the allegorical figure Nature is described at length in the *Roman de Silence*. The body's distinguishing marks are described as inscriptions: Nature "writes" features on her body as part of the creative process.¹⁷

Les orelles li fait petites

15. R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: the *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986), 81-99; Peter L. Allen, "The Ambiguity of Silence; Gender, Writing, and the *Roman de Silence*," in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 98-112.

16. In an essay that fails to question misogynist definitions of the weaknesses of women, Anita Benaim Lasry suggests that Silence's masculine education has made her a better woman. ("The Ideal Heroine in Medieval Romance: A Quest for a Paradigm," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 32 [1985], 231.) Kathleen Brahney's study of the *Roman de Silence* shows a similar tendency to equate fictional characters and historical women, and to read Silence as a character who demonstrates the "true" capacities of women. ("When Silence was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*," in *The Spirit of the Court; Selected Proceedings of the 4th Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985], 54-61.)

17. The metaphor is also found in the description of Nature's creation of Lirope in *Floris et Lirope*: "Oroilles droites et petites, / Si com soient ou chiet escrites." (ed. Wolfram von Zingerle [Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1891].) Romadanaple's eyebrows are "escris" by Nature in Aimon de Varenne's *Florimont*, ed. Alfons Hilka (Halle: Niemeyer, 1933), v. 6016.

Nature, ki les a escrites...

(Nature, who wrote her ears, made them small.)

La boche escrist, fait l'overture
Petite, et levres a mesure...

(She wrote her mouth, making the opening small and lips to fit it.)¹⁸

Nature's plan is to create the most beautiful girl she has ever made, but her intentions are subverted by Silence's symbolic entry into culture at her baptism, when the child receives a masculine name along with a masculine identity from her father, Cador. Succession through women has been abolished by royal decree in England, where the story takes place, and since a daughter could not inherit the family's wealth, Cador decides to raise his daughter as a son and to name her "Silence."

Sel faisons apieler Scilense
El non de Sainte Paciense,
Por cho que silensce tolt anse...
Il iert només Scilenscius;
Et s'il avient par aventure
Al descovrir de sa nature
Nos muerons cest -us en -a,
S'avra a non Scilencia. (vv. 2067-78)

(And let him be called Silence in the name of Saint Patience, because silence takes away anxiety...He will be named Silentius, and if it happens by chance that her/his nature is discovered, we will change the -us to -a and s/he will have the name Silentia.)

As Cador demonstrates in his effort to disguise his daughter's female anatomy, a primary element of medieval transvestism is the name. Yde and Blanchandine become Ydé and Blanchandin as they put on masculine forms

18. Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le roman de Silence*, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: Heffer, 1972), vv. 1917-18; 1931-32. All translations of the *Roman de Silence* are mine, and I have deliberately preserved the gender ambiguity of pronouns or the ambiguity permitted by their absence. The *Roman de Silence* has recently been translated into English by Regina Psaki (New York: Garland, 1991), and re-edited with an English translation by Sarah Roche-Mahdi, *Silence; A Thirteenth-Century French Romance* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992).

of their names along with masculine clothes.¹⁹ Silence does not choose her name or her gender identity, nor does Nature determine them; they are imposed by her father in the interest of patrilinear succession. In fact, Cador chooses a name with two forms, suggesting that despite his strong desire to preserve his family's wealth through a son, the father's decision to disguise his daughter's gender is an uneasy one. He designates the name as a sign of gender, but since the name rhetorically regenders Silence's body, it implicitly replaces anatomy as the location of the child's gender identity. In a cautionary move that suggests his anxiety about the gender transformation, Cador indicates that the name is mutable and could be changed to its feminine form if necessary. And he further qualifies the regendering imposed by the masculine name by calling the child "Silence": the name speaks an absence of linguistic content and puts into question the value of a name that proclaims its own inability to speak. Moreover, the gendered difference that the name is meant to speak in "Scilentius" and "Scilentia" is effaced when the form "Scilense" is used throughout the romance. Although it is masculine as a common noun, "Scilense" has no specific gender as a proper name, and "Scilentia" returns only when gender is imposed on "Scilense" at the end of the story.²⁰ In choosing to regender his daughter's body with a mutable, masculine form of her name that is immediately replaced with the neuter "Scilense," Cador participates in the anxious debate about the location of sexual difference that pervades the *Roman de Silence*. He attempts to resolve that anxiety by baptizing his child with a name that denies its own power to name: "Sel faisons apieler Scilense...Por cho que silensce tolt anse." (2067-69).

The act of naming inaugurates a gender performance that is dictated by the father's law and originates in the desire to secure the dynastic foundations of that law. Cador's wish to preserve his family's wealth, a patrimony received from his wife, results in a cover-up of the female line. Indeed, Silence's disguise is described from the beginning of her story as a cover: "Faisons le com un fil norir, / De priés garder et bien *couvrir*," Cador suggests to his wife. ("Let us raise him as a son, closely guarded and well disguised/covered," my emphasis, 1757-58.) Silence will "split her clothes, put on pants" ("fendre ses dras, braies calcier" 2056) and the (mis)naming of the child's gender is made possible by covering the body at the baptism (2087-90). Even the name that dictates

19. Perret discusses the way that word plays on the masculine and feminine forms of the names constantly speak what the name change is intended to hide. "Travesties et transsexuelles," 334-35.

20. The Latin forms Scilentius/Scilentia are used only when Cador suggests the deception to Eufemie, when Nature tries to persuade Silence to give up her masculine appearance, and when the name is changed at the end of the romance. (Allen, "The Ambiguity of Silence," 105-106.)

Silence's gender performance is described as part of the cover-up. Like the cloth which covered Silence's sexual organs at baptism, the name dresses Silence's nude body, as Silence herself proclaims when the allegorical figure Nature tries to convince her/him to assume her/his "natural" identity as a girl.

Tu nen es pas Scilentius!—
 Et cil respont: 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. (vv. 2530-38)

("You are not Silentius!" —And he answers: "I never heard such a thing! Silentius! Who am I then? Silentius is my name, I believe, or I am different than I was. But I know well, by my right, that I cannot be another. Thus I am Silentius, that is my opinion, or I am no one/or I am nude.")

The textual play on *nus* (no one) / *nus* (nude) affirms the importance of both the name and clothing to the establishment of Silence's identity and seems to deny the influence of anatomy: Silence proclaims that without "cover" she is without identity.²¹ The crossdressed heroine's protests point to a more general truth that the narrative constantly seeks to cover up: without performance there is no subjectivity; the subjectivity of all romance characters is constructed around a gender identity.²²

As part of his attempt to suppress the anxiety of (mis)naming gender, Cador denies the importance of the disguise by locating gender difference not in the masculine name that will dictate the clothes and comportment Silence will adopt, but in the child's "nature" (2076). Gender identity is thus defined as "natural," and Cador attempts to change his child's gender by moving her

21. E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk; When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 243-45; Perret, "Travesties et transsexuelles," 332; Kate Mason Cooper, "Elle and L: Sexualized Textuality in *Le roman de Silence*," *Romance Notes* 25 (1985), 341.

22. Indeed, gender may be more important than class in constructing subjectivity, as Kathryn Gravdal has suggested in relation to *pastourelles*, a genre whose subject is the confrontation between a knight and a shepherdess. *Ravishing Maidens; Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 104-121.

from the care of Nature to the custody of Nurture: "Faisons le com un fil norir."²³ Yet the location of the natural is disputed in the opposition between Nature and Nurture that structures Silence's story. The allegorical figure Nature is credited with the creation of the child Silence, and Cador claims to identify and disguise a "natural" gender identity, but the very idea of nature remains problematic in this romance.²⁴ "Nature" has many meanings in the *Roman de Silence* and is used to name anatomy, moral temperament, noble breeding, and even the status quo of gender roles. In Roberta Krueger's words, "nature" is the justification of how 'culture' constructs women."²⁵

Nature and culture are nonetheless personified and opposed in an extended contest over which of the two determines gender identity.²⁶ The "nature" of the body as the foundation of identity is challenged by the allegorical figure Noretur. In opposition to Nature's claim to the adolescent Silence's body, Nurture, responsible for Silence's masculine appearance, asserts that she has de-natured Silence: "Jo l'ai tolte desnaturee" (2595). Nurture argues that Silence's gender performance is the true location of her identity: Silence dresses like a boy, Silence acts like a boy, Silence is a boy. In other words, sexual characteristics inscribed on the body at birth are subordinate to the truth of the clothes and the name Scilentius. Nature protests that Nurture can only disguise her ("Noretur me disguise," 2275), and denies that the appearance

23. "Let us raise [*nurture*] him as a son," 1757; my emphasis.

24. For a discussion of medieval French and Latin descriptions of Nature's activity which correspond closely to the account in the *Roman de Silence*, see Claude Luttrell's discussion of Nature in *The Creation of the First Arthurian Romance; A Quest* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 1-14. Suzanne Conklin Akbari demonstrates the feminization of these models of Nature in the *Roman de Silence*: "Nature's Forge Recast in the *Roman de Silence*," (forthcoming), typescript 4-5. For a discussion of the representation of Nature's activity as pregnancy and birth in a later text, Christine de Pisan's *Lavision-Christine*, see Sylvia Huot, "Seduction and Sublimation: Christine de Pizan, Jean de Meun, and Dante," *Romance Notes* 25 (1985), 366-7.

25. *Women Readers*, 117. Krueger's study of the *Roman de Silence* demonstrates that the investigation of the "nature de feme" is the central adventure of the romance. See also Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," 204-205, 209. Bloch argues that "despite the complaint of Nature [and] the elaborate debate between Nature and Nurture...there is no essential contradiction between heredity and environment" in the *Roman de Silence*. ("Silence and Holes," 85.)

26. Gaunt discusses the misogynist subtext of the debate over natural and social constructions of gender in the *Roman de Silence* in "The Significance of Silence," 202-16. Joan Ferrante takes a different view and suggests that Heldris uses the story of the crossdressed heroine to question the traditional sex roles of his society. "Male Fantasy and Female Reality," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984), 95-95.

contains any truth: Silence may look like a boy, but she is still female. The gender performance is false, it covers and masks a primary identification to be read on the body.

The dispute between Nature and Nurture is not easily resolved at any level in the text. The narrator vacillates between masculine and feminine characterizations of "the boy who was a girl" ("le vallet ki ert meschine"),²⁷ revealing a confused perception of the relation between Silence's clothes and the features they cover:

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

(He has practiced the customs of man for so long, and refused those of woman, that but for a little he is a man. All that one sees of him is completely male. But he has something in his pants other than flour: beneath the clothes, he is a girl.²⁸)

The descriptions of Silence's convincing masculine performance and appearance seem to have taken over the story at this point, and the reference to a feminine "nature" does not seem adequate to refute the identification of Silence as a man. The narrator thus has recourse to anatomy, giving authority to an unseen truth that Silence disputes in her equation of nudity and anonymity: "Donques sui jo Scilentius, / Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus." ("Thus I am Silentius, that is my opinion, or I am no one/or I am nude." vv. 2537-38.)

Silence's own awareness of her disputed gender identity begins at adolescence in a confrontation with the allegorical figure Nature, who wants Silence to dress and act as a woman. Initially Silence is convinced by Nature's arguments and wishes to renounce her masculine appearance: "I do not want to cut my hair short, to split my clothes or wear pants," she says.²⁹ Subsequently persuaded by Nurture, and then counseled by a third allegorical figure, Reason, Silence is faced with the choice of becoming male or female. Silence finally chooses to remain male, not only because she wishes to preserve the family inheritance and to avoid the king's displeasure at the deception, but

27. Vv. 3704, 3763, 3785, 3871.

28. I am following Gaunt's correction to Thorpe's gloss of "tine." "The Significance of Silence," 208, n. 15.

29. "Jo ne voel pas moi estalcier, / Fendre mes dras, braies calcier" (2559-60).

also because her body, the supposed locus of the truth of gender identity, of her “natural” gender identity, is unsuited for feminine pleasures.

Trop dure boche ai por baisier,
Et trop rois bras por acoler.
On me poroit tost afoier
Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,
Car vallés sui et nient mescine. (vv. 2646-50)

(My mouth is too rough for kissing and my arms too hard for embracing. I could easily be hurt in the game one plays beneath the bedcovers, for I am a boy and not a girl.)

Silence declares her/himself ill-equipped to play the feminine role in sexual games and in this oddly worded passage she/he seems to suggest that a boy is more sexually vulnerable than a girl. The relation of Silence's body to any kind of sexuality remains impossible to determine in the *Roman de Silence*: although the young knight repeatedly becomes the object of desire in the romance, Silence her/himself never expresses any kind of sexual or amorous desire.³⁰ The truth of Silence's gender seems to be lost somewhere in the fictions of Nature and Nurture. Balancing the narrator's assertion that “he is a girl beneath the clothes” (“il est desos les dras mescine” 2480) is Silence's refusal to “uncover” the truth of her body (“Por quanque puet faire Nature / Ja n'en ferai descoverture” 2655-56) and her/his claim to a mouth that is “too rough,” and arms that are “too hard” to belong to a woman's body. Nor are there any missteps in Silence's gender performance which inadvertently uncover an impersonation: Silence's strength, appearance, and demeanor are never questioned by the narrator or by any of the characters in the romance. Even Nature's protests focus on the success of Nurture's disguise.

Viewing Silence

The dispute between Nature and Nurture over Silence's allegiance is structured as a debate about the relationship of body and performance. Nature claims that Silence's gender identity is located in her female anatomy, while Nurture claims that Silence's masculine appearance and performance determine his gender. The resolution of the conflict seems to depend on a comparison of the features of Silence's body and her/his appearance and behavior; a pretext for just such a comparison is provided by the well known medieval

30. Bloch, “Silence and Holes,” 89; Cooper, “Elle and L,” 355.

master of deception, Merlin. When Silence succeeds in capturing Merlin and bringing him to court, a task that according to Merlin’s own prophecy only a woman could accomplish, she/he becomes a visible disjunction: Silence’s ability to capture Merlin is a feminine performance that contradicts her/his masculine clothes. The successful quest marks Silence as a culturally unintelligible being who must be reincorporated into a system in which male and female correspond to clearly defined social and sexual roles.³¹ The contradiction between the young knight’s feminine actions and masculine appearance is publicly explained when Merlin reveals to the king, in a repetition of the narrator’s formula, that Silence is a girl beneath her clothes: “Si est desos les dras meschine.” (6536). Silence’s anatomy becomes the location of her/his gender identity, and Merlin’s claim to “uncover” (“descuevre” 6500) Silence’s secret leads to the uncovering of Silence’s body. The young knight is undressed before the court and upon viewing Silence’s body, the king names her woman: “We clearly see that you are a woman.” (“Nos veöns bien que tu iés feme.” 6586) The king’s pronouncement renders Silence’s gender performance culturally intelligible by reconciling the young knight’s masculine appearance with the fact that she/he captured Merlin who could only be found by a woman.

Notably, the former disjunction—the masculine performance of a female anatomy—is never shown to be evident to characters in the story. It is only when Silence’s performance as a woman contradicts the masculine body that the disguise is questioned. Moreover, the idea that a woman could have performed the feats of war and prowess that are credited to Silence does not seem to hinder Silence’s appropriation of a female identity. Silence is dressed as a woman, her name is changed, and she marries the king, assuming the role of the archetypal woman of medieval romance, the queen. The *Roman de Silence* differs from the two fourteenth-century transvestite narratives mentioned above in its refusal to give corporeal confirmation to the masculine identity that Silence has adopted, and in its ultimate affirmation of her female gender. Nonetheless, the uncovering of the body has the same result in all three romances: it permits or legitimizes a marriage and implicitly guarantees lineage and succession.

The gender identification at the end of the *Roman de Silence* provides a neat resolution to the story in Silence’s marriage and in the king’s agreement to lift the ban on women’s inheritance rights that motivated the story. However, in the *Roman de Silence* the conventional “happy ending” is subverted by a subtle narrative resistance to Silence’s new appearance. In a validation of Silence’s successful masculine performance and of the crossdressed hero-

31. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 78.

ine's ambiguous claims about her body recounted throughout the story, Silence's assumption of a female identity is profoundly troubled at the end of the romance.

First, it is pertinent to interrogate exactly what the king saw inscribed on Silence's body, since the "truth" of Silence's anatomy does not appear to be self-evident at all. The text explicitly states that after the public exposure Nature took three days to remove masculine traits from Silence's body: "Nature took this long to repolish the whole body and to remove everything male there was on the body."³² The description of Nature's rewriting of Silence's body denies the autonomous truth of its sexual characteristics: where the king saw a woman's features, Nature found masculine traces. The erasure of masculine characteristics recalls Nature's writing of feminine features on Silence's newly created form and suggests a literal reinscription of gender on the body.

Moreover, when Silence explains the gender disguise to the king, she attributes its cause to the king's suspension of women's succession rights ("...por mon iretage quierre / Me rova vivre al fuer de malle," 6598-99), but Silence does not make any claims for the "truth" of her body. Speaking in her newly assigned female identity Silence does not repeat earlier claims to masculine features, nor does she speak the confusion about gender identity that she demonstrated in the earlier dialogues with Nature, Nurture, and Reason. Silence accepts the king's identification of her gender, and although she admits that the disguise was motivated by a desire to hide female features, she makes no claims about how the masculine performance may have reshaped or reformed the body. In the absence of descriptions of Silence's uncovered body either by the narrator or by Silence her/himself, the king's observation stands as the only interpretation of her/his gender.

Second, the ambiguity of the "nature" of Silence's body is suggested by the identity of the self-proclaimed agent of revelation: Merlin the enchanter is known in Arthurian legend for his ability to change appearances and confuse identities. His best-known act of transformation was to give King Utherpan-dragon the appearance of his vassal, Gorlois, to enable the king to sleep with Gorlois's wife.³³ Curiously enough, Silence claims to be a descendent of Gorlois and to have inherited his enmity with Merlin.

32. "D'illuec al tierc jor que Nature / Ot recovree sa droiture / Si prist Nature a repolir / Par tolt le cors et a tolr / Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle." (6669-73).

33. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed. Acton Griscom (New York: Longmans, 1929), 7.19, p. 425.

“Amis, fait [Merlin], com as tu non?
 Et por quoi me maines ensi?—
 Silences ai non, si isci
 De mon ostel por toi tracier.
 Ta mort te volrai porcacier.—
 Ma mort? dist Merlins. Tu por quoi?—
 Mes ancestres fu mors par toi,
 Gorlains, li dus de Cornuälle.
 Tu en morras, comment qu’il alle.
 Merlin, assés le me tuas
 Quant Uterpandragon muas
 En le forme al duc mon a[n]cestre.” (6138-49)

(“Friend,” says [Merlin], “what is your name? And why are you taking me away like this?” —“Silence is my name, and I have come from my lodgings to track you. I want to give you your death.” —“My death?” says Merlin. “You? Why?” —“My ancestor, Gorlois, the duke of Cornwall, died because of you ... Merlin, as far as I am concerned you killed him when you changed Utherpandragon into the form of the duke my ancestor.”)

Since she is already a victim of Merlin’s transformations though her lineage, the “naturalness” of Silence’s recuperation of her feminine nature is rendered suspect since it is “uncovered” by Merlin.³⁴ Merlin’s ability to change appearances undermines his authority to identify the truth behind an appearance.

34. Heather Lloyd suggests that the introduction of Merlin clashes with the realistic tone that characterizes the rest of the poem, apart from the early dragon episode. (“The Triumph of Pragmatism—Rewards and Punishment in *Le Roman de Silence*,” in *Rewards and Punishments in Arthurian Literature and Lyric Poetry of Medieval France; Essays Presented to Kenneth Varty on the occasion of his 60th birthday*, ed. Peter V. Davies and Angus J. Kennedy [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987], 84.) As Lloyd notes, Lewis Thorpe argued that the extensive narrative that precedes Silence’s encounter with Merlin was intended “to lead up to and to explain this final episode.” (*Roman de Silence*, 28). Ironically, it is precisely the narrative elaboration that precedes Merlin’s revelation that renders it suspect. Felix Lecoy corrects Thorpe’s identification of Heldris’s source for the episode in “*Le Roman de Silence* d’Heldris de Cornuälle,” *Romania* 99 (1978), 109-110.

In its disputed realignment of gender, performance, and the body in the undressing and redressing (and renaming) of Silence in the final scene,³⁵ the *Roman de Silence* challenges the primacy of anatomy as the location of gender identity. Unlike later stories of crossdressed heroines in *Yde et Olive* and *Tristan de Nanteuil*, the *Roman de Silence* does not go so far as to proclaim a miraculous regendering of the body to conform to a gender performance. Nonetheless, in its contradictory representations of the gendered body of Silence, the romance begins to imagine a body whose features change to correspond to an adopted gender identity: Silence's story suggests that the body's "nature" may be determined by its "nurture."

Simon Gaunt has argued that the romance "deliberately problematises gender and posits a view of sexual difference that is culturally rather than biologically determined, only to conclude that the problem is not really a problem" (209). The suppression of the dilemma posed in Silence's story—is gender natural or social?—has potentially serious social consequences. Medieval romances usually offer only one answer, that gender is natural and is indicated on the body. In its resolution the *Roman de Silence* does not dispute this answer: the king declares that Silence is a woman and to prove it, he marries her. But Silence's successful masculine performance has already posed the question of how gender is identified, and although the question is suppressed by the king's authoritative answer the text nonetheless escapes the imposition of the proverbial truth that Gaunt discusses in connection with the *Roman de Silence*: "Mieuz vaut nature que nourreture."³⁶ The story ends with an affirmation of the body as the site of Silence's true gender, but Nature's "repolishing" of the body and Merlin's role in revealing its "nature" complicate the reading of Silence's identity and suggest that the features on Silence's body reveal an ambiguous truth.

Several critics have discussed the valorization of ambiguity in the *Roman de Silence*. As Peter Allen notes, the more closely the reader looks at this romance, the more ambiguities he or she is likely to find.³⁷ The gendered body of Silence may stand as an emblem of ambiguity in this text: Silence's

35. "Silence atorment come feme. / Segnor, que vos diroie plus? / Ains ot a non Scilensiüs: / Otés est -us, mis i est -a, / Si est només Scilentiä." (6664-68).

36. Cited by Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," 203-205, from A. Tobler and E. Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1965), VI: 808; and *Proverbes français antérieurs au XVe siècle*, ed. Joseph Morawski (Paris: Champion, 1925), 1328. See also Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, xvii-ix. On proverbs valorizing nurture over nature, see Akbari, "Nature's Forge," typescript 1-17.

37. Allen, "The Ambiguity of Silence," 98-112; Perret, "Travesties et transsexuelles," 334-37; Bloch, "Silence and Holes," 88-89.

gender is repeatedly discussed and interpreted and her "nature" is the subject of debates and disputes. The efforts to eliminate indeterminacy and ambiguity expose and question the ideological foundations of gender identifications. Ultimately Silence's body signifies "female" because the king says it does, not because it demonstrates an inherent truth. The ostensible realignment of body, performance, and gender identity that closes the *Roman de Silence* reestablishes and reinforces the binary division of gender that is essential to a society whose economic and political foundations are built on marriage and succession. The cultural intelligibility of gender depends on a socially sanctioned coordination between body and performance that is based on participation in a compulsory heterosexuality dictated by dynastic ambition. Indeed, the conflation of gender and dynasty is suggested in the author's own account of the subject of his story: "De Cador, de s'engendreüre" (1657). Cador's "engendreüre" is of course his child, Silence, but it is also the act of engendering, which names both procreation and the assignment of gender.

The *Roman de Silence* recounts the anxiety that the ambiguously gendered individual provokes in aristocratic society. Through the restoration of reproductive gender roles in its resolution, the romance locates that anxiety not in the possibility of women performing men's roles as well as men, but in the disruption of "proper" avenues for exchange that are essential to maintain the kinship alliances that structure medieval aristocratic society.³⁸ The ambiguously gendered body is ill contained by strategies of identification in the *Roman de Silence*: the "nature" of Silence's body seems first to conform to the gender she/he performs and then to correspond to the gender she is assigned. In the resolution of the story, both body and performance are dictated by royal command, by the king's pronouncement that "nos veöns bien que tu iés feme." The pronouncement's truth is guaranteed by the king's authority, not by evidence on the body. In fact, the king's assertion is "naturalized" when Nature effaces the features on the body that contradict his identification of Silence as a woman.

From the beginning of Silence's story gender identification is influenced by concerns about succession and dynasty. A reading of the efforts by various characters in the story to contain the mutability of Silence's body reveals the role of political and social institutions in maintaining a binary gender system and in both exploring and suppressing challenges to that system. An exami-

38. See, for example, Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest; The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Pantheon, 1983); and *Medieval Marriage; Two Models from Twelfth-Century France*, trans. Elborg Forster (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

nation of the ways in which those attempts to identify the gender of Silence's body are narratively subverted in the *Roman de Silence* demonstrates an inventive and provocative medieval interrogation of the location of gender and of sexual difference.³⁹

University of Illinois, Chicago

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