INTRODUCTION

SINCE THIS ROMANCE is only beginning to recover its voice after a silence of more than seven hundred years,[1] it seems appropriate to introduce the text and briefly summarize its contents before discussing its literary sources, linguistic play and ideological stance. The very existence of the manuscript containing *Silence*—a well-worn anthology that must have been the property of a professional entertainer—was unknown to the scholarly world until 1911, when it was discovered in the manor house of a British nobleman in a box marked "old papers—no value," together with letters from Henry VIII and other documents (Cowper 1959, 17). The poem itself, ignored after that except for Gelzer's brief treatments (1917, 1925, 1927), was edited for the first time by Lewis Thorpe in the 1960s and first published separately in 1972. This volume is now out of print. The language, Old French with many Picard features, is of the second half of the thirteenth century. The author, Heldris of Cornwall, is otherwise unknown.[2]

The plot, reduced to a minimum, is that Silence, daughter of Cador and Eufemie of Cornwall, is raised as a boy because Eban, king of England, will not allow women to inherit. When she reaches adolescence, Nature and Nurture appear as vituperative allegorical figures who torment her. Reason tells her to

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[1] In the face of the dearth of secondary literature on *Silence* in general and the almost total lack of rigorous literary analysis (but cf. Bloch 1983, 1986), the discussion that follows owes much to the feminist issue of *Yale French Studies* (1981), especially Felman's article, and to conversations with Maria-Eugenia Lacarra during the NEH Summer Seminar (1981). Thanks also to Kathryn Slott for her insightful linguistic comments. I should also mention that the main points of my linguistic analysis of the women's names as well as other key portions of this introduction (which is in part a heavily revised version of a paper I wrote in 1981 and presented on a number of public occasions) appear without my permission and without acknowledgment in the afterword to a Spanish version of *Silence* published in 1986—a translation based on, not simply in accord with, earlier drafts of this one, which began, at my invitation, as a collaborative effort.

[2] As Gelzer (1927, 99) has convincingly argued, "Master Heldris" seems to be a name picked from the pages of Geoffrey of Monmouth because of its connection with Cornwall: Cheldricus, a Saxon leader defeated and slain by Cador, duke of Cornwall (*History of the Kings of Britain* 9:1–5). Is this *Lokalpatriotismus* (as Gelzer suggests), the desire to please a patron (e.g., Richard of Cornwall)? Is the author, like the heroine, a transvestite she? Or does he just want to make us think so?

continue her life as a male. She runs away to learn the art of minstrelsy and then becomes a famous knight. Having repeatedly rejected the advances of Eban's highly sexed wife, Eufeme (who fakes a bloody rape attempt), Silence is sent on a supposedly hopeless quest: the capture of Merlin, who has prophesied that he can be taken only by a woman's trick. She succeeds, but is unmasked by Merlin, as is the queen and the queen's latest lover, disguised as a nun. Justice is done, women's right to inherit is restored, and Silence becomes queen of England through marriage with Eban.

Major Sources and Analogues

Thorpe took the story of the warrior maiden "Grisandole" in *L'Estoire Merlin* (Sommer 2:281–92) to be the "only real literary source" (14) for *Silence*, assuming more or less free invention for the rest, with details gleaned mainly from Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace (17, 32–34). Gelzer (1927) and Lecoy (1978) have stressed that "Grisandole" fails to provide the Potiphar's wife motif as a motive for the disguised maiden's quest for Merlin; they note that Lucy Paton (1907), in a study published before the discovery of *Silence* and apparently unknown to Thorpe, posited that both "Grisandole" and a group of later tales that include the satisfyingly ironic motif of the vengeful queen who insists on the quest that will undo her derived from a more complete earlier source. Gelzer, after a tabulated comparison of motifs, concluded that *Silence* must derive from something like Paton's X; Lecoy sees *Silence* as providing striking confirmation of Paton's hypothesis.

I would argue that "Grisandole," with its imperfections and prejudices, is as likely a source as any hypothetically more complete X for an author as spirited and original as Heldris to have used, greatly improved upon, and reacted against. But "Grisandole" (or X) is hardly the only major source. At least two other romances are important: the *Roman d'Eneas* and some version(s) of the "Seven Sages of Rome.[3] Alain de Lille is everywhere, as is the matter of Tristan. Saints' lives, other tales and ballads[4] of warrior maidens and women musicians also deserve mention. Here again, what is interesting is how Heldris reworked existing material for his/her own purpose: to refute the definition of woman as

[3] Whether the author could have known the *Roman de la Rose* of Jean de Meun is uncertain. We cannot date the manuscript of *Silence* with sufficient accuracy, let alone determine the actual date of Heldris's composition. But whether the fact that both Oiseuse and Eufeme are called *huissiere* indicates literary influence—to cite only one example—it is certainly important to note the coincidence and the negative implications the word has for women.

[4] For example, the very popular Spanish ballad "La doncella guerrera," certainly old (although not attested in the standard *cancioneros*), which survived into the twentieth century in more than a hundred versions (Menendez-Pidal 1939, 221; 1973, 71).

defective male and to challenge the allegedly "natural" foundations of the social order.

To begin with the *Roman d'Eneas*, it seems clear that the three female characters in *Silence* owe a good deal to Dido, Lavine, and Camille (Lasry 1985). Eufeme is far inferior to Dido, sharing her passion and scheming, but possessing none of her nobility and dignity—nor her pangs of guilt. Eufemie is far superior to Lavine, but equally emboldened by and subject to love. But most importantly, Camille, the warrior queen of Vulcane, serves as both model for and contrast to Silence:

> She was marvellously beautiful and of very great strength. There was no other woman of her wisdom. She was very wise, brave and courteous and possessed great wealth and ruled her land wonderfully well. She had been raised always amid warfare, so that she loved chivalry greatly and upheld it her whole life. She had no interest in women's work, neither spinning nor sewing, but preferred the bearing of arms, tourneying and jousting, striking with the sword and the lance: there was no other woman of her bravery. During the day she was king, but at night, queen. No chambermaid or handmaid went about her during the day, nor ever in the night did any man enter the chamber where she was. She governed herself so wisely, both early and late, that no one could detect any folly in her, either in deed or in appearance, or feel any envy toward her.
>
> (Yunck 1974, 3959–86)

Both Silence and Camille are noble, loyal and courageous warriors, but Camille is queen in her own right and feels no tension between womanhood and the practice of chivalry. Both are also beautiful blondes, described (as Dido, Lavine, Eufeme and Eufemie are not) according to the tradition of *effictio* (Lasry 1985). But again, the contrast is significant: while Camille's blonde beauty is depicted in a military context (just as the beauty of a male warrior might be described to heighten the pathos of his death), Heldris stresses Silence's tension by separating the description of her as lovely maiden, Nature's masterpiece, from the scene in which she is armed for battle. Similarly, Silence's internal conflict, expressed by Nature's admonitions and her own self-examination echoes the external verbal and ideological confrontation of Camille with a Trojan warrior in battle. He taunts her:

> Enough of this arrogance: put down the shield and lance and hauberk, which cuts into you too much, and stop exhibiting your prowess. That is not your calling; you must spin, sew, and clip. The place to do battle with a maiden like you is in a beautiful chamber, behind the bed-hangings. Did you come here to show off?
>
> (7081–89)

And he ends by offering to pay for her sexual services, even though, he says, a hundred Trojans couldn't satisfy her lust. Camille retorts—after killing him:

> I did not come her to show off or indulge in debauchery, but to practice chivalry. I want none of your deniers: you have made a very foolish bargain. I know better how to strike down a knight than to embrace him or make love to him; I do not know how to do battle on my back. (7117–25)

Silence reflects, after Reason has persuaded her to remain a man:

> I have a mouth too hard for kisses
> and arms too rough for embraces.
> One could easily make a fool of me
> in any game played under the covers.
> (2646–49)

Camille, who represents an ideal that Silence, through no fault of her own, achieves but is unable to sustain, dies a hero's death in battle. As Heldris makes painfully clear, Silence is not so fortunate: our *mulier fortis* must dwindle into a wife.

The third major vernacular literary source for *Silence*, the very popular story of "Dolopathos" ("he who suffers sorrow") or the "Seven Sages of Rome," offers a cluster of essential motifs: the question of inheritance, the vow of silence, the lustful queen, the accusation of rape, and the theme of nature and nurture. (The indecisiveness of the king, who shifts the responsibility for a judgment of life or death onto his advisers, is transferred to the French king in *Silence*.) In the best-told version, Herbert's *Dolopathos* (Brunet and Montaiglon 1856), the king sends his heir, Lucemien, to the great sage Virgil, who is head of an exclusive private school outside of Rome. The boy, favored by heredity and environment, learns the seven arts so well that his schoolmates are jealous and try to poison him (just as the minstrels plot to kill Silence). He reads in the stars that his mother is dead and his father has remarried. He swears to Virgil as an act of unquestioning obedience that he will not speak until he sees him again. Naturally, his silence destroys the *joie* of the court. There is much involved play with speech and silence; Dolopathos speaks as King David: "my harp is rent and broken." The queen tries everything to break the boy's silence, including seduction. One of her ladies gives evil counsel: Lucemien is her enemy because he is heir; she should stage a rape scene. The queen appears before the court all bloody and her dress torn to the waist. The prince's guilt seems obvious, and of course he does not speak to defend himself. No one wants to pronounce sentence, but the king insists justice must be done. Lucemien is stripped naked and about to be burned at the stake when a rider from afar appears—a distinguished old man, the first of the seven sages—to begin the process of storytelling that saves the hero's life. (Similarly, when Silence, disguised as a minstrel, is in danger of being executed by her father, a wise old man, Merlin in disguise, appears as rescuer.) The tales include warnings against too hasty judgment, incidents of rescue, and examples of the treachery of women. Finally Virgil appears (with a story as well) and Lucemien can speak. The queen is suitably punished: she and her damsels are burnt. Lucemien becomes a model ruler, a

philosopher king, and is finally converted to Christianity by a wandering preacher.

The "Seven Sages" undoubtedly goes back to a story of the education and temptation of an Eastern ascetic (Roloff 1973), however much the original spiritual purpose may be obscured in certain variants; it remains fundamentally misogynist in all its extant versions. Speech and sensuality are identified with woman; the final test on the path to virtue is the command or vow of silence. The stories told (in other versions the queen gets a chance to reply) are of the deceitful deeds of women. Attacks on women abound, from two-liners to full-blown tirades.[5] The queen and her ladies, described as a nest of serpents, are

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[5] One or two examples from Herbert's version – by no means the most virulent – will suffice to demonstrate the misogyny of the tradition:

Crois tu chose ke fame die?
Certes, tu fais trop grant follie.
C'onkes, par mon cors ne par m'arme,
N'oi parler de saige dame;
Mal savoir n'est pas ciance.
Mais je vos dis tot en fiance,
Et bien saichiez ke je di voir,
Que de mal puet fame savoir
Plus ke nule autre criature.
Teilz est ses sanz et sa nature.
Je sai aikes de lor covine.
(10,238–48)

(Do you believe anything a woman says?
Then you are truly stark, raving mad.
For never, upon my body and soul,
have I heard of a wise woman.
Knowledge of evil is not wisdom.
But I tell you this confidently,
and know well that I speak the truth,
that a woman can know more of evil
than any other creature alive.
That is her essence and her nature.
This I know about the way they are.)

Virgil's attack on the queen leaves no doubt that she stands for woman:

. . . . . .Folle criature,
Farsie de mal et d'ordure,
Plainne de grant forsenerie
Et d'outrage et de lecherie,
La plus desloial riens ki vive. . .
(10,252–56)

(Lascivious creature,
bloated with evil and corruption,
bursting with fury,
outrage and lechery,
the most disloyal thing
on the face of the earth.)

Neither walls nor towers nor war machines can prevail against her, in short,

N'est malx ke par feme ne vegne.
(10,292)

(There is no evil that does not come from women.)

hardly counterbalanced by the first good queen. And as the tale spreads in Europe, titles such as the thirteenth-century Spanish *Libro de los enganos y los asayamientos de las mugeres* ("Book of the Treachery and Cunning of Women") focus not on the wise men, but on the evil stepmother wanting to do in her stepson for the inheritance.

Heldris transforms both motif and message, chiefly, of course, by making the pure and silent hero a she. The question of inheritance becomes a case of sex discrimination: the king's unjust and irrational decision to punish women for the greed of men. The wise and just monarch becomes the shallow, scheming Eban, who rules by terror and distribution of political favors, disloyal to his wife and to his most faithful vassal and rescuer, Silence. Certain graphic details of the "rape" scene are followed closely, but the accusation takes place in private, and the king covers up the entire incident. Considering the boy's social status, Eban explains to Eufeme (4234–36), this is to everyone's advantage. After all, boys will be boys—what Silence did was due to the impetuous nature of youth (4237). A pity to spoil the lad's good record. Besides, it will look bad if word gets around that the king found him in the queen's chamber. To pacify her, he promises to have the boy killed abroad, but he is lying. Statements regarding nature and nurture, now applied to a woman disguised as a man, go beyond social convention to ask what is really natural. But this last point needs to be discussed separately.

The chaste female in male dress who does not reveal her sex recalls many popular accounts of holy virgins, saints and martyrs. The "lives" of saints Marina and Eugenia are particularly relevant: both are blameless, as opposed to the "reformed prostitute" type, and both are accused of crimes that, given their sex, they could not have committed.[6] Marina, whose father disguised her sex, is raised in his monastery as the monk Marinus and accused of fathering a child; her sex is discovered only after her death. Eugenia runs away to a monastery, becomes abbot, is accused of adultery, comes before the judge, who is her father, rends her garments to show she is a woman, converts her father and is eventually martyred. Saints Apollinaris, Euphrosyne, Pelagia, and Theodora are other examples of disguised females. And as Bloch (1987) suggests, the life of the male saint Alexis, son of Euphemian, may have influenced the names of characters as well as provided another example of disguise. Again, however, the contrast is striking: Silence's reward for her loyalty, purity and perseverance is an all-too-earthly crown.

[6] For this and related motifs, see Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index*, e.g., K 2113 (princess disguised as man accused of illicit relations with Queen); K 1837 (disguising of women in men's clothes); also K 310, 514, 1321, 1836.

As for the theme of girl as minstrel,[7] Thorpe suggested (1972, 33) that the idea came from Geoffrey of Monmouth (IX:1), where the Saxon leader Badulf, defeated by Cador, enters York dressed as a minstrel. This is certainly possible, since many other details seem to come from these few pages concerning Cador; yet the closest parallel is Nicolete, who dyes her face, disguises herself as male minstrel, and seeks passage on a ship. There is also Tharsia, daughter of Apollonius of Tyre (Tarsiana *la juglaresca* in the thirteenth-century Spanish version, the *Libro de Apolonio*), who saves her chastity by persuasive speech and by performing as a street musician, whose father thinks she is dead and with whom there is a moving scene of recognition. And when she tells her brothel-keeper, "studiis liberalibus erudita sum et in genere musicali possum modulari. Duc me in forum!" (Singer 1895, 93 [the *Gesta Romanorum* version]), she is, as it were, a combination of Euphemie and Silence. Like the people of Cornwall, all come running to hear the gifted musician (omnis populus cucurrit ad virginem videndam). The Spanish version includes a good deal of verbal play with the contrast of speech and silence. Yet Silence acts out of loyalty and devotion to family, not romantic love or the need to preserve her maidenly virtue. And she experiences intense inner conflict between her womanhood and her male upbringing.

Nature and Nurture

Nature appears frequently in Old French romance as creator of the most beautiful girl in the world (for example, Gelzer 1917, Malkiel 1977, Lasry 1985). As such, and so she first appears in *Silence*, she is clearly a trivialized version of the goddess Nature in Alain de Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, the *vicaria Dei*, *artifex* and arbiter of morals who wants to create the perfect human being. And when she appears to complain and nag Silence about the perversion of her work, she is an obvious parody of Alain's heroine in *De planctu Naturae*, who laments the unnatural behavior of humans and the degeneration of the world. Nature, as *procreatrix*, abhors the transvestite: misuse of the organs of generation threatens the survival of the species. "The association of sophistry and sodomy which lies at the core of Alain's thought" (Bloch 1987, 86) pervades Heldris's witty and sophisticated play with linguistic forms and sexual perversion.

[7] The article by Rokseth (1935), despite its title, is disappointing in general and does not mention Silence.

"Nature passe noreture" (and, rarely, the contrary) is a common Old French proverb (Gelzer 1917, 56; cf. Tobler-Lommatzsch 6,2:807–8, *norreture*); for example:

> Et par tant, ce dist l'escripture
> Nature passe nourreture.
> Voirs est, nourreture vilaine
> Souvent bonne nature amaine
> A ordure et a vilenie,
> Dont ele est destruite et hounie.
> Et si revoit on le contraire.[8]
>
> (And thus, as Scripture says,
> does nature surpass nurture.
> It is true that a bad upbringing
> often leads a good nature astray
> into vileness and base conduct,
> by which it is dishonored and destroyed.
> And one also sees the opposite.)

Herbert says of Lucemien (*Dolopathos* 1367–78):

> Moult fu de bone norreture
> Et de bon sens fu par nature;
> Par lui se semont et esmuet
> Li biens qui de nature muet;
> Li hons puet a peine endurer
> Qu'on li puist desnaturer;
> Nature sormonte et trespasse
> Tout ce ke norreture amasse,
> Et quant la bonne norreture
> S'aconpaigne a bone nature
> Dont est bone la conpaignie;
> Li uns biens fet a l'autre aie.
>
> (He had a very good upbringing
> and was intelligent and prudent by nature;
> environment arouses and stimulates
> natural endowments;
> the human being can scarcely

[8] Tobler-Lommatzsch 6,2:808 cites A. Scheler, ed. *Dits et contes de Baudoin de Conde et de son fils Jean de Conde*, Brussels 1836, 2:264,83.

be dis-natured;
nature overcomes and surmounts
everything that nurture can mass against it,
and when a good upbringing
is harmoniously combined
with good character,
one good reinforces the other.)

Another formulation, "Nature et noreture mainent grant tencon" (Gelzer 1917, 57), is lively personification bordering on more. It seems to have been Heldris's original idea to allegorize this tension into a lively debate. But beyond that, the author is asking a much more profound and difficult question than which counts more, heredity or environment: what is "natural" and what is acquired male or female behavior? With exquisite irony, Heldris has Nature employ deviant speech (sophistry) and argue precisely from a conventional view of what is natural in both her major and minor debate with Nurture, as well as in lesser textual skirmishes. In the major debate (2500–64), Nature tells Silence that sex determines one's social role: give up romping in the woods (it's bad for the complexion); go to a chamber and learn to sew. Nurture wins with the help of Reason, a personification of Silence's inner voice, who demonstrates that no one in their right mind would choose to live as a woman. Masculinity means freedom of movement, having a voice, being on top. Silence concludes, "I'm on top; why should I step down?" (2641). In the second debate (5996–6090), Nature argues that man is naturally carnivorous, and wins when Merlin abandons nuts and roots for a large roast of prime rib. But if Nature is arguing in terms of acquired characteristics, that is, environmental determinism, Nurture's argument is perverse as well: she claims to be able to dis-nature people permanently, to change supposedly innate characteristics through remedial training. Each blames the other for Adam's fall (note that Eve's guilt is underplayed here). Nature triumphs by means of a theological argument: God created man entirely good; snake and apple were environmental factors. In contrast to their sophistry, a key authorial intrusion (2295–2342) argues that one's true nature is one's moral nature (the heart). Innate proclivity for evil can be only temporarily and superficially modified by Nurture for the good, but her capacity for harm is enormous. The harm done to a good nature by even a small amount of bad upbringing far outweighs the good that any amount of good upbringing can impose upon a bad nature. This lays the foundation for the provocative statements with which the author concludes the poem: women who do bad things are less culpable than men; given their circumstances, it is a wonder there are any good women at all. Woman's upbringing gives her no motivation to be good—indeed, she rarely has a chance to choose.

Euphemism and Silence

Whatever the constellation of female characters may owe to the *Eneas*, it is Heldris who wittily and tellingly makes them into figures of speech. And whatever the equation of grammatical and sexual deviation may owe to Alain de Lille, only Heldris raises such profound questions, predicated on the primary opposition of speech and silence, concerning women's voice and men's discourse, women's place in or absence from the social contract, whether verbal, economic or political—matters that the modern reader might reasonably expect to find expressed so explicitly and with such emphasis on linguistic play in French feminist criticism of the 1970s rather than in a medieval romance. To be sure, the question of women's speech and silence is a commonplace of medieval literature but mainly in misogynistic utterances, and the moral issues raised by Enide's silence in *Erec* are quite different (Roloff 1973, Ruberg 1978, McConeghy 1987).[9]

The women's names are examples of liminal language with a not-so-subliminal message.[10] Eufeme ("Alas! Woman!") represents the female as socially defined: the object of male lust and male barter, with no voice in determining her fate. Her body ends a war. Her name hardly conceals *feme*; she embodies all the negative stereotypes traditionally associated with her sex: she is lustful, scheming, disloyal, and vengeful; she speaks only to deceive. Eufemie ("use of good speech") is also defined by convention: as typical romance heroine, she sustains the linguistic and ideological code of courtly ideals. Despite the medieval equivalent of the best private schools, Ph.D. and M.D., she, too, is defined by desire. To be sure, hers is a reciprocated *grande passion* for an eminently suitable beloved, rather than the crude and undiscriminating sexuality of Eufeme. She makes good use of her powers of speech to communicate with Cador until the language of the body can take over. But if she is the initiator of dialogue before her marriage, she speaks only to acquiesce

[9] Briefly, Enide has failed to speak out of fear: her atonement consists in being forbidden to speak and having to find the courage to break silence when appropriate. A wife must demonstrate not blind obedience but sound judgment; she must act not out of fear, but love. Good marriage is a partnership. This is a laudable position (very much like Cador's in *Silence*), particularly in contrast to the wife-beating of Oringles. *Erec*'s stress on the need for integration of public and private spheres and also its essentially conservative if positive view of woman's place are typical of courtly romance.

[10] In contrast, the men's names, except for some obvious Arthurian associations, seem to yield no particular significance for this text. Cador is of course prominent in the Arthurian material; besides slaying the Saxon leader, he raises Guinevere at his court. Evan's name may have been inspired by that of King Evrain in *Erec et Enide*. I suggest that the names Renaut and Beghes are simply lifted from the *Quatre Fils Aymon*, where Renaut de Montauban defeats "Beges li Sarrazin" (note the reference to Aimon, lines 5892–94). Thorpe tried unsuccessfully to trace Silence's three French knights with convincingly realistic names. Gelzer (1927, 98) notes that the form 'Fortigierne' for Vortigern otherwise occurs only in the English *Arthour and Merlin*.

afterwards. Good speech, temporarily denied Cador by the torments of love, is now his characteristic, while the brilliant and articulate Eufemie is reduced to a silent spouse, subsumed under Cador's identity ("the countess, his wife"). Only one letter separates one euphemism from the other, "bad" *femme* from ideal *femme*; in fact, Eufeme is once called Eufemie for the sake of rhyme (5206), but also to indicate their interchangeability.

Euphemia/Euphemism gives birth to Silence, who transcends both real-life role and literary convention, whose naming and upbringing challenge the very foundations of the social order: by engaging in deviant naming, her parents subvert the cultural procedure that normally assures propriety and property: the naming by the father of the male with a name signifying male. She is a live metaphor that opens up revolutionary possibilities for the redefinition of male and female. As human metaphor, Silence experiences a semantic and personal clash within herself at puberty, the time in life when the human being becomes aware of sexuality and of the possibilities of metaphorical language—a double loss of innocence that precipitates the perverse debate between heredity and environment.

The narrator engages in highly complex play with the rhetorical possibilities and social implications of the "boy" named Silence, not the least of which is the consistent use of grammatical inconsistency: masculine pronouns to refer to a being we know to be female. The text itself thus interferes with the functioning of language as a code that upholds conventional distinctions, constantly challenges the legitimacy of social classification by gender. As linguistic counterpart to Silence's transvestism, this usage exposes a supposedly essential, natural distinction as one of social role-playing. Heldris's punning on *-us* and *us* usage (noted by Gelzer 1917, Bloch 1986) emphasizes that societal norms are masculine. The play with Silentius/Silentia demonstrates that woman cannot be seen as a minus of man: the root is the same, the endings are grammatically (if not socially) equi-valent. This indicates an unsettling proximity, the possiblity of a unity so fundamental that the metaphor will collapse. When male and female are reduced to an arbitrary gender distinction marked by minute grammatical suffixes, what does a minute difference in the genitalia signify? The narrator plays with these questions most explicitly in lines 2476–79:

> Il a us d'ome tant use,
> Et cel de feme refuse,
> Que poi en falt que il n'est malles.
> Quanque on en voit est trestot malles.
>
> (He was so used to men's usage
> and had so rejected women's ways
> that little was lacking for him to be a man.
> Whatever one could see was certainly male!)

By revealing that relations between the sexes are based on masking, the author has undercut the surface contrast between Silence and Eufeme as heroine and villainess before their ultimate confrontation. The king's praise of Silence as a "good woman" (6631–34) and his patriarchal admonition to Eufeme, "a woman should keep silent" (6398), are equally distasteful. If a good woman is hard to find, the reason lies in convention, not in the innate wickedness of the female sex—nurture, not nature.[11]

Merlin's Laughter

In reality, Silence has proved that a woman can hold her tongue; figuratively, she is speaking loudly: Silence as *sprechender Name* evokes the idea of woman. It evokes popular and clerical "wisdom" regarding women (they have no right to a public voice/the last thing they ever are is silent). Silence herself is a refutation of this tradition, a statement concerning women's very real silence: their exclusion from language and culture. She has unmasked the problem of women's silence in a man's world. The contrast between the opening up of revolutionary possibilities and the narrative closure (justice is done, evil queen and lover are executed, girl gets king), which sustains the conventions of romance, is deeply disturbing.

Weary of trifling with mortal fools, bored with his roles of friendly helper and buffoon, Merlin takes command of the story. Under the control of the great magician, supreme trickster and shapeshifter, the denouement takes the ironic form of tricheur/euse triché(e). Merlin, in *Silence* as elsewhere, "knows very well how the story will turn out" (6160). Here as elsewhere, he is, as Bloch has so incisively put it, the "spoiler of family fictions" (1983, 213). In one sense, Eufeme has the last laugh, as Silence states in her final interior monologue (6457–60):

> I thought I was tricking Merlin,
> but I tricked myself. I thought
> to abandon woman's ways forever,
> but Eufeme has ruined any chance of that.

Yet Merlin laughs more than anyone,[12] and he has the last laugh after all.

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[11] As Natalie Zemon Davis has noted, "defects of the males were [traditionally] thought to stem not so much from nature as from nurture," whereas "female disorderliness" went back to the Garden of Eden (1975, 124).

[12] The incidents of laughter on the way to court (peasant, leper, burial) are traditional; cf., e.g., Paton (1907), Gelzer (1927), Lecoy (1978).

At the close of his *Etymologies and Genealogies*, Bloch says that medieval romance

> serves as a virtual guidebook, a manual of instruction for the integration of the hidden self within the public sphere. The romance hero is precisely he who, having lived through a series of internal crises, either achieves—like Erec, Yvain, Cliges—a balance between personal desire and social necessity, or who—like Tristan—is excluded from society altogether. . .Medieval poetry served to found a vision of man that will for centuries to come inform his notion of of what he is and govern his rapport with others. (1983, 226)

But if this serves as a good working definition of standard romances, one must ask how it applies to *Silence*. The story of the woman called Silence offers no solution, despite the narrative resolution. We are left with Merlin's mocking laughter.

Note on the Text and Translation

The only extant copy of *Silence* is contained in folios 188 recto to 223 recto of what is now MS. Mi.LM.6 of the University of Nottingham. Because the manuscript has been thoroughly described by Thorpe in the introduction to his edition, I will briefly summarize here. Before it ended up forgotten in its box, the manuscript may have been copied for a noble lady, Beatrice de Gavre, on the occasion of her marriage to Guy IX de Laval, ca. 1286 (Cowper 1959, 6). It undoubtedly fell into the hands of the English during the Hundred Years' War, when town and castle were sacked in 1428. It ended up as the property of Lord Middleton at Wollaton Hall, where W. H. Stevenson discovered it. The text of *Silence* seems to be the work of a single, rather careless scribe. There are fourteen endearingly clumsy miniatures, eleven of which appear to be the work of one artist. The language, a mixture of francien and picard, includes several unusual vocabulary items.[13]

Lewis Thorpe must be congratulated for being the first to have undertaken and accomplished the challenging task of editing the unique manuscript of *Silence*. However, like most pioneer efforts, his work stands in need of considerable revision. It is particularly marred by faulty morpheme boundaries and an inadequate and frequently fanciful glossary. I have corrected Thorpe's printed

[13] Lecoy (1978) has listed most of them. Several are not in Godefroy or Tobler-Lommatzsch, e.g., *fural* 5946 "flint." In the same line, *esce*, "tinder," is not in Godefroy. Both are wrong in Thorpe, who glossed the first as "tinder" and failed to recognize the second. Markedly picard are, e.g., *agaise* 5889, *fordine* 790, *pire* 3332, *tercuel* 1822.

text on the basis of a careful comparison with the original manuscript, considered and adopted most of Lecoy's suggestions (1978), and in several cases made my own emendations. In certain instances, my examination of the manuscript itself, in good light and with a magnifying glass, yielded a different reading from that of Lecoy, who relied on a photocopy. I have also adopted several of the astute suggestions made by Prof. Iker-Gittleman of Vassar College, to whom I am very much indebted. Undoubtedly, many problems remain. If, after listing thirteen pages of corrections, Lecoy could say that "the text still offers a good number of difficulties likely to tax the reader's wits," I offer this assessment as a plea for leniency in my own case.

In rendering the text into modern English, I aimed at a reasonably literal version. Three stylistic peculiarities of Old French are particularly challenging: the frequent repetition with variation characteristic of poetry intended for oral recitation, and the syntactic independence and verbal sparseness of the brief poetic line. Because Old French lines generally stand on their own, with relatively rare and sometimes, to the modern reader, baffling use of subordinating conjunctions, the sequence of lines—and thoughts—within a given passage can be determined not so much by logic as by exigencies of rhyme, the use of repetition, or intellectual and aesthetic delight in deliberate interference with, or suspension or interlacing of, ideas. I have on occasion felt it necessary to take liberties with the sequence of phrase or line and to supply subordination. The individual Old French phrase is notoriously spare: this native elegance can sometimes fall flat or cause mystification if rendered literally; yet, on the other hand, expansion or qualification can destroy ambiguity. It is precisely for these reasons that I find a bilingual format so important.