CHAPTER 2

The Roman de Silence

Crossing Categories

On devient cuisinier, mais on naît rôtisseur

We can learn to be a cook, but we must be born a roaster.
—Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*

1. NATURE WITHOUT NOURETURE

"NATURE PASSE nourriture / et nourriture survainc nature" [Nature surpasses nurture / but nurture vanquishes nature],[1] declares a thirteenth-century proverb that reads like a severely condensed inspiration for Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* (ca. 1275).[2] Both explore the tension between birth and environment in the development of the individual self, as the two sides of this equation battle for supremacy over human destiny. What the old adage proposes in two chiastic, mutually negating clauses, Heldris explores for more than 6,700 lines that chronicle the adventures of Silence—a biological woman cross-dressed as a knight, who exceeds all others in chivalric virtue, yet is unjustly accused of raping a queen and punished by being forced to tame a feral Merlin. What is cleanly expressed in the proverb is untidy and frustrating in the romance, which alternately favors Nature and "Noureture" [nurture, culture] in arguments that are no sooner stated than reversed by a chatty, interfering, sententious narrator who enjoys contradicting his own precepts and interpretations. *Silence* offers no way out of the conflict of heredity versus

1. *Le Livre des Proverbes Francais,* ed. M. LeRoux de Lincy, 2.352.

2. Citations from the *Roman de Silence* are from *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance,* ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi, in consultation with *Le Roman de Silence,* ed. Lewis Thorpe, and Felix Lecoy's emendations of Thorpe ("*Le Roman de Silence,*" *Romania* 99 [1978]: 109–25).

education—any sort of resolution is lost in its recursions. After rehearsing the slippery dichotomy exhaustively, the romance appears to reject its own surprising revelations regarding the fluidity—and concomitant equality—of gender. The poem's final lines are a decidedly unsatisfying conclusion; a bombastic, misogynistic tirade ostensibly directed at the wicked queen Eufeme that seems an abandonment of the exemplary life story of Silence. The narrator acts as though the good deeds and virtuous conduct of Silence have never happened, focusing avidly instead upon the gruesome punishment of Queen Eufeme (she is "a chevals detraite" [6656] [dragged apart by horses]). Eufeme's faults and her own cross-dressing transgressions (she has a male lover disguised as a nun) become the faults of all women, including Silence, who by now is stripped of her masculine garb, her body purged of its maleness—once a powerful knight, now only a bride. Perhaps this is why the narrator ignores her here. He complains that the only way any woman can be "good" in society is to act contrary to her nature, to be led by Noureture away from her inherent *malvaise*—but also that the kind of "nurturing" or education women are most likely to receive will only vitiate them further. This paradoxical protestation—abruptly at odds with the narrator's admiration of the masculinized Silence throughout the poem—is an act of deliberate irresolution that proposes an unlikely solution. The narrator's final hope is that the category-crossing work of the poem will continue outside its bounds; that moral cross-dressing will unravel the binds of social and gender inequality.

Radically, *Silence* proposes that Nature—a term that was ideologically mobilized as a hierarchizing force in medieval culture, and one that stood for the androcentric and aristocratic status quo—signifies nothing without the intervention of Noureture. Nature is cloaked, as it were, by human practice and discourse. To say it another way, Nature is far from "natural"—it has no prediscursive meaning and is therefore beyond the experience of any subject in the postlapsarian world of language and politics. In *Silence,* Nature is not ontologically prior to human understanding, but rather bound up in the transitory, imperfect realm of human knowledge and its politically charged, epistemological distinctions. *Silence* suggests that binaries believed to be fundamental to human identity—male and female, aristocrat and *vilein*—are in fact historically contingent constructs. They may have seemingly stable and permanent ideological status, but their meaning has actually changed over time and will continue to change in the future. *Silence* makes this point subtly by tempering its cross-dressing, class-transgressing plot with the narrator's fatuous protestations of its outrages. He mock-struggles to contain and even to controvert the implications of his radical romance, even as these frustrations amplify the poem's violative design.

Beginning with the narrator's cantankerous lament of a modernity in which avarice and ingratitude have replaced storied largesse of the Arthurian past, the *Roman de Silence* unfolds a plot obsessed with mixed and compromised categories: of "masculine" women; of kings who fail to demonstrate wise polity; of human nature that is the unnatural socializing influence of nurture. This muddled picture of contemporary life gestures at the relative purity of categories in bygone times, and the narrator balefully notes their transformation and hybridization as time moves on. To mourn the loss of a more perfect world is not unusual in a medieval text,[3] yet *Silence* explores the terms of this lament in a unique idiom—an elaborate constellation of cooking imagery. The author continually invokes culinary processes to signify the adulterated, denatured state of the world and its inhabitants. Dame Nature cuts her flour with bran to make human substance, Silence creates an edible trap for a bestial Merlin, and Merlin himself prepares prophetic revelation as if it were the main course of a courtly banquet. In each of these cases, cooking exposes the alienation of humanity from nature, a fundamental schism created by the application of labor to nature.

In *Silence,* labor—as represented by cooking—acts to restore characters to their predetermined "natural" state, despite the effort they have taken to achieve a status they prefer to have. As Marx reveals, labor is defined by its intermediary status: it is "a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature."[4] Productive activity, itself driven by cultural, appetitive urges, renders the natural world digestible to human needs and human bodies. And though the natural world is creative in ways analogous to human labor—take Marx's examples of the spider and the bee—labor is a political force that drives humanity to intentionally change their environment, with some improving end in mind, regardless of whose circumstances are actually improved by the labor.[5] Labor is therefore a cultured force that usually works on behalf of the ideological status quo; that is, it conscripts nature to underwrite the powers that be. As an application of human effort, labor in the poem seemingly should be an aspect of Noureture, but instead in *Silence,* the figure of Nature strives to right the categorical "wrongs" that threaten binary stability. By laboring as a cook, Silence humanizes Merlin's

3. The traditional figure of Nature as an allegorical construct emerges most often in a context of complaint, satiric or otherwise. See George Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* on the pedigree of Dame Nature from late antiquity to the fourteenth century.

4. Marx, *Capital,* 1.283.

5. Marx, *Capital,* 1.284. "But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax."

bestiality, while he metaphorically "cooks" (*decoverra le pot* [6186] [uncovers the pot]) when he discovers her gender ruse. The status of labor as rectifier of categories in Heldris's romance reveals a world that is hopelessly mediated, crossed, and queered; where Nature cannot stand alone without the intervention of a laboring Noureture to assist her. Silence's nearly flawless assumption of masculinity reinforces the idea that Noureture threatens the values of the "natural" aristocratic milieu.

The exploration of a mediated world extends even to the generic identity of the *Roman de Silence.* Romance is a genre that has always been notable for its mixture of heterogeneous elements. Medieval authors unite the martial and marvelous stories of the epic and *chanson de geste* with the lyric's examination of inner tensions and romantic love. The union of disparate parts is often thought to have created a wholly new mode of literature in France.[6] In fact, mélange is what makes the story, as Heldris reminds his audience:

> Si com l'estoire le nos livre,
> Qu'en latin escrite lizons,
> En romans si le vos disons.
> Je ne di pas que n'i ajoigne
> Avoic le voir sovent mençoigne
> Por le conte miols acesmer:
> Mais se jel puis a droit esmer
> N'i metrai rien qui m'uevre enpire
> Ne del voir nen iert mos a dire
> Car la verté ne doi taisir.
> (1660–69)

> Just as the story provides it to us
> that we read written in Latin
> so in French [*romans*] we tell it to you
> I'm not saying that there are not
> often lies joined with the truth
> in order to embellish the tale better—
> but if I can estimate rightly
> I will add nothing there that impairs my work
> Nor truly is there any word left to say
> Because the truth should not be silenced.

6. Although there were many Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon romances written before the 1150s, in both prose and verse. See chapter 1.

The narrator's disclaimers about mediating Latin with French, truth with fiction, are not surprising—they are part of the genre's efforts to authorize itself as worth telling. It is, however, remarkable that the narrator waits more than 1,600 lines to make this gesture. This sentiment must be expressed in order to sanction the labor that intervenes between the matter of storytelling and the product of the author, or in Eugène Vinaver's terms, between the *conte,* or the tale itself, and its *conjointure,* the particular arrangement that marks the tale as one's own.[7] This example is just one instance of the politics of adulteration to be found on nearly every level of *Silence,* from structure and idea to imagery and character. Here I will discuss the implications of this adulteration—the political use of impurity that points toward an imperfect state of affairs. Mixture is precisely what makes romance possible: the genre is both a symptom and a celebration of cultural and literary amalgamation. The intermediary nature of food matches that of romance: both are phenomena that reveal the contingencies of a "world grown old."[8]

Just as the first chapter of this book reconsidered definitions of romance, extending the genre backward in time, so this part requires a rethinking about what makes a writer of English romance. The *Roman de Silence,* a story written in a dialect of Old French usually considered to be continental,[9] nonetheless raises questions about its author and audience that expand the linguistic and national programs of modern critics. As Schmolke-Hasselmann first argued, the medieval idea of "Frenchness" was a cosmopolitan and international phenomenon; French-speaking court elites and literary patrons moved back and forth across the English Channel, bringing with them their political sympathies and feudal entanglements, as well as their favored authors.[10] Just like with Middle English, the differences between the dialects of French, though sometimes held up to ridicule, were not entirely incomprehensible to various speakers of the language. That a poem was not written in Anglo-Norman (or whatever local dialect) was no impediment to its circulation, nor should it be considered a hard limit to its appeal to a broad range of readers in any Francophonic area. So if verse romances were produced and disseminated in both England and France, for audiences living in either country, we should not be surprised if a writer of one of these texts was produced in England as

7. Vinaver, *Rise of Romance,* 36–37. The word *conjointure* appears to be a coinage of Chrétien de Troyes.

8. See James M. Dean's *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature* for a thorough study of the *topos* of the *senectus mundi.*

9. For the linguistic analysis of the poem, see introduction to Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence,* ed. Lewis Thorpe, 35–59.

10. Schmolke-Hasselmann, *Evolution of Arthurian Romance,* 282–85.

well. This may have been the case for Heldris de Cornuälle, about whom we know nothing except the name, which indicates a possible origin in Cornwall.

The textual history of *Silence* is as muddled and mediated as the poem itself. Its sole surviving witness, the Laval-Middleton Manuscript, was produced in northeastern France, near Tournai in Picardy, in the late thirteenth century.[11] It was probably seized as war booty during the long years of conflict between France and England, where it eventually ended up in the possession of Lord Middleton, discovered in 1911 by W. H. Stevenson in a box labeled "Old Papers—no value."[12] *Silence* seems out of place with the dominant trends of French vernacular narrative. A poetic romance written at a time when the French were primarily composing romances in prose,[13] *Silence* feels much more at home among its manuscript companions, *chansons de geste* and early verse romances like Benoît de Saint-Maure's *Roman de Troie* and Gautier d'Arras' *Ille et Galeron* (ca. late twelfth century).[14] It is possible that this sense of anachronism may be the result of an actual English origin of the poem—at the very least it plays, perhaps humorously, to the idea that insular romance was "behind the times" to urbane French audiences. At any rate, like many of the Arthurian verse romances examined by Schmolke-Haselmann, *Silence* is a poem about England: its hero and her king are both English, its excursus celebrates an English polity, and its conclusion salvages this same English kingdom.[15] Therefore, I treat the *Roman de Silence* as designed for Francophonic English audiences for the purposes of this book.

Silence has garnered a great deal of critical and pedagogical interest recently, becoming a fixture in collegiate syllabi and attracting scholarly attention with its freewheeling narrative and powerful story that uses cross-dressing to interrogate gender categories. It is not the only cross-dressing narrative in

11. The Laval-Middleton Manuscript is catalogued as University of Nottingham MS Mi.LM.6.

12. This anecdote is repeated in Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence,* trans. F. Regina Psaki, xii; and Heldris de Cornuälle, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance,* ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi, xi.

13. Craig A. Berry argues that classifying *Silence* as such a late "chivalric verse romance" is justified by its attention to problems of inheritance and succession ("What Silence Desires," in *Translating Desire in Medieval and Early Modern Literature,* ed. Craig A. Berry and Heather Richardson Hayton, 193). See E. Jane Burns for an intriguing suggestion that the origins of French prose romance were in the English court of Henry II (1154–89), perhaps initiated by noted clerk and author Walter Map ("Arthurian Romance in Prose," in *A New History of French Literature,* ed. Denis Holier, 66–70).

14. The complete contents of the Laval-Middleton Manuscript are listed in Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence,* ed. Thorpe, 3–6. For a description of the manuscript, see ibid., 1–12, and Keith Busby, *Codex and Context: Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscript,* 415–20.

15. Schmolke-Haselmann, *Evolution of Arthurian Romance,* 242–44.

European medieval literature (its confreres are as diverse as the chauntefable *Aucassin et Nicolette* [ca. 1300–1400] and Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauendienst* [*The Service of Ladies,* ca. 1255]). Nowhere else, however, is the idea of gender as a stable category of identity so relentlessly challenged, questioned, and even theorized as a cultural construct centuries ahead of a postmodernity that takes such ideas for granted. The poem's attention to issues of gender is so potent, so resonant to contemporary critiques, that the majority of criticism written about *Silence* has focused upon gender, sex, and sexuality in one way or another, almost to the exclusion of many other issues raised in its lines.

Scholarship on *Silence* is a relatively recent phenomenon; articles appeared only around thirty years ago to break the silence surrounding this intriguing romance. Kathleen J. Brahney, in a paper delivered in 1983, initiates the modern cycle of scholarship by observing that Heldris suspends the prevailing antifeminism of his milieu to engage in a bit of fantasy, to see what a woman could become in his society.[16] Anita Benaim Lasry counters that the literary status of women, who are defined at times as *hommes manqués* [men who are lacking], is dependent upon them acting like men in order to be represented as heroic at all.[17] Simon Gaunt identifies the repressive conclusion of the poem as "characteristically masculine," noting that Heldris cannot help talking about what disturbs him about gender and sexuality, desiring what he fears most—a masculine woman.[18] Peggy McCracken diagnoses the anxiety of aristocratic society about gender ambiguity, showing that romances are invested in policing proper gender roles in its characters.[19] Sharon Kinoshita interprets *Silence* politically, arguing that the heroine's cross-dressing "renegotiates the over-lapping, potentially conflictual relations" between interested parties in feudal bonds, which reveals aristocratic bodies were valued less for their war-making than for their perpetuation of dynastic lineage.[20] Queering the gender constructions of *Silence,* Elizabeth Waters recognizes the role of shame in motivating the heroine's cross-dressing performance, a self-censuring that ensures that heteronormative categories are reinscribed within the romance.[21]

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16. Kathleen J. Brahney, "When *Silence* was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence,*" in *The Spirit of the Court,* ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor, 52–61.

17. Anita Benaim Lasry, "The Ideal Heroine in Medieval Romances: A Quest for a Paradigm," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 32 (1985): 227–43.

18. Simon Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," *Paragraph* 13 (1990): 213.

19. Peggy McCracken, "'The Boy who was a Girl': Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence,*" *Romanic Review* 84 (1994): 517–36.

20. Sharon Kinoshita, "Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage," *PMLA* 110 (1995): 398.

21. Elizabeth Waters, "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence,*" *Arthuriana* 7 (1997): 35–46.

In the same issue of *Arthuriana* (Summer 1997), Caroline A. Jewers outlines how *Silence* redefines the critical term *aventure* [chance, event] to incorporate feminine agency into its parameters—however, this reinscription has the effect of creating a "*Bildungsroman* focused not on the education of a hero, but of a heroine who experiences different structures of power without permanently appropriating them, and in so doing learns to submit to them."[22] Robert L. A. Clark identifies "category crisis" as the driving energy in the romance, one that queers gender performance in order to make social class seem more natural as a determination of human identity.[23] Also citing the work of Marjorie Garber, Robert S. Sturges reads cross-dressing in *Silence* as the "archetypal sign of the transgression of all categories" of a story that illuminates the vexed social position of the *juventus*—militarized, aristocratic youth who were not to inherit their fathers' lands, and so had to wander Europe seeking other noblemen to serve.[24]

Without denying the importance of gender to the poem and its study, or denigrating the laudable efforts by scholars to unravel its complexities, I follow Sturges and Clark in seeing its cross-dressing as a symptom of a more pervasive issue. Yet where these scholars see the class as the major issue of *Silence*'s critique, I return to the words of Marjorie Garber on the fullest implications of cross-dressing's threat to categories:

> Transvestism was located at the juncture of "class" and "gender," and increasingly through its agency gender and class were revealed to be commutable, if not equivalent. To transgress against one set of boundaries was to call into question the inviolability of both, and of the set of social codes—already demonstrably under attack—by which such categories were policed and maintained. The transvestite in this scenario is both terrifying and seductive precisely because s/he incarnates and emblematizes the disruptive element that intervenes, signaling not just another category crisis, but—much more disquietingly—a crisis of "category" itself.[25]

The cross-dresser raises the possibility that no dyadic category has any meaning whatsoever—that they are not natural, but rather enforced by cultural

22. Caroline A. Jewers, "The Non-Existent Knight: Adventure in *Le Roman de Silence,*" *Arthuriana* 7 (1997): 92.

23. Robert L. A. Clark, "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the *Roman de Silence,*" *Arthuriana* 12 (2002): 50–63.

24. Robert S. Sturges, "The Crossdresser and the *Juventus*: Category Crisis in *Silence,*" *Arthuriana* 12 (2002): 37.

25. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety,* 32.

habits. *Silence* toys with this challenge, fixated upon the problem of mixture and mediation more generally, upon adulteration that complicates and threatens binary relationships. Masculine and feminine are obvious, very attractive, examples of the twofold thinking which organizes existence, forming putatively stable categories that inevitably prove to be anything but solid and predictable upon deeper scrutiny. *Silence* and its cross-dressing narrative challenge the legitimacy of these dualistic categories, defying their stability and exposing their fluidity.

The grand innovation of *Silence,* however, comes with how its disruption of fundamental categories is marshalled. Heldris mobilizes a pervasive imagery of the edible in order to drive home his critique of the social imagination. This rich metaphorical and material connection can be made because food is a mediating phenomenon: it transcends distinctions between inside and outside, between self and other. Cooking is the practice of labor by which these unusual objects are made palatable for ingestion—it cajoles the wary eater to incorporate its products. Both food and cooking imbricate the individual into a political world of economic production, social consumption, and class-based stratification, putting the self into circulation among a world of commodities and behaviors. The literary power of consumption renders social critique and humor deliciously appealing, as has been shown by Sarah Gordon, bringing the very structures of power into question by interrogating its appetites.[26] Gordon's study shows that food is often funny in medieval French literature, but in the *Roman de Silence* this trenchant power allows its author to move past lampooning social mores and conventions, and engage in an intellectual broadside attacking the epistemological foundations of an entire social order in desperate need of regeneration.

2. BAKING WITH DAME NATURE

Cooking directly challenges the stability of categories as well, as it transforms raw food into something desirable to humans. A natural foodstuff is altered by the addition of heat, which transmutes the texture and consistency of meat and other foods so they become digestible. Its purity is mediated by the process, as well as by the addition of other ingredients—herbs, spices, or salt at the very least—that change its native flavor into something designed to appeal to the sensory pleasure of an eater. But even in the famous "culinary triangle" of Claude Lévi-Strauss, there is no point where culture does not intervene in

26. Gordon, *Culinary Comedy in Medieval French Literature,* 1–4.

the presentation of the natural.[27] Foods eaten raw or rotted—both "natural" states to be sure—are consumed with the benefit of cultural wisdom and customary practice: even a nut right off the tree must be cracked with some sort of tool. Cooking is the act that reveals culture's dominance over its environment, translating all things into products useful for nutrition as well as good to eat. We almost never apprehend the natural world without some process of cooking, at least as far as our bellies are concerned.

Cooking first appears in *Silence* in the context of labor of another sort—the birth of the hero(ine)—which gives way to an account of the work required to create human bodies. During the harrowing account of Eufemie's labor pains (1775–94), Heldris's narrator averts his gaze, and the tale shifts from the realistic to the metaphysical. Here he introduces the figure of Dame Nature and diverges to speculate on the generation of living creatures. Anticipating the objections of his audience, who might become irritated with what seems to be a digression, the narrator signals that we are nonetheless meant to pay close attention to the description that follows:

> Se jo le vus di et descuevre
> Quels l'uevre fu, ne vos anuit,
> Car vos devés bien ester aduit,
> Se vos voles savoir un conte,
> D'entendre et oïr cho que monte.
> (1800–1804)
>
> If I tell and describe to you
> this handiwork, don't be annoyed [or bored],
> for you should be well instructed,
> if you wish to savor a tale,
> in order to understand and hear what it's worth.

In this extraordinary passage, tightly woven with internal rhymes, that belies its status as an off-hand remark, the narrator seems brazenly to diverge from Heldris's tale, insisting that he is returning (*repairier*) to the true matter of the story, which will speculate upon the metaphysical process of creating living matter (both senses are described by the word *matyre*). Challenging his audience to follow along with what he feels is important to tell, the narrator commands us not to become *anuit* [bored or vexed], stating that this detour is fundamental to a listener's experience of *savoir*—both tasting and understand-

27. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," trans. Peter Brooks, *Partisan Review* 33 (1966): 586–96.

ing the story. We cannot fully enjoy the narrative without comprehending of the role of Nature in the action to come.

As has been demonstrated by critics of *Silence,* Heldris de Cornuälle's reimagination of Nature takes many liberties with her traditional personification, altering her iconography in order to better suit the purposes of his narrative.[28] An allegorical character with a literary pedigree stretching back to late antiquity in the work of Boethius and Macrobius, Nature is a laboring goddess, emblematized by Alain de Lille in *De planctu naturae* (ca. 1160–65) as a stamper of coins (he calls her the "monetariam," [the mistress of his [God's] mint]).[29] Jean de Meun, in his continuation of the *Roman de la Rose* (ca. 1275), elaborates Nature even further, drawing her more clearly as a blacksmith in whose workshop "Toujourz martele, tourjourz forge, / Toujourz ses pieces renouvele / Par generacion nouvele" [she continues always to hammer and forge and always to renew the individuals by means of new generation].[30] The laboring figure of Nature naturalizes the secondary, mediated relationship that humans have created with the natural world: she labors because men are required to. The earth and its most basic products—plants, animals, food—have been converted through husbandry and breeding into instruments of labor, mere tools that intervene between the laborer and his object.[31] Nature, as an idealized allegorical figure, renders this indirect connection into a normal state of affairs through displacement, perpetuating an isomorphism between the work of the blacksmith and sexual, as well as intellectual, labor. Through this equation Nature identifies that the work of reproduction lies "not with gestation," as observed by Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "but with the impression of form upon matter."[32] Even though she is represented as female, Jean de

28. Important studies of Nature in *Roman de Silence* include: Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "Nature's Forge Recast in the *Roman de Silence,*" in *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture,* ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox, 39–46, and Barbara Newman, "Did Goddesses Empower Women?" in *Gendering the Master Narrative,* ed. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, 135–55.

29. Alain de Lille, *De planctu naturae,* in *The Anglo-Latin Satirical Poets and Epigrammatists of the Twelfth Century,* ed. Thomas Wright, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores,* vol. 59, part 2, 469. Translation: James J. Sheridan, *The Plaint of Nature,* 146. Economou's *The Goddess Natura* remains the most complete study of the iconography and uses of the allegorical figure of Nature, despite the fact that it omits the *Roman de Silence* in its survey. See also E. R. Curtius's survey of Nature in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. Willard R. Trask, 106–27.

30. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose,* ed. Ernest Langlois, SATF, 16010–12. Translation: Charles Dalhberg, *The Romance of the Rose,* 271.

31. See Marx, *Capital,* vol. 1. An instrument of labor is defined as "a thing, or a complex of things, which a worker interposes between himself and the object of his labour and which serves as its conductor, directing his physical activity onto that object" (285–86).

32. Akbari, "Nature's Forge Recast," 39.

Meun's Nature takes the male role in procreation, hammering out the forms of living creatures upon her anvil. This image is aligned with the popular Aristotelian theory of the generation of offspring, which describes male sperm as the active *forma* that imposes shape and character upon passive female *materia.* The figure of Nature as a blacksmith is more than just cross-dressed like Silence; she (unlike Silence) performs the masculine sexual role. Nature as a blacksmith is a titillating, phallocentric image of the theory of generation.

Though the Aristotelian "one-seed" theory of procreation was widespread in medieval scientific thought, Heldris's alterations of the figure of Nature in *Silence* suggest that there may have been other theories in circulation.[33] In converting her from a blacksmith to a baker, Heldris preserves the image of a laboring Nature, not only reimagining how Nature should be personified but also retheorizing how procreation works, as Akbari observes:

> This transformation of the figure of Nature reflects an unusual perspective on human reproduction and, more generally, on gender roles. Here, Nature's forge is transformed into an oven where, instead of forcibly shaping matter, she prepares a concoction which is moulded and baked.[34]

The generation of form is no longer metamorphic, but metabolic. The violent, dramatic imposition of active form upon passive matter is given up in favor of a subtle process of mixture based upon inexorable chemical reactions that mutually change disparate parts into a whole. Heldris transforms a theory that valorizes conception into another that celebrates gestation, elevating the status of the female in reproduction to at least the equal of the male.

This conceptual innovation through personification proceeds at first from an analogy, a simile that likens Nature to a baker and expands to form a coherent theory from a strain of imagery. In other words, Heldris's philosophical figure is one in progress, that develops conspicuously as the narrator goes on. Framing the simile with an emphasis upon the quality of its results (the *ouvre forcible* [1807] or its *majestyre* [1827]),[35] Heldris shifts for a moment to a fascination with the technical vocabulary of baking. He revels in the redundancy and repetition of the lexicon, naming the tools of baking Nature uses—

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33. According to Joan Cadden, medieval natural philosophers and physicians used an eclectic blend of Aristotelian, Hippocratic, and Galenic materials to formulate their own theories of reproduction (See *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages,* 54–88). Aristotle's theory of reproduction is called "one-seed" because he theorizes that only men produce reproductive material. "Two-seed" theories recognize that women produce a "seed" of their own.

34. Akbari, "Nature's Forge Recast," 39–40.

35. Brahney notes that Nature linguistically mixes the masculine and feminine in this passage ("When *Silence* Was Golden," 57).

whether *crible, bulette,* or *tamise.* This catalogue reveals an important step in the production of human forms: the sifting of the flour to remove the bran and other impurities. He repeats himself further: a description of the sifting process or its results is given twice more (1828–39; 1845–60). The more cleanly sifted the flour, the whiter the bread and the more valuable the final product—in effect he refigures the economic side of generation; shifting the attention from numismatics (the output of Alain de Lille's *monetariam*) to a product to be purchased with that coin, the commodifiable *blanc pain et biel* (1810) [white and lovely bread]. Reducing the bread to a view of its exchange-value also reminds us that the desirability of white bread is culturally determined: it is hardly a natural distinction, nor one in concordance with the use-value of bread.[36]

As observed by Barbara Newman and Robert L. A. Clark, the pure white flour does not primarily signify sex or gender in Nature's creation; instead, it represents class identity.[37] The division of pure flour from the bran creates two separate bodies, the first an aristocratic *gastial* [refined cake], and the lower-classed *torte a porciels* [cake for the pigs]. However, the process of filtering is far from gender-neutral. The carefully sifted flour is described as *vallant* [good, worthy, brave, powerful, as well as its cognate "valiant"]; it is an adjective that marks the flour as excelling at both aristocracy and masculinity.[38] Nature has winnowed out the impurities in her flour, leaving nothing but what is noble and male in her desire to bake the perfect female body.

Heldris's allegory of Nature's workshop, however, is far from ideal. The process is imprecise, often creating an impure mixture of components. Despite her efforts to separate the parts, accidents do happen:

Si oste del gros le délie.
De cel délie si fait sans falle
Les buens et del gros la frapalle.
Mais se il avient que Nature
Soit corocie, u que n'ait cure
C'un poi del gros al délie viegne
Et al mollier avoec se tiegne,

36. White bread was the most desirable type in the Middle Ages, its expense precluded all but the most wealthy from affording it.

37. Newman, "Did Goddesses Empower Women?" 143, and Clark, "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class," 61.

38. Heldris uses the same adjective to modify the *home* (man, human being) that Nature wishes to create in her bakeshop (1826), and when Silence acknowledges the quality of her own manliness: "Or sui jo moult vallans et pros" (2642) [Now I am quite valiant and honored].

Cil gros se trait al cuer en oire.
(1832–39)

So she separates from the crude the refined.
From this refined stuff she makes, without a doubt,
the good people and from the crude the worthless.
But if it should happen that Nature
becomes angry so that she hasn't a care,
if a little bit of coarse is blended with the fine
and is retained in the molding,
the coarse bran attacks the heart at once.

Repeating the words *délie* [pure, refined] and *gros* [crude] three times in shifting chiastic constructions emphasizes the uncertain relationship between the two grades of flour, and acknowledges a continuum of purity. Even in the bakery of Nature, flour is rarely encountered in an unmediated state, due to Nature's *corocie* [anger], a trait that aligns her with the traditional personifications of the goddess in medieval literature. Nature is given voice in poems such as *De Planctu Naturae* and the *Roman de la Rose* only because she is upset and must vent her complaint. This type of anger characterizes Nature as stereotypically female but also aligns her with the putatively male narrator of *Silence,* whose petulant digressions cause the matter of the romance to veer frequently away from its plot. And, as if on cue, *Silence*'s narrator launches into a twenty-line speech about the appearance of rich bodies [*riche cors*] with low-born hearts [*vil cuer et povre* (1843)] and vice versa. With this outburst, he seems to goad himself into questioning the relevance of the entire Nature episode. He shifts (and further mixes) his metaphor, claiming that "Li cors n'est mais fors sarpelliere, / Encor soit de la tierre chiere" (1845–46) [The body is mere sackcloth, / even if it's made from the dearest clay]. Even though this is a commonplace, his statement seems to deny the importance of Nature's work in building, which the past sixty lines have demonstrated.

Perhaps it is this denial of Nature's power that leads the narrator to examine the next step of the process of creating human forms: the imprinting of shape upon the dough she has sifted and prepared. The narrator moves from contemplating the inner substance of her creation to its outer form:

A son secré va, si descuevre.
Molles i a bien .m. milliers,
Que cho li est moult grant mestiers,
Car s'ele n'eüst forme c'une,

La samblance estroit si commune
De tolte gent, c'on ne savroit
Quoi, ne quel non, cascuns avroit.
(1886–92)

She goes to her coffer and discloses it.
She has nearly a thousand thousands of molds there,
and she has a very great need of them,
for if she had only one form,
everyone would so much alike
that no one would ever be able to tell
who was who or what their name was.

Dame Nature begins the next step in the baking process by opening up (*descuevre*)[39] her own enclosed coffer (*secré*) in order to produce the formed pans that give her creations shape. In a bit of materialist detail that illustrates the allegorical vision of creation, Nature must have numerous shaped pans—a *.m. milliers* [a million] to be exact—in order to account for all the differences of human form. None are imperfect or accidentally misshapen: any sort of variation is a part of Nature's plan. Two implications can be derived from this description. First, contrary to what the narrator has said previously about her *corocie* (1836), which causes her to become less careful with her products' composition, Nature is now described as always being cautious with her molds, so that there is never anything wrong with her work (*n'a a blasmer rien*). Second, and more importantly, Heldris suggests that all human difference—big or small, handsome or ugly, *contrefaites* or *parfites*—is a matter of surface detail. These are superficial aspects, not metaphysical properties, pragmatically applied so that humans can distinguish between themselves, to know who they are and their names. Newman identifies the unexpected results of Nature's priorities:

> Heldris seems here to be making a distinction analogous to the Aristotelian dichotomy of form and matter, though with antithetical meaning. Silence's gender is signified by the inscription and coloring, or superficial form, stamped on that matter. His unusual privileging of matter over form explains why gender is more mutable than character.[40]

39. *Cuevre* [to cover, conceal] is an important word in *Silence,* and various compounds of it (*decuvere, recuevre*) are used as rhyme words twelve times in the poem, all of them paired with (*o*)*uevre* (work).

40. Newmann, "Did Goddesses Empower Women?" 144.

This is a startling reversal of the Aristotelian theory of conception, flipping its dialectic onto its head. *Materia* becomes the more substantial part of the process, while *forma* is reduced to just an outward appearance. However, the gendering of these forces is reversed as well, and the most natural, essential part of creation becomes gendered as male (the *vallant fleur*), and the female aspect only possible through the imposition of the mold.

The link between the *matyre* of the romance story and the floury *matere* of Nature's workshop is drawn further as the goddess sketches and forms the female features of the infant Silence. Not only does the goddess draw and inscribe her facial features just like the scribe draws characters on a sheet of parchment but also she employs the rhetorical practice of *effictio,* describing her creation from her shining blonde hair, "ki luisent cler par nuit obscure" (1907) [which clearly lights up the dark night] to her perfectly proportioned feet and toes (*piés et ortals a mesure,* 1944), following exactly the poet's prescription for praising the beautiful woman.[41] Femininity is a surface effect, glazed over this upper-class, masculine body, with the signifiers of the poetic blazon and the overdetermined language of artifice.[42] Silence is created to be delectable, a body consumable through (masculine) poetic efforts.

The evolution of Alain's or Jean's Dame Nature into that of Heldris not only involves altering her profession from blacksmith to baker. It also reimagines the allegorical possibilities extending from this personification. In the earlier two works, Nature is equipped with masculine hammers and feminine anvils—an image of carnal activity, of sex as the performance of strenuous work. The process of hammering out metal on an anvil is crudely symbolic, if not equally ironic, of the rhythm and sweat of male-superior intercourse. The transformation of Heldris's Nature into a baker proposes a different theory of the sex act, one which is polymorphous and not easily apprehended, defined by the process of blending and the mutuality of influence, rather than by the "correct" position and the collision's true stroke. It is a process that takes place behind the womblike oven's closed door.

The smithing Nature creates bodies that are not natural, but the baker of *Silence* creates something that is a sign of culture itself. Bread is the foodstuff that is most changed by its encounter with humanity. Inedible in its native state, grain must be ploughed, sown, reaped, winnowed, ground, mixed,

41. On the subject of effictio, Geoffrey de Vinsauf exhorts: "So let the radiant description descend from the top of the head to her toe, and the whole be polished to perfection" (*Poetria Nova,* trans. Nims, 36). This rhetorical practice is sent up in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale,* which deploys it to praise the figure of a handsome rooster (*Canterbury Tales* VII.2859–64).

42. The emphasis on the surface effects as gender identification may explain why Heldris always rhymes the word "halle" [sunburnt] with "malle" [male].

leavened, molded, baked, and then broken. Nature's products symbolize the human condition itself: that we are given to labor (see *Genesis* 3:19), liable to sin and penitence (eating nothing but bread and water), yet able to be united with God by way of the Eucharist. Bread reveals our connection with the world, mediated through labor, as we perceive it. Nature, at work in her bakeshop, garbed in her apron, is at the same moment her supposed opposite Noureture. Silence, the product of Nature's finest efforts, baked from the purest flour, imprinted and decorated with enough beauty for a thousand others, hardly has a natural body of her own. The outer decoration is superficial, not essential. That she is a woman has only to do with how her body is molded. The inner substance, the *vallant* flour, will determine her qualities and her worth; it is what Ebain will presumably recognize when he chooses her to be his next wife (though he has her stripped naked anyway, just to be sure).

3. COOKING WITH MERLIN

If the bodies of humans are merely stamped in the bakeshop with so-called "natural" gender distinctions, then it is no wonder that humans can so easily lead Nature's designs astray. Silence is rigorously educated in the pursuits of boys and exposed to the harsh elements, training which suffices to make a fine young man out of her, capable of fooling anyone. She even learns how to imitate socially inferior men by dyeing her face with herbs, a pose that allows her to travel Europe with a pair of wandering minstrels (2921–3476). Merlin, too, learns how to transform himself into a beast of the woods, where he roams free from human society. Not only binaries of female and male, aristocrat and commoner, but even human and animal seem to be little more than surface distinctions, vulnerable to Noureture's manipulation.

Himself an unnatural production—the child of a nun and an incubus—Merlin intervenes in historical events to make the unlikely come to pass, although these machinations tend to protect and ensure the proper patriarchal succession. He is not a member of the aristocracy, but he safeguards their values nonetheless, using his formidable powers of prophecy to rectify what goes astray. Merlin plays many roles in the texts in which he appears: prophet, magician, engineer, royal counselor, trickster, and wild man.[43] In *Silence* he wears several of these hats, but the most surprising is the toque—the puffy white cook's headwear he shares with Silence in the final episode of the story.

43. For an overview of and speculation about Merlin's many facets and interpretations, see R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies,* 2–8.

Silence's capture of the wild Merlin is the culmination of her heroic quest, though it is neither the cessation of the romance's gender-bending energies nor the end of Silence's troubled path from cross-dressed child to "good" wife. Yet the transvestite heroine has already reached the apex of her masculine performance. Her bold exploits on the battlefield in the service of King Ebain (5185–647) exceed the finest knights of England and France in martial power and bloodthirstiness.[44] The sudden reversal of her fortunes in exile, and her seemingly impossible quest demanded on false pretenses, prevent her from discovering what more there is to life as a man beyond conquering hero. Twice caught in the snare of the wily Eufeme (who, furious at Silence's repeated refusal of her sexual advances, twice accuses Silence of attempted rape) (4071–148, 5747–78), Silence returns from exile in France only to be consigned to hunt endlessly for a Merlin gone bestial, pursuing a quarry who can only be caught (as he says himself) by an *engien de feme* (5803)—often translated as a "female trick," but it could just as easily be the "wit of a woman."

Silence herself must first be trapped, however, into taking up the search for Merlin. Eufeme tells Silence a lie about a symbolic dream she has had about the British king Vortigern and his rickety tower, which only Merlin can make stand upright overnight. Eufeme duplicitously begs Silence to find Merlin so that he can interpret this "dream," even as she glosses its literary and historical context—Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Regis Historia Britannia* (5779–80).[45] Eufeme assumes a narratorial role here: the tower that always falls in the night unites two plot-strands of the romance. It stands for the sexual and political challenges to Ebain's rule—the royal couple's childlessness, Eufeme's (attempted) adulteries, and the Count of Chester's rebellion.[46] These problems orbit around Silence's presence in Ebain's court: she is the object of Eufeme's desire, just as she is the hero who ends the insurgency. In both cases, the weakness of Ebain's reign is exposed and Silence's strength and desirability fill

44. Silence's activity and power in this scene is signaled by the *topos* of the arming of the hero (5334–68), traditionally used for (male) epic heroes. Lorraine Kochanske Stock compares this scene to Camilla's arming scene in the *Roman d'Aeneas* (ca. 1150), arguing that the author shows Silence not only meeting but exceeding her characterization as a masculine knight ("'Arms and the (Wo)Man' in Medieval Romance," *Arthuriana* 5 [1995]: 69–75).

45. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain,* 6.499–577, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright, 136–40. The cause of tower's fall proved to be pair of dragons fighting in a pool beneath the foundation.

46. Michelle Bolduc identifies the unity of these two characters: both give advice to Ebain but ultimately prove to be disloyal and wicked (187–90). The section of the poem containing their doubled infidelities (5557–878) is headed by a miniature of a strange creature that Thorpe identifies as a "bird with a griffin's head" (*Roman de Silence,* 8), but Bolduc perceives (more accurately, I believe) as a dragon (Bolduc, "Silence's Beasts," in *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature,* ed. Debra Higgs Strickland, 191–93).

the resultant gap. The tower is an (im)potent emblem of Ebain's condition—at once Eufeme's sly comment on her husband's vulnerable rule, yet also a gesture toward ameliorating the situation.

Redemption is not in the cards for Silence, even though she will locate and capture the wayward magician. But the *engien de feme* that captures Merlin is not performed by Silence alone, but rather set into motion by Eufeme and helped along by Ebain. Silence is unusually passive during this important moment in this story; she is buffeted about by other forces, lost and confused. After a year of fruitless searching, and becoming more and more sure she has been sent on a fool's errand, Silence meets a mysterious old man in the woods. This old man (often identified by critics as Merlin in disguise)[47] greets Silence warmly and offers her hope in the form of an emblem:

> Amis, lasscier le dementer.
> Jo ai veü jadis enter
> Sovent sor sur estoc dolce ente,
> Par tel engien et tele entente
> Que li estos et li surece
> Escrut trestolt puis en haltece.
> (5915–20)

> Friend, let be your grieving—
> Formerly I have seen grafted
> often upon a sterile stock a sweet imp
> with such art and such application
> that the graft and the stock
> both increased to a height afterwards.[48]

The old man "up-writes" the falling tower with a new growth of grafted plants. In one sense, his prophetic words offer hope to Silence—that she will find Merlin, and also that she will flourish as a person of composite gender, despite her troubles in Ebain's court. The grafting represents possibilities that can bloom into prosperity, a fertile cooperation between the perpetually warring

47. This identification of the old man as Merlin stems from the story's parallel in the Grisandole episode of the *Estoire de Merlin* (ca. 1230–40), in which a white stag informs Grisandole how to capture the magician. The stag is later explicitly identified as Merlin. See Sarah Roche-Mahdi's examination of Merlin in *Silence* ("A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin," *Arthuriana* 12 [2002]: 6–21).

48. Gloria Thomas Gilmore proposes a radically different, though feasible, translation of these words, arguing that the passage admonishes Silence to view things allegorically ("*Le Roman de Silence*: Allegory in Ruin or Womb of Irony," *Arthuriana* 7 [1997]: 113).

Nature and Noureture. Yet the "sterile stock" also recalls the suspended state of Silence's female body, which—according to cultural mores—requires a *dolce ente* (fresh shoot) in order to bloom.[49] The predetermined roles of wife and mother have lain dormant as she follows the third path of her own choosing.[50] Wandering in the wilderness, Silence's selfhood is detached from the discourses and performances by which she has created a masculine identity. Her fate is catching up with her, and she is beginning to fulfill her own prophecy: without an audience, she is both nobody and nude (*jo sui nus,* 2538), vulnerable to some new gender stamp. Just as Nature bakes her into a woman of the *gastial,* Silence's own cookery will have gendering effects, not only transforming Merlin back into a man but also bringing femininity unwittingly back upon herself. Her stock will bear fruit, but this is an uncertain boon that will leave her vulnerable to sexual consumption.

The recipe for baiting Merlin is not complicated, requiring only meat that has been heavily salted and three pots containing honey, milk, and wine. But, as with many recipes, presentation is everything. The meat must be cooked with a lot of smoke, so that the scent will spread through the woods and Merlin will notice it more readily. After he eats the salty meat, he will become thirsty and seek to drink from each of three pots, though the first two will only make his thirst for wine greater. The wine, in turn, will intoxicate Merlin and cause him to lose consciousness, allowing Silence to capture him. The key to the old man's recipe is the salt added to the meat. Commonly used as a preserving agent as well as a flavoring, salt was a valuable commodity that held a place of privilege upon the noble table, kept clean and dry inside a "salt-cellar."[51] Salt is a uniquely human product, either mined from the earth or evaporated from seawater, and used in specifically human ways. It signifies both the preservation of life and its pleasurable surplus. It interrupts natural processes of decomposi-

49. The double entendre recalls the narrator's statement about Silence as a boy: "poi en falt que il n'est malles" (2477) [little was lacking for him to be a male].

50. For a study of queer identities in *Roman de Silence,* see Waters, "Third Path." At the start of her adolescence Silence questions her gender identity, becoming trapped between the two possibilities presented by Nature and Noureture. Silence resolves the intellectual bind by following the argument of a third figure, Lady Reason, who appeals to the exterior advantages of manhood, such as the acquisition of superior social status (2497–656).

51. See Peter C. D. Brears, *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England,* 400, for a drawing of several examples of saltcellars. The "Lytyll Childrens Boke," a fourteenth-century courtesy manual, advises that a polite eater will not put his food directly into the saltcellar, but rather will scoop the salt out with the point of his knife (F. J. Furnivall, ed., *The Babees Book: Meals and Manners in Olden Time*, 18, lines 29–31). This courteous admonition is ignored in the romance of *Richard Coer de Lyon,* when King Richard, upon escaping from prison and bearing the heart of the lion that was supposed to kill him, confronts his captor at a banquet and dips the raw heart into the saltcellar before eating it whole (1103–9).

tion and transforms an edible object into a savory one. Precious (though not as dear as spices), salt is both a luxury and a necessity. Reputed to be an aphrodisiac due to its ability to warm the body into a state of arousal,[52] salt is the crystallization of surplus enjoyment, the very delight of eating.

Salted fish and meat would typically be found in a medieval kitchen throughout the year, and cooks developed ways to render preserved food more palatable by soaking it in water for several days.[53] For Silence to serve the meat as is—roasted and not boiled first—increases its dryness and suggests its use as a medicinal corrective for the humoral complexion of the wild Merlin, who has fed so long on the diet of a wild ruminant.[54] By eating like a beast, he has become one: "Cho est uns hom trestols pelus / Et si est com uns ors velus; / Si est isnials com cers de lande" (5929–31) [He is a man entirely covered with hair, / and so he is like a hairy bear; / he is as swift as the deer of the thicket]. Raw vegetables and grasses were considered to be humorally cold and dry due to their proximity to the earth, and so Merlin has become cold and dry as well, completely reversed from the ideal—hot and moist—masculine complexion.[55] He requires something to warm and moisten him into a human man again.

Silence's dinner party goes off without a hitch, and Merlin thirstily drinks from the three pots filled with honey, milk, and wine. Honey was considered hot and dry—its introduction into Merlin's already distempered system increases his thirst. Milk was deemed cold, moist, though volatile in the human digestive system, prone to corrupt and burn inside the stomach—it makes Merlin even more uncomfortable and more eager to drink the wine. Wine was often considered the perfect drink due to its humoral similarity to human blood, which allowed it to be swiftly and easily converted into spirits essential for bodily restoration.[56] It has a doubly transformative effect on Merlin, who drinks it to excess: his humors are realigned, and he falls asleep, losing (bestial) consciousness to awake as a human.

Although these are compelling medieval medical reasons for Merlin's recovery, the restorative recipe has culturally determined symbolic registers beyond its "natural" power to heal. Newman terms Merlin's cure a "Lévi-Straussian synthesis" between raw and the cooked foods, but notes that because meat and wine evoke the manly domain of the feast hall, these pro-

52. Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance,* 148.

53. See Brears, *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England,* 148–49, for ways to remove salt from meat.

54. See Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance,* 50–51.

55. Women were deemed to be colder and moister, a trait thought to explain their reputed lechery as a compulsive need to be warmed through sexual contact.

56. Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance,* 73–74; Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times,* 51.

cessed foods are more vital to Merlin's cure than the raw milk and honey, which correspond to the female body and primal nutrition.[57] Akbari stresses the humanizing power of the wine, which is the only item on Silence's menu found solely in the human world.[58] To assign these ingredients symbolic meaning, however, is to acknowledge their participation in the human domain of signifiers. Significance does not inhere in any foodstuff—the femininity of milk and honey is just as culturally conditioned as the manliness of meat and wine in the warrior's hall. All of the ingredients designate the imposition of human will. Milk and honey are gathered from domesticated animals, wine is subject to controlled spoilage, meat is cooked, and salt is cultivated.[59]

Merlin's powerful "cure" works its magic on the poem itself, reframing Silence's story. This is a narrative recipe as well as a culinary one, that orders the lines of the poem so that the feminine milk and honey is literally surrounded by the cultured and masculine wine and roasted meat: "vin, miel, et lait . . . / . . . et car bien fressce" (5944–45). The duality of Silence's sexual identity is writ large in the cooking process, allowing the restored Merlin to uncover her secret, to read her. Her female body, baked by Nature to be the most delectable and desirable of all her creations, is returned to the table. By enacting the old man's prescription, Silence sacrifices her masculine outer self, in effect feeding part of herself to Merlin in order to return him to humanity. Moreover, she re-empowers Merlin to determine the proper male succession in Ebain's court. She does this not only by being reborn, as Akbari suggests, as a female in her society[60] but also by consigning herself to a lower social status. In her own words, she does what she is unwilling to do *en son corage* [in her heart]—to "Irai desos, quant sui deseure" [to go down, when I'm above], to *honis* [disgrace] herself. This is exactly what Silence feared would happen as she contemplated ending her masculine performance at twelve years old (2639–42). As a cook, she loses both her masculinity and aristocratic status.

Despite being biologically equipped to provide the primal form of infant nourishment (both the blood that feeds the fetus in the womb and the milk that feeds the baby afterward), Silence has become conditioned to be more male in complexion than female. Not only has exposure to the sun and wind dried her body (again, as suggested by Heldris's common rhyme on *halle/malle*) but she has also exercised her body in knightly combat and followed

57. Newman, "Did the Goddesses Empower Women?" 146.

58. Akbari, "Nature's Forge Recast," 44.

59. Silence's recipe does not include bread, but it is worth noting its similarly restorative power in medieval literature. In Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Chevalier au Lion,* the mad Yvain meets a hermit who brings him bread, even going so far as to acquire white bread in order to better suit Yvain's obvious nobility. The combination of cooked meat and white bread succeeds in bringing him back to his senses (ed. Staines, 261).

60. Akbari, "Nature's Forge Recast," 43.

the diet of a warrior. However, since the roles of mother and food provider are wholly governed by society, which has limited women of lower class to the roles of cook and nurse, Silence, as an aristocrat, is not destined to nurture anyone, not even her own child after it is born.[61]

At such a dramatic moment in the *Roman de Silence*—a story so obsessed with dialogue and verbal interaction that most of its manuscript miniatures only portray people talking[62]—further debate is unavoidable, and so once again Noureture and Nature meet to argue. The locus of inner turmoil, however, shifts from Silence to Merlin. In the final moments of the story, as Mary Ellen Ryder and Linda Marie Zaerr have observed, Silence's agency is diminished,[63] so much so that her internal dialogue—dramatized by the perpetual conflict between the allegorical figures of Nature and Noureture—lapses into their argument about Merlin. Silence is herself silenced in this last episode, both within and without, her destiny to be decided by others. Merlin and his violative performance of life outside society—like Silence, he was "noris en bos" (2354, 6003) [raised in the woods]—take the place of Silence's own nonconforming body. The fate of two men is at stake in this final debate, but only one is shown. Even the miniatures that accompany the Merlin episode do not feature Silence.[64] Merlin's occlusion of Silence presages her legal coverture to come, when she marries King Ebain at the end of the tale.

4. ROTTEN COUNSEL

The final debate between Nature and Noureture does not involve the fate of Silence—instead they restage the fall of Adam, grafting the ancient story onto the scene, creating a travesty both of the biblical narrative and of the old man's prophecy. The connotations of Eden are appropriate: even though Merlin is no Adam, he wills himself into a condition of renewed innocence.[65] Through his

61. Though medical authorities disapproved of the practice, Western European noble women often hired wet nurses to feed their babies, transforming the "natural" act of motherly breastfeeding through a cultural more.

62. See Thorpe's description of the miniatures (6–8), and Michelle Bolduc, "Images of Romance: The Miniatures of *Le Roman de Silence,*" *Arthuriana* 12 (2002): 101.

63. Mary Ellen Ryder and Linda Marie Zaerr, "A Stylistic Analysis of the *Roman de Silence,*" *Arthuriana* 18 (2008): 27.

64. The first, on fol. 218v, portrays a bird, apparently piercing its own breast like a pelican. The second, on fol. 221r, shows a Merlin-like figure sitting alone on a rock (see Bolduc, "Silence's Beasts," 193–96).

65. Merlin's storied assumption of the animal is traditionally explained in terms of madness, as it is usually presumed that one would have to be insane in order to want to take on a bestial life. However, the recent insights of animal studies question the reflexive assumption of animal inferiority and might encourage a reassessment of Merlin's act: might the magician just

diet of *herbes* and *rachines* he achieves a false state of prelapsarian nutrition, reversing the secondary and alienated relationship with nature that has been humankind's curse ever since the expulsion from paradise. Merlin eats without labor and without killing, yet this Edenic gastronomy is unnatural to him. Noureture recognizes this when she observes how the roasting meat tempts the bestial wizard:

> Or est Merlins en male luite.
> "Qu'as tu a faire de car cuite?"
> Dist Noreture, "Est cho dangiers?
> Herbes, rachines est tes mangiers."
> (6007–10)

> Now Merlin is in a painful struggle.
> "What do you have to do with cooked meat,"
> said Noureture, "Is this your whim?
> Herbs and roots are your food."

His "natural" predilection for meat interrupts Merlin's own self-discipline and the training he receives from Noureture, who teaches him to enjoy his greens. But appetite seems poised to betray him, a basic need that is indistinguishable from desire. Noureture cuts right to its effects on Merlin's body, the external forces by which he feels pulled in two. The word *dangiers* is slippery, meaning both caprice and compulsion;[66] it is a power outside of one's body that drives one to act. Food (*mangiers*) is the one thing that he cannot resist once he smells the meal laid out for him. He betrays his accustomed lifestyle on a whim of appetite.

Noureture attempts to bolster her weaker position with a rhetorical attack against Nature, invoking the incommensurability of men's bodies to their hearts, caused by the imperfections of Nature's process sifting and baking human forms. Noureture disavows her own power to improve a person with a bad heart, declaring that all bad men and women can be traced back to the first bad parents, Adam and Eve. Because no one came before them, their corruption must have come from Nature herself. Nature refutes this argument by retelling the story of the fall as an explicitly gustatory anecdote:

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be playing at an imaginative refiguration of his life, a desire to experience what the world has to offer from many different points of view?

66. "Dangiers," s.v. Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'Ancienne Langue Francaise du IXme au XVIme Siécle.*

Cho dist Nature: "Or doi jo dire,
Cho sache Dex, li nostre sire,
Tu m'oposa del premier home
Ki pecha par mangier la pome.
Dex le fist certes com le suen,
Net, sans pechié, et biel et buen.
. . . . . .
Noreture, car te repoze?
Quanques Adans fist de rancure,
Fu par toi, certes, Noreture.
Car li diäbles le norri
Par son malvais consel porri.
Tant l'enaprist, tant l'enorta,
Que le pome le sorporta."
(6045–50; 6066–72)

Nature said this: "Now I must say,
God knows it, our Father,
You have opposed me since the first man
Who sinned by eating the apple.
God truly made him like one of his own,
Pure, without sin, both lovely and good.
. . . . . .
Noureture, why don't you give it a rest?
Whatever grievous acts Adam did,
It was by you, indeed, Noureture.
For the devil fed him
With his counsel, wicked and rotten.
So he taught him and encouraged him,
That he carried him away to the apple."

Nature argues that humankind fell by choosing the forbidden apple among all the other edible things available in Paradise, and the drastic effects have been carried down through history. Adam's drive for a kind of culinary innovation, the desire to eat something exotic, resulted in him imbibing (*norri*) the Devil's rotten counsel (*consel porri*). According to Nature, Noureture is born at this instant, appearing inside Adam at the moment of contact with the Devil: "Mais tolt lor vient de Noreture / Dont l'enemis Adan enbut / Quant par la pome le deçut" (6078–80) [But all that is due to Noureture / with which the

Enemy imbued Adam / when he deceived him with the apple].[67] Nature casts Noureture as an allegorical non-entity, a negative capacity equated with the Devil, with no power except for evil, to urge and confuse people to become contrary to nature. At that, Noureture turns pale and disappears—and Merlin (and Silence) revert to their "natural" identities.

Just as Silence seems to disappear from the scene of Merlin's fall, so too there is no Eve in Nature's retelling of the Fall. The narrator is silent upon the feminine at this piviotal moment—abandoning even the baiting, misogynistic diatribes that he seems to relish so much.[68] This omission is strategic, however; it is meant to imply more than he could say about the subservient role of women in the story. Nature's version of the Fall, mustered to deny her responsibility for Adam's disobedience, is exculpatory, meant to argue for a male nature that is not flawed at its core, but rather misled by circumstance. Nature's emphasis upon God's creation of the first man—and thus Adam's necessary goodness—is the crux of her argument. Eve, whom Nature does not mention, may be a different case: she was first tempted by the Devil and failed to resist him, eating the apple and then giving it to Adam. Nature's position on Eve is unclear: perhaps she was simply the first victim of the Devil/Noureture; or perhaps she—and consequently all women—are inherently "bad."

Playing the part of the absent Eve in this scene, Silence assumes the role of perfidious food provider, giving Merlin the food that causes a second fall from innocence. This is no tragedy of biblical proportions, however, but rather an episode of uproariously comic gluttony. Merlin's submission to the smell of roasted meat results in his punishment through a series of painful slapstick pratfalls. Victorious Nature treats Merlin like a *maleöit fol* (6091) [wretched fool], dragging him by the scruff of the neck through the brambles and bushes, tearing and scratching the wild man in the process of celebrating her triumph. By chastising the wayward wizard, Nature demonstrates the cost of betraying one's "natural" identity. Merlin is afflicted with a great burning desire, a ravenous appetite not only for meat but also for his own displaced human identity. This hunger leaves him vulnerable both to Silence's trap and also his own machinations. The setup is farcical, the action burlesque. Merlin is all gluttony in his single-minded fixation "de la car" [by the meat], a phrase repeated three times (6109–15). Regardless of the pain it causes him, he tears into it, not caring if it is "Cuite u crue, salee u fresce" (6113) [raw or cooked, salted or fresh]. Merlin ignores Nature, Noureture, and saltiness here—all he cares about is his hunger. Salt is the activating agent for the trap that catches

67. Translation by Roche-Mahdi.

68. See the narrator's comments after Eufeme is rebuffed by Silence (3901–24), or when she learns Silence is coming back to England (5222–41).

both Merlin and Silence: it is a feature of the meat that is not immediately visible, especially after it has been roasted. Merlin cannot know the nature of the meat until he takes a bite first. In the same way, Silence's body, like Silence's meal, is both salted and fresh, her true nature concealed from sight.

The comic description of Merlin as he drinks the pots is a further jab at his gluttony—the physical torment of his indigestion that the narrator hopes will provoke belly-laughs from the audience:

> Ki donc veïst enfler Merlin!
> Com plus en goit, plus en puet boire,
> Et si ne fait fors lui deçoivre.
> Ki donc veïst home a mesaise!
> Merlins crieve d'anguisse enaise.
> Il voit le lait, si en boit donques.
> Or n'ot il mais tele angoissce onques.
> Ki donc veïst ventre eslargir,
> Estendre, et tezir, et bargir,
> Ne lairoit qu'il n'en resist tost!
> (6120–29)

> Then you should have seen Merlin swell up!
> The more he swallowed the thirstier he got—
> all he accomplished was his own undoing.
> You never saw a man in greater discomfort;
> Merlin was nearly dying with agony.
> He saw the milk and drank it then.
> He had never been in such pain!
> If you ever saw how his belly swelled up,
> expanded, inflated and dilated,
> you would have burst out laughting![69]

The repeated lines "Ki donc veïst" [you should have seen] make Merlin a spectacle to be gawked at: his belly swells up like a balloon in a parody of overeating. The absurdity of the display is emphasized by the piling-on of synonyms for swelling of the stomach (*enfler, eslargir, estendre, tezir, bargir*). Both his inflation and his agony suggest that Merlin is experiencing a kind of pregnancy, shifting between the male and the female in his tormented state. He gives birth to himself as a human, just as he will "engender" Silence.

69. Translation by Roche-Mahdi.

At this point, the compound identities both of Silence and Merlin are reaching their breaking point; the paradoxes inherent to being "norris en bois" [raised in the forest] are becoming more and more intolerable. As Merlin succumbs to Silence's edible snare, we realize that neither of them can escape their culturally conditioned selves. Merlin's inclination to consume the products of human labor drags him out of the forest and back into society. One can be nurtured in the woods—the chaotic space outside the court—only in the complete absence of others. Merlin, in his solitude, has managed to defy Nature for a long time, so long that he can exist without labor in the woods, gathering the simplest of foods. He is no longer a man because he has moved beyond the human dependence on labor. Silence, too, was raised in the forest, "solitive et solitaire" (2154) [solitary and alone], hidden away from the pressures and performances of aristocratic life. She was able to labor to become a man in this isolation, free from discourses that would feminize her. Yet unlike Merlin, whose bestiality frees him from humanity, Silence is nothing without a stage upon which to work at her masculinity.[70] Social humanity cannot find escape from culture in the woods, for it brings its political constraints and feels its absence. Just as the body wears culture's requirements, so the mind toils under its burdens.

5. THE POT BOILS OVER

Just as Silence drops out of the final debate between Nature and Noureture, so she will take a secondary role in the *dénouement* of the *Roman de Silence,* reduced to the status of an observer in her own life story. She reacts inwardly but never initiates action in the poem's last scenes, subject to Ebain's and Merlin's speech acts. Merlin takes over the tale. The account of his irrepressible laughter at the other characters' predicaments (and his own) replaces the introspection of Silence, his extroversion dominating the final events of the romance. What only has been thought is spoken aloud; what lies hidden will be dragged to the surface. Secrets are made into proclamations, and clothed inscrutability becomes naked exposure.

Merlin always gets the last laugh. Silence has captured him and Nature humiliated him, but the prophet and trickster, who knows the ends of all

70. Silence, as a knight and vassal, is a social creature who feels her exile profoundly. However, this is not the only attitude to take toward life in the forest. The eagerness shown by Cador's kinswoman, the widow who attends Eufemie as a midwife and then raises Silence in the woods, embraces the possibilities of being a *femme solée* away from court and its patriarchal culture (2155–74).

things, is the one giggling when it is all over. Merlin's hilarity, the marriage of King Ebain to Silence, and the king's reversal of his edict that no woman can inherit land, close *Silence* on a comic note. Comedy restores all its energetic disruptions to the original status quo. Nothing seems to change in this comic mode; its reparations seem to smooth over the story's ideological challenges and innovations. Merlin, the supporter and guarantor of the masculine values of society, performs this comic labor; his ability to see into the future often leads affairs to mirror the way they were in the past.

Exposed to the gawking eyes of crowds, Merlin labors as well as laughs. He is a cook preparing a special dish: "Il tienant or Merlin por sot, / Mais il decoverra le pot, / Si fera telis i a maris (6185–87) [They took Merlin now to be a fool / But he would uncover the pot, / And make many of them there uncomfortable]. Even while reduced to a fool and a prisoner, Merlin cooks up his revenge, uncovering the kettle and stirring the brew so that its contents do not boil over prematurely. He masks the fruits of his efforts until the perfect moment, when King Ebain calls out for the dinner of his comeuppance—the revelation that Silence is a biological woman.

Throughout the *Roman de Silence,* the labor of cooking does not merely alter the flavor of a foodstuff: the spice reveals its inner nature only to counteract or alter it. Cookery is a practice of revelation, exposing the truth behind appearances. Nature's bakeshop concocts Silence's composite and confused identity, a product of *vallans* flour (that is, aristocratic and masculine matter) in the form of femininity. In trapping Merlin, Silence lays bare the strong roots of his humanity, concealed but not negated by his bestial practice and animal diet. She exposes herself as well: for both, cooking is apocalyptic in the root sense of the word (from the Greek: *àpo* + *kalyptein* = to disclose, uncover). The dish reveals the eater, uncovering truths that have lain hidden or unacknowledged.

While Silence's culinary act was restorative, feeding the human in Merlin so that it can reemerge and take its rightful place, Merlin's is emetic, forcing the truth out of those who have internalized their deception for so long:

> Merlins, ki siet desos le lanbre,
> Ki voit et set trestolte l'uevre,
> Destemparra ancui tel suevre,
> Ki sera tels i a moult sure
> Anchois que viegne nuis obscure.
> (6408–12)

Merlin, who sat beneath the carved paneling,
Who sees and knows the entire work,
Was mis-tempering that very day so spicy a sauce
That would make many bitter bellies
Before the dark night fell.

This is the only place in the poem that the *(o)uevre* (work) does not rhyme with some form of *cuevre* (to cover). *Uevre* is most often used to describe Silence herself—not only the secret of her gender but also the efforts by which she has concealed it. This work, which has been covered, uncovered, and recovered, finally reaches a stage where it must be laid bare. The baked body of Silence is ready to be consumed by masculine society. What better way to serve it than accompanied by the *suevre* that Merlin concocts, the spicy sauce of prophetic revelation?

The verb *destemper* (or *destremper*), as Terence Scully notes, is used to signify the process by which dry ingredients such as spices were mixed with liquids in order to create a humorally balanced mixture that could be added to a dish or used to form the base of a sauce.[71] Medieval cooks had to be quite careful of the balance of these blends, ensuring that their cooking did not make their patron ill by disturbing his complexion. The act of creating gastronomic equilibrium, then, is synonymous with cooking. Merlin, however, is not a chef that is interested in soothing anyone: he cooks to uncover the truth, and so Merlin's dish is the romance equivalent of the angel's book in Revelations 10:10: "And it was in my mouth, sweet as honey: and when I had eaten it, my belly was bitter." His stew is a purgative medicine, meant to go down sweetly but burn inside the stomach, intended to purge Ebain's court of its complacent acceptance of corruption and deceit. Ebain, who has labored long to cover up Eufeme's schemes and maintain his honor, will no longer be allowed to look the other way. Merlin is the final chef in the sequence of *Silence*'s cooks; his meal is prophecy distempered and barely palatable, but vitally necessary to disgorge the deceptions that surround the English king.

Merlin's cathartic revelations seem to reset the romance, to replicate its opening circumstances. King Ebain is single again, just as he was at the start of the tale. He renounces his onerous prohibition of female inheritance (the rationale for Silence's cross-dressing in the first place) and makes peace with one of his land's most prominent families through a marriage with their daughter. But these apparent resolutions are impossible to digest without a bitter belly. Silence's extraordinary *aventures* as a man must come to a halt: she

71. Terence Scully, "Tempering Medieval Food," in *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays,* ed. Melitta Weiss Adamson, 6–7.

must step down while she's on top. And though she exemplifies the narrator's closing admonition for all women to be led by Noureture from their originary *malvaise* (6684–701), her gender laboring thwarts the ideological status quo and throws its binary logic into chaos. Class, gender, sexual identity, even the human/animal distinction has been threatened by her performance and the world has been revealed as an eminently queerable place. Yet this queering is also theorized as a means to resist political injustice and thrive in a poorly led kingdom. Category crisis has liberated its players in an unjust world—if only temporarily. This is too much for Heldris's conservative narrator to bear: he labors to tamp down these menacing exceptions to the dreary rule. The method for ending this carnivalesque reign of binary play is hegemonic, the king himself acts unilaterally to bring the world back into dyadic alignment. Confronted with the accusation that his most reliable retainer is a woman, and his wife has a male lover right under his nose, and to have these allegations bruited before his entire court, King Ebain does the only thing he can do. He works to displace his own burning shame onto someone else, ordering that the "nun" and Silence be stripped naked in front of everyone. They are punished by exposure for their transgressive behavior, all treacheries to gender being equal. The only verification he will accept—despite the fact that Merlin has been right about everything else—is the naked "proof" of biology. The story is boiled down at its conclusion to an imposition of the unadorned truth of Nature (a word that can mean "genitalia" in Old French). Despite its earlier philosophical exploration of a laboring goddess Nature and a gender that is just skin-deep, the narrator seems to deny his imaginative work, copping out to the established order of things. Yet his theory of bodies lingers: if gender is just molded onto a body, then how can Ebain ever know what Silence "really" is, even if he sees her genitals for himself. Isn't he just assuming he knows what they mean?

The final miniature in the manuscript illustrates the indeterminacy of this crude test of veracity: the king is shown facing an empty silhouette of a woman. The manuscript itself seems to deny resolution in a poignant coincidence or perhaps an intentional alteration: the paint that once represented the miniature woman's nakedness has either flaked away or been scraped off, leaving an empty outline to represent the truth of the transgressive heroine of the *Roman de Silence.* What is left is the account of labor, of performance, and in the end that is all a reader can trust in a world riven by category crises.

The possibility of category crossing, seemingly so common yet so menacing to traditionally androcentric, patriarchal forms of civilization, foregrounds ideas of the naturalness of human bodies thought to be inherently marked by both gender and class identities. Heldris de Cornuälle, if any such English

author actually existed, has exulted in his proto-postmodern attack on the prediscursivity of these bodies, refusing to accept the constraints of cisgender assumptions and recognizing, like Judith Butler does so famously, that performance is a powerful political force in society. The more obviously political romance of *Havelok the Dane,* explored in the next chapter, also probes a related question: in a world in which class identity was thought to be even more determining than gender, what happens when the sovereign must actually perform the role of the servile? *Havelok* approaches this delicate, disruptive question in a manner parallel to Heldris. That is, the anonymous author stages his intervention by means of food, revealing perhaps the most compelling example of the force of political appetites in the romantic imagination. *Havelok* demonstrates that social order is made legible through what its members can eat, founded upon and edified by culinary distinctions. It is not just a matter of kings having more to eat than the peasants: eating itself is an expression of political power. Sovereignty, as opposed to servility, is manifested through privileged consumption of human products, and is therefore dependent upon the labors of suffering, toiling humanity.