ELLE AND *L*: SEXUALIZED TEXTUALITY IN *LE ROMAN DE SILENCE*

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Et cil respont: Tel n'oï onques!
Silencius! qui sui jo donques?
Silencius ai non, jo cui,
U jo sui altres que ne fui.
Mais cho sai jo bien, par ma destre,
Que jo ne puis pas altres estre!
Donc sui jo Scilentius,
Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus."

* * *

And this one responds: Such a thing I never heard!
Silencius [*Silence*]! Who am I then?
I have the name Silencius [*Silence*]
[*or*]
I do not have Silencius [*Silence*]
, I believe
Or I am other than I was.
But this I know well, by my right hand,
That I cannot be other!
Therefore I am Scilentius [*Silence*],
It seems to me, or I am nothing.
[*or*]
It seems to me, or I am nude.

Le Roman de Silence, 2532-2538 [1]

IF the above translation in open-ended, it is only so at the injunction of the miraculous and enigmatic text from which the passage was taken, *Le Roman de Silence.* At multiple intervals in this 7,000-line romance of the late thirteenth century, the reader is enjoined to participate in those intrigues of language which are of equal pertinence to the

[1] *Le Roman de Silence,* ed. L. Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd., 1972). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

philosophy of the French High Middle-Ages and to representational thought of our own time.

In the passage cited, Silence, who is the hero/heroine of the verse tale, is internally meandering, urged by the allegorical figure Nature to interrogate her way of being in the world, the propriety of her name, and the possibility of being other than she is. I say the "hero/heroine" of the verse tale because it is precisely that sexual indeterminacy which inflames the language of this fiction and which renders its writing so profoundly modern in the etymological sense of the word — "modern" being derived from the Latin *modernus,* "that which is always new." [2]

The story has it that Silence is born in England at a time when a prohibition was ruled against inheritance of wealth or position through the female line. Previous to her birth, Silence's parents, the Count Cador and Eufemie, are anxious to insure the transmission of their own wealth to their child, whatever the sex of the child may be. When a beautiful daughter is born to them, they have her baptized Silence or "Silentius" (the suffix *-us* denoting custom or tradition) and it is announced in Winchester that a boy has been born to the Count and his wife. Her parents entrust her to the care of a faithful seneschal and his wife, to be raised as a male child in the forest, far from the court and the more politically developed area of her birth. As Silence approaches adolescence, Cador explains to his son/daughter the reasons for her solitary and bewildering upbringing. The distress which this admission stirs in the child is supplemented by the chagrin which she experiences upon hearing the reprimand of Nature, who had given her the most beautiful feminine body imaginable and who is disgruntled that such a work of perfection be hidden behind the name, manner and garments of a male. It is at this point in the narrative that Silence initiates that dialogue within herself cited at the beginning of this essay.

This is one seminal moment among many in the romance, for even though soothed by the allegorical figure of Noreture (loosely translated, Nurture or Environment), who approves Silence's com-

[2] On the notion of modernity, see the remarks of R. Dragonetti in "L'Enjeu et l'événement: entretien avec Roger Dragonetti, Alexandre Leupin et Charles Méla," *L'Esprit Créateur* 22, I (1983), 7 *passim.*

pliance with paternal law, the child is perturbed at the prospect of being compromised should her sexuality be discovered, for she has no knowledge of feminine pursuits. She therefore quits her homeland for France with two itinerant minstrels in order to learn the arts of *joglerie,* and quickly attains an unsurpassed virtuosity in singing. There ensues a series of articulations in which Silence returns to Cornwall, is called to serve in Ebains' court, undergoes attempted seductions at the hands of King Ebains' wife, Eufeme, and is subsequently banished by Ebains to the high court of France. This expulsion is followed by an exchange between the two courts of forged and substituted letters, letters which initially prescribe, then reverse the decision of Silence's death. The omni-present and ever-absent hero/heroine remains in France as a knight until once more surmoned to England by Ebains to help quell the uprising of rebellious counts, a task which she undertakes with success. Yet Silence finds herself again at the mercy of the vagaries of Queen Eufeme who, seething at Silence's continued rejections, urges her husband to send the young knight on a penitential mission which the invidious Queen deems impossible — for no one but a female can capture Merlin. But capture Merlin Silence does, and upon their return to court the wizard sagely reveals not only the natural sexuality of his captivator, but also the sustained treachery of the Queen. [3] King Ebains, enraged, has Eufeme drawn and quartered, retracts his decree prohibiting inheritance through the cognatic line, and marries Silence — whereupon the romance itself opens onto silence.

If this summary is somewhat protracted, it is only because some explanation is needed of a text which is so widely neglected and yet so rich. For, as may be deduced from the bare bones of the story, rarely have the workings of poetic creation, of the sexuation of language, or of the possibilities of pure signification been problematized in such vivid verse. Silence is indeed the textual conjecture of perfec-

[3] Merlin's ability to extricate the known from the unknown is demonstrated far and wide in thirteenth-century romance; textual episodes illustrating his mysterious powers are found in: The Huth *Merlin,* ed. Gaston Paris and Jacob Ulrich, 2 vols. (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1886; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1965).

tion: the offshoot of a "conte" [4] and the origin of the "conte," the successful conjunction of erotic desire and heritable form, of creation and tradition, of absence and presence, of female and male textualities, of nature and culture — in sum, she is that hypothesis of truth, of ultimate articulation, to which the poet aspires.

In the following pages and across selected episodes of *Le Roman de Silence,* I shall trace certain internal textual coherences which are intended to demonstrate how modes of masculine and feminine representation function in the universe of this particular fiction. It is important to underscore that the masculine and feminine of which I speak are textual sexualities, meant to have neither a documentary nor purely mimetic implication. Rather, they are terms used to explicate the relation of the text's narrative discourse to a larger, more integral notion of language evoked by that same discourse. More specifically, the role of silence in speech shall be examined in relation to the ways female sexuality is conceived in the romance, for silence within this text is the most profound figure of poetic enterprise, an integral part of poetic production compared time and again to the absent, unheard and unseen female body. Silence as a linguistic phenomenon and as a textual figure is at once the representation of that object of desire which stimulates the poet's speech, and the subject — ineffable, unattainable, irreducible — of his verse.

With these observations in mind, the most challenging figure to consider is Silence herself. In the passage cited at the beginning of this essay, Silence is thrown into doubt by Nature, who had literally broken the mold when sculpting Silence's feminine form. Moreover, Nature's concoction is represented in the romance as the preparation of fine cake:

> Et quant la farine i a mise
> Dunt crible, u bulette, u tamise
> Et torne le flor d'une part
> Et le gros terchuel en depart,

[4] In numerous instances within this text, the term *conte,* designating "story" or "tale," is orthographically assimilated to the term *conte,* designating "count," a member of the text's royal hierarchy. See, for one example among many, the textual explanation of why inheritance through the female line has been cancelled under Ebains' rule, v. 305 ff.

Et fait adont un entreclos
Entre le fleur blance et le gros,
Si qu'o le fleur n'a nule palle,
Ne busce nule, ne escalle
Ne entre tolt l'autre monciel
De fleur vallant un botonciel
Et de la fleur fait ses gastials
Et del tercuel torte a porcials. (v. 1811)

* * *

And when she put the flour in
Then she filters, or sifts, or refines
And stirs the flour in one direction
And the coarse bran falls aside,
And then she makes a division
Between the white flour and the coarse,
So that in the flour there is no straw,
Nor fragment of straw, nor chaff
Nor in the entirety any other tiny piece
Of flour even as large as a small button,
And of the flour she makes her cake
And of the bran a tart for pigs.

The substance of Nature's creation is white and pure, refined to the point where difference is no longer discernible, for in the entirety of this substance there is no one piece capable of being distinguished from another. Moreover, never again will this matter be used in the working of human images, for Nature reserves it exclusively for her unique creation:

"Ainc mais nen endurai a prendre
Ceste matere, ne despendre:
La prendrai hoves ma mescine. (v. 1871)

* * *

Never shall I tolerate this matter
To be taken or used:
I shall take it for my maiden.

In a like manner, Nature is not content to select for Silence an established form from her abundant arsenal of modes; rather, she chooses a solitary form which she will never again employ (v. 1900).

Silence's feminine body is thus pure, white, unprecedented and beautiful, made of an undifferentiated and perfect substance; its metonym is flawless cake — cake which induces hunger and craving. As Nature herself comments:

> . . . "Jo m'en duel
> se riens i falt." (v. 1921)
>
> * * *
>
> "I suffer for it
> If anything is lacking."

And yet Silence's body is itself a text, for Nature has literally written its parts:

> Les oreilles li fait petites
> Nature, ki les a escrites
> (.....)
> La bouce escrist, fait l'overture
> Petite, et levres a mesure. (v. 1917)
>
> * * *
>
> The ears were made small by
> Nature, who wrote them
> (.....)
> She wrote the mouth, and made the opening
> Small, and lips to measure.

The ideal beauty: flawless, white, unique, made of a matter and form which are themselves so perfect that they are scarcely capable of articulation within the language of the romance — how best to represent such ontological integrity across writing, a form of representation which has its own force, graphics, laws and difference? The ultimate fashion, as Nature intimates ("Alcune fois doit paroir m'uevre," v. 1885), is not to represent it at all: the most extreme expression of that which is everything is a circumscription of absence or emptiness. [5] Silence's body is a sign of those inner white chasms

[5] According to J.-C. Milner, ". . . il est toujours possible de construire la figure, fut-elle vide, de ce qui n'a pas la propriété: soit un Autre, qui est la limite nécessaire au Tout." *Les Noms Indistincts* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), p. 105.

of language which the poet's erotic desire seeks to approach through speech.

And yet Silence's body is covered in the romance by boy's garb, for her hair is cut and she has breeches tied onto her (v. 2055). Even her name, *Scilenscius,* is a form of hiding or disguise: the suffix *-us,* appended to her name because it implies custom and tradition, is also the ending of a Latin nominative. Further, she is raised in a solitary castle, far from her natural mother and father, by a seneschal and his wife who assume the responsibilities for her education. She is remarkably skilled in letters (v. 2383) and displays almost preternatural abilities in field sports and chivalric games (v. 2494). Ostracized from the fictional society in which she was born, Silence displays unparalleled excellence in all those activities which are pertinent to it. Within the limits of this textual universe, she is literally without peer. Parenthetically, after Silence receives her name in the romance, the text endows her with all the linguistic attributes of masculinity: even her father, Cador, refers to Silence as "he" or "him." The sole exceptions to this practice are when Silence speaks to herself internally or when Nature and Noreture engage her in a dialogue.

What are the romance's pretexts for this dissembling parade? As usual with *Le Roman de Silence,* a scrutiny of the modalities of this question yields more than simple appearances may suggest. For the hero/heroine's masculine mask reflects not only the desire of her father for generational continuity, but also the desire of the poet for the unity of creation with tradition. In this verse *opus* it is the "conte qui parle." [6] Before Silence's birth, the political tranquility of King Ebains' domain has been upset by the grueling duel between two counts who fought to the end over the inheritance of twin sisters who were their wives. The King, sickened at the spectre of such waste, passes an edict outlawing the legacy of land or money through females. Because of special services which Cador and Eufemie have

[6] *Silence* is not the first romance of the French High Middle Ages to taunt the reader with the equivocal term "conte." Indeed, the phrase "Ci dist li contes" is so common in the narrative of the Arthurian Vulgate romances that it would be easy for the inattentive reader to dismiss it as a trope. See *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* ed. H. Oskar Sommer (Washington: The Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1909-1913), vols. I-VII.

performed for Ebains, they are exempted from this ruling and take over the holdings of Eufemie's father, the Count Renalt, when he dies. But the dispensation granted to the couple is not applicable to their female child. In Cador and Eufemie's example, the law was rearranged for the exception; in Silence's case, the exception is rearranged for the law — for in a movement coterminous with the effects of externalized language, Cador (called "le conte" in the text) masks nature and his child's sexuality in order to insure uninterrupted succession, the transmission of that which he has.

At this point, those incongruities which arise in Silence's perturbed dialogue cited at the opening of this essay may seem more comprehensible. For, much like the *silène,* that multi-colored jar which Rabelais uses in the Prologue to *Gargantua* as a metaphor for his own book,[7] her textual form is cast in terms of a polyvalent, pluralistic, catch-as-catch can exteriority which masks a total, mysterious and universal depth. She obeys paternal dictum, masters scholastic, athletic and cultural arts, and never betrays the gentility to which she is heir. Yet as she approaches adolescence, Nature and the language of her heart conspire to disrupt this ordered and well-supervised existence by urging her to think about a possible future where the political exclusion of females would no longer be the rule.

Se lens iés en chevalerie
Si te valra la joglerie.
Et s'il avient que li rois muire,
Es cambres t'en poras deduire.
Ta harpe et ta viële avras
En liu de cho que ne savras
Orfrois ne fresials manoier.
Si te porra mains anoier
Se tu ies en un bastonage
Ke tu aiés vials el en grange. (v. 2863)

* * *

If you were reluctant in chivalry
[*or* (phonetically)]
Silenced in chivalry

[7] Jefferson Humphries, "The Rabelaisian *Matrice,*" forthcoming (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University).

Playing and singing will serve you.
And if it comes to pass that the king dies,
You will be able to enjoy yourself with that in chamber.
You will have your harp and your viol
In place of not knowing
[*or* (graphically)]
Instead of echo for you will not know
How to work embroideries and ribbons.
And it might disturb you less
If you were in servitude
For you would have at least something else in mind.

Indeed, what the good Count Cador seems to have overlooked in his master plan for masculine continuity is a place for Eros, the erotic impulse suggesting futurity, something else, that which never was — that which induces the quest for new articulation, new speech, poetry.

Silence's heart is her own private Siren; she submits to its seduction by escaping from her isolated castle to join up with two minstrels bound for France, where she will learn the arts of singing and playing music. Once again, she becomes foremost in her art and finds in *joglerie* the perfect expression for the massive contradictions implied by her textual figure. The term *joglerie,* derived from the Latin *ioculari,* is alternately defined in the vernacular as "playing tricks," "joking" or "singing songs"; it is often assimilated in this and other writings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the term *jenglois,*[8] from the Latin *iactare,* designating in medieval French "idle or empty speech." In either case, playing tricks, joking and empty speech all have one thing in common — the use of signs or symbols to point to that which is not there, to indicate absence. An analogue may be

[8] At the onset of *Le Roman de Silence,* the poet, a self-named Heldris de Cornuälle (v. 1), praises Ebains' reign by acknowledging that the King's command was not mere empty talk ("Li siens conmans n'ert pas jenglois" v. 112). This remark is linked to the fact that the monarch's laws were strictly observed and that transgression of his rule was severely punished (cf. v. 113 ff.). His ability to sustain such political rigor is explicitly dependent in the text upon his munificent practices, for when his followers performed their duties to him well, "lor *dona* il tols jours assés" (v. 125, my emphasis). Once again, the vernacular of the period shows its multiform face: for "doner," meaning generally "to give or dispense, to exercise largess," implies also "to make love," as in Heldris's prologue where he bemoans the evils of his day (v. 43 ff.).

established with the usage of the terms "song" or "music" in the graphic representation of writing. Silence as a *jongleur* is the androgynous inscription of the poet, for she is at once a depiction of that perfect emptiness which poetic language approaches (the unseen female body, the unheard female voice), and a representation of the quest for that perfect emptiness, that absent femininity, through song and music. In *joglerie,* Silence represents the maximum: self-contained, self-generated, she is harmony and consonance, the perfect union of desire and the expression of desire — all that is impossible to be said.

Feminine sexuality in this particular romance is thus represented as unheard and unseen, as that which is missing and ineffable, but which is consistently implied. Feminine sexuality is represented as *being* an absence. Masculine sexuality, on the other hand, is represented as *having* an absence, a hunger, a craving of which linguistic signs — be they inscribed in the language of love, war, politics or poetry — are the symptom. Love and poetry are most successful when an attempt is made to unite the two representational orders, for neither mode exists without the other. The most stunning example of this observation is found in the scenes relating the awakening of love in Cador and Eufemie, Silence's parents, at the beginning of the text. Cador, at King Ebains' behest, has slain a menacing dragon, but has suffered physical harm in so doing. The King immediately sends one of the Queen's handmaidens, Eufemie, to Cador to nourish him back to health, which she does. But their prolonged frequentation has enamored the both of them, and Cador suffers anguish even deeper than the pain caused by the original wound: the effects of the wound on his body are replaced by the overwhelming effects of desire on his body, and he finds himself so tormented that he literally cannot speak. The same tension has grown in Eufemie (whose own name suggests linguistic "otherness") and she finally determines to speak:

> Vient en la cambre a son ami
> Dist li: "Amis, parlés, haymmi!"
> Dire li dut: "Parlés a moi,"
> Mais l'Amors li fist tel anoi
> Que dire dut: "Parlés a mi,"
> Se li a dit: "Parlés, haymmi"
> "Parlés a mi" dire li dut,

Mais "haymmi" sor le cuer li jut.
Si tost com ele ot dit "amis,"
En la clauze "haymmi!" a mis.
"Ami" dut dire, et "haymmi!" dist,
Por la dolor qui en li gist. (v. 881)

* * *

She comes into her friend's room.
She says to him: "*Amis,* speak, *haymmi!*"
She was supposed to say: "Speak *a moi,*"
But Love had so disturbed her
That she had to say: "Speak *a mi,*"
If she said to him "Speak, *haymmi*"
"Speak *a mi*" she was supposed to say,
But "*haymmi*" was lying on her heart.
As soon as she had said "*amis,*"
At the end of the line "*haymmi*" she put.
"*Ami*" she was supposed to say and "*haymmi*" she said,
Because of the pain which resided within her.

The explosive effects of desire upon Eufemie's speech have contorted her intended articulation almost past recognition. Indeed, the text tells us about the various dislocations which the terms *a moi* ("to me"), *a mi* ("to me" or "to the middle"), *amis* ("friend") and *haymmi* ("alas!") have undergone before being uttered as the reader sees them. But in the interplay between the terms *amis* and *haymmi,* Cador's doubt is loosened just enough to allow a venture at speech. In the space between the two terms, phonically similar yet graphically and linguistically so different, Cador speculates and eventually begins to speak specularly — for *amis* could be an indication of love and *haymmi!,* when placed after it, an intimation of the pain of love:

Se nule cose avés averse,
Ma vie doi mener enverse:
Plorer de vostre aversité,
Rire en vostre prospérité. (v. 929)

* * *

If you have nothing against it,
I must lead my life { upside down / in verse }
Cry in your adversity,
Laugh in your prosperity.

Cador's speech is here synonymous with poetic discourse in general, for he vows to enter into that specular relation (*enverse:* upside down) with Eufemie which is the relation of the poet to the white and feminine text, that relation which impels the poet to create *en verse* (in verse). Cador will literally emit the signs which Eufemie's body suggests to him. But what is singularly provocative in this series is the fact that the textual explanation of Eufemie's utterance — the analysis of her dislocated speech — and Cador's subsequent reflection on it (cf. v. 901 ff.) take little, if any, notice of the central term, "parlés." "Parlés," the request of the other for speech, has been rendered silent in the discourse of the textual commentary, yet it is to this silent request which both the "conte" and Count Cador submit.

The couple's talk leads to more talk, which in turn leads to kissing, and kissing does nothing but confirm a love so undeniable that they decide to ask the King for permission to marry. This permission implies a break with precedent, but it is a permission granted by the King in counsel with his court. The able kings, dukes and counts of the court are those who are *senés,* a term which in the thirteenth-century vernacular indicates "wise" or "knowledgeable" and which derives from the Latin *signum:* "a mark," "a sign," "a token," "an image," or even more provocatively, "an incision." The wise members of the royal hierarchy are therefore those who literally have signs, who are in possession of signs, and who, surprisingly enough, use them not to obey the letters of law and social form, but rather to question those same letters and to change them in the interest of a vital body politic. This body politic could be compared to the self-generational body poetic. The *contes* who are *senés,* who are in possession of signs, use their signs sparingly and moderately. Thus, when Cador and Eufemie's request necessitates a break with precedent, the Count of Chester, a count who is very *senés* (cf. v. 1433 ff.) is sent to impart the decision to Cador and Eufemie; he fulfills the task briefly, without making any noise ("Ainc n'en oïstes mains noiseus" v. 1400). And toward the end of the romance, when the King of France calls upon his counts for counsel in the affair of the treacherous letter, it is the Count of Clermont, he who is the most *senés* of the three, who recommends refusing the letter's demand. This recommendation constitutes in itself a break with the precedents of social form, for the King of France exists in a relation of fealty with Ebains. But as

the letter prescribes Silence's death, the Count of Clermont is reluctant: for he is *atemprés* (v. 4598), which is to say "moderate" or "gentle," but also "tuned," as with an instrument, "harmonized." And the wise counts of *Le Roman de Silence* are those who break with precedent in the interests of the continuity of poetry and life, rather than in the service of death. It is a movement integrated time and again in the poet's own narrative, for he consistently breaks his story, plunges into silence, and makes new attempts to poeticize. Thus, after the account of the Count Renalt's death (le *conte* Renalt) we read:

> Chi le lairons del mort ester
> Ni fait pas trop bon arester:
> Ki vis et o les vis se tiegne.
> Dieu, se lui plaist, des mors soviegne.
> Huimais orrés conte aviver,
> Sans noise faire et estriver (. . . .) (v. 1651).
>
> * * *
>
> Here we shall let it be about death
> It doesn't do much good to stop there:
> May the living keep himself with the living.
> May God, if it pleases him, remember the dead.
> From here on you will hear a *conte* enlivened,
> Without making noise or argument. [my italics]

A truly monumental project: to enliven a *conte* without making noise, to depart from a silence to go toward Silence (for it is the story of Silence's birth which the poet will relate) — and all of this, across language, across writing. But it is a project with its own inherent pitfalls, for if the production of poetry is the linguistic expression of the desire to approach that pure, perfect hollow of meaning, that absence or gap which admits all possibility, then it must be remembered that the poet's own medium has gaps of its own. Language, as both medieval and contemporary philosophy would tell us,[9] is a very

[9] For an enlightening introduction to medieval philosophers and to the impact of their thought upon subsequent theories of language, see M. L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: a Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968). For contemporary linguistic philosophy, see in particular J. Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967) and J. Lacan, "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse" in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 237-322.

fragmented affair, and the risks run in its poetic deployment are the dangers of excessive desire. In this romance, desire left too long confounded results in that kind of signifying movement which folds back upon itself, which seeks to supplement its own *lacunae,* and which tends in its own spiraling excesses to obliterate or even to kill its original object. Language in such cases, be it a discourse of war, law or covering for the body, becomes a network, an autonomous agent enforcing troubled recognition, even blindness in those who use it.

The most apparent textual demonstration of this is the example of Cador following Silence's escape with the *jongleurs.* The cataclysmic sense of loss which Cador and Eufemie first experience when they discover their child's disappearance (the absence of Silence) results in a prolonged inability to speak (v. 3015 ff.). When finally they recover their senses, they repeatedly beseech the seneschal, Silence's guardian, for information, but to no avail — for the seneschal knows nothing either of how she disappeared or of her whereabouts (v. 3106 ff.). The chagrin caused by her absence coupled with the desperation he senses at the seneschal's lack of knowledge implies Cador toward a false yet poetically curious reflection:

> Li cuens set que li jogleör
> Ont pris del mont le mireör (v. 3115).
>
> * * *
>
> The count knows that the jongleurs
> Took [the best / the mirror] from the world.

The *jongleurs* had nothing to do with Silence's escape, but the use of the term *mireör* indicating both "best" and "mirror," is rhetorically stunning: for Silence is truly best in the command of all social forms and hierarchies, yet she is also the mirror of poetic desire — that which is never fully known.

In any event, so deeply disturbed is the Count that he supplants the lack of Silence and the seneschal's lack of knowledge by a judgment, and issues a death warrant throughout his land on all *jongleurs.* The letter of the law thereby becomes the letter of death for that which he desires most — the return of Silence.

Even when Silence returns to court, Cador has been so long beleaguered by his own thwarted desire and by the fact that music has been banished from his land that he doesn't recognize his own child for hours (v. 3620 ff.). Significantly, it is only after Silence has revealed to him a small mark on her right shoulder, that is to say, a small uncovered section of her body familiar to the both of them, that he embraces her as his child. The result of Silence's return to Cador's court is a quasi-immediate resumption of the circulation of wealth and music (v. 3669 ff.).

Silence is everywhere in the romance the source and object of universal desire, and when that desire becomes too extreme, its effects are articulated in terms which suggest both social or political confusion and language overkill. Thus it is toward the end of the tale when the Count of Chester and three other counts, those same ones who at the beginning of the romance used their signs for the creation of political harmony, attempt to usurp Ebains' authority through revolt. Under siege, Ebains sends for Silence who has been dubbed a knight by the King of France. Silence arrives in the company of thirty other French knights and, magnificently armed in a faultless ("ne puet faire falle" v. 5341) coat of mail studded with brilliant gems, she enters into the thick of battle to uphold Ebains interests. The skirmish scene, in good medieval tradition, is chaotic: the warring parties do not recognize each other, the clash of swords and lances is thunderous, and the number of felled and dismembered bodies is countless. The Count of Chester has a deep loathing for Silence and the French troops without even being able to recognize them (cf. v. 5569 ff.). When finally the Count (*le conte*) and Silence engage in direct contact, the battle is so furious that Silence is nearly killed. Yet at the very moment when the count raises his lance to cut through Silence's helmet, her own sword turns into a song ("li brans torna en chant" v. 5616) and she is spared death. Revived in spirit by her singing blade, Silence proceeds to cut off the right arm of the *conte:*

> Del branc d'acier le conte fiert
> Si que del destre brac l'afole.
> Del puig perdu l'espee vole,
> Et li cuens chiet, pert sa valor (v. 5624).

* * *

With the gleaming blade she strikes the count
So that she deprives him of his right arm.
From the lost hand the sword flies,
And the count falls, loses his prowess.

Silence with her singing sword has literally cut off the right hand — I would suggest, the *writing* hand — of the *conte,* and has thereby deprived him of that member which insured his own continuity both in war and in the text. (It is at this point that the long verse segment dealing with the revolt ends, and abruptly so.) Thus, that *conte* who was so prudent, wise or *senés* at the beginning of the tale is now *senés* in another sense of the word. In one of those lexical plays so characteristic of the thirteenth century vernacular, *senés,* a word with one orthographic identity, indicates alternately "knowledgeable, wise, in possession of signs" *and* "castrated" (from the Latin *sanguis:* "blood"). If, as Lacan has suggested, the use of language is a symptom of the body's rapport to the castration complex, rarely is there to be found a more vivid illustration in medieval writing . . . .[10]

Yet in this fictional universe, it is not only the masculine textualities which are subject to the throes of insatiable desire. For Eufeme, King Ebains' wife, repeatedly thwarted in her attempt to obtain Silence's sexual attentions, is the source of another protracted verse network represented in an exchange of letters. The modalities of the text which she weaves suggest the perfidy of that metaphorical spider which the poet so deplores at the outset of his tale:

Ausi est d'auls com de l'aragne:
Et l'ordist tels, painne et labore
Et si se point ne voit on l'ore
Enmi sa toile qu'a ordi
Si font li pusnais esdordi
Et clerc et lai et conte et duc
S'enprendre, mois ne altre bus. (v. 268)

* * *

It is with them as with the spider
Who spins so long, struggles and strives
And places herself where one doesn't then see her

[10] *Écrits,* pp. 401-436 and 493-583.

In the thick of the web which she has woven,
And thus foolish little bugs
Clergy, laymen, dukes and counts [*contes*]
Are taken in, no less than any other fool.

In accordance with the other modes of feminine representation in *Le Roman de Silence,* Eufeme is presented as a lack or absence. But her represented absence is qualitatively different from Silence's; it is an absence enforced solely by the signs which Eufeme herself emits. First, while her husband the King is away in a wood, she invites Silence into her private chambers for a favor unknown to the young court squire. Once there, she assures their solitude by bolting the chamber doors, then proceeds to disrobe, revealing to Silence a flesh (*cars* v. 3793) as white as new-fallen snow, perfect, rounded and tender, marred by no wrinkle, mark or fold: the feminine body of romance, waiting to be inscribed. Silence, to be sure, refuses all blandishments on the pretext that to indulge in amorous activity with the Queen would be a disloyal act toward the King. But during a second seduction attempt the Queen becomes so desperate that she rends her own clothes, slashes at herself, strikes at her own nose until it bleeds, and tears her headpiece, all the while calling to Ebains for help. Eufeme literally inflicts upon herself, upon her own body, those signs of violent desire which she desires from another, and displaces the source of aggression by implicating Silence. At the bottom of Eufeme's story lies nothing.

Silence's dilemma here is the consummate dilemma of the romance. To denounce Eufeme to the King would be to sow the seeds of dissension in the established and royal order of things, an order which Silence, as has been shown, follows and sustains. On the other hand, to reveal her natural sexuality to the Queen would be tantamount to disinheritance, to personal exile from that very order which she upholds and wields so well (cf. v. 4165 ff.). Silence chooses to remain silent.

The Queen's vehement recriminations are increasingly spiteful; she recommends burning the youth or drawing and quartering him/her (v. 4231). But the Queen's discourse is constructed around an emptiness, and although she hopes to persuade those around her of Silence's malevolence by imputing sexual aggression where others cannot see it, it is precisely those fissures in her story which will

eventually turn around to incriminate her. The King refuses her violent demands for justice simply on the grounds that he cannot claim *flagrante delicto* (v. 4239). Hoping to appease Eufeme, the King agrees to send Silence away to France accompanied by a royal letter requesting asylum for the youth. And here is where the Queen, wanton in her hatred, sets up another and larger bottomless text: for when the court scribe brings his copy of the royal letter to give to Silence, Eufeme asks to inspect it. When no one is looking she withdraws the original letter and replaces it with her own. Once more, she has displaced the source of the letter, much as she displaced the source of her physical wounds in her account to Ebains of Silence's aggression. Moreover, in her own letter she has demanded Silence's death by decapitation — by literal dismemberment — for a crime so heinous it cannot be said (v. 4443). Fortunately, as we have already seen, the good counts of France will not murder without proof, and they return the letter to Winchester with their explanation. Ebains, livid at the reception of the counterfeit letter, ascribes its origin to the court scrivener and immediately imprisons him; the letter, called a *cartre* in the text (from the Latin *cartula*), is the reason that the scribe is put into the King's prison, also called a *cartre* (from the Latin *carcer*). The letter is thus assimilated to the empty and deadly enclosure of prison, and Eufeme, like the poet's spider, is nowhere to be seen in the web she has woven. [11]

In the final articulation of the romance, Eufeme is at last caught in her own textual chasm. In this segment her unyielding desire for Silence's death forces her into the ultimate scheme: the young squire will be sent to capture Merlin, and unless Silence returns triumphant from this mission, he/she will be killed. Of course Eufeme considers this ordeal impossible, and in so thinking she commits that error which will lead to her own destruction. The Queen believes in the extreme and exclusive power of signs, be they linguistic or other. Silence is a

[11] This series of scenes indeed recalls the critical furor occasioned by various readings of Poe's tale, "The Purloined Letter." See J. Lacan, "Le Séminaire sur 'La Lettre volée'" in *Écrits,* pp. 11-61; J. Derrida, "Le Facteur de la vérité," in *La Carte postale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), pp. 440-524; B. Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," in *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 110-146.

male because she is dressed as a male; her own plots, concocted around the displacement and removal of letters, will succeed because of the inherent force of those same forms and because of her ability to wield those forms in a movement invoking vacuum.

But Merlin, though susceptible to the desires for flesh (Silence captures him by setting up a lure of fresh meat or *car* v. 6115), is the thirteenth-century emblem of all knowledge; he has complete vision of the past, the present and the future, of the relation between the inside and the outside of the universe — Merlin is the consummate reader. His arrival in court is followed by an unfolding of letters and a disrobing of bodies. The Queen's treachery thus disclosed, she herself is drawn and quartered; and with the revelation of Silence's sexuality, the letters displaced are the letters of Silence's own name:

> Segnor, que vos diroie plus?
> Ains ot a non Scilensiüs:
> Ostés est -us, mis i est -a,
> Si est només Scilentia (v. 6665)
>
> * * *
>
> Lords, what more shall I say?
> Formerly she had the name *Scilensiüs*
> Removed is the *-us,* put in its place is *-a*
> And she is named *Scilentiä.*

Nature is appeased, for what the allegorical figure deems to be Silence's naturally proper name, along with her naturally proper sexuality, is now restored.

Yet this orthographic stroke is one more master stroke of the poet, for her name implies not only restoration of a certain propriety, but also the question central to the romance. Spelled *Scilentiä,* Silence's final denomination is the Latin *scientia* ("wisdom, knowledge, truth"), written around one important detail: the letter "l."

The implications of such onomastic liberty are concomitant with those of an established medieval practice wherein the process of poetry-making involves seeking the obscurities in ancient or traditional texts *(scientia)* and endeavoring to articulate them, to fill the gaps.

The desire which motivates this praxis is, as Dragonetti has written, [12] a desire for the letter — in our text, the letter "l." And if, as Dragonetti further posits, the desire for the letter is not to be distinguished from the desire for poetry, then poetry here is expressed as a heightened rhetorical mastery *(scientia)* employed to speak around and toward a pure and absent feminine body (the letter "l," or *elle*). Thus, rather than suggesting that at the end of *Le Roman de Silence* Silence is reduced to silence by the revelation of her natural sexuality and the restoration of her naturally proper name, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider that she is opened to silence. For her name simultaneously incorporates the impossibilities of a totalizing linguistic form (to speak of silence is to betray the very principle), and a graphic reinstatement of the most basic question of the romance: "l" *(elle),* the ineffable and unattainable feminine body, is placed within *scientia* in such a way as to suggest the enduring force of and quest for the absent female in the workings of poetics.

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[12] Dragonetti's insightful discussion of the Provençal romance *Flamenca* includes many remarks on silence pertinent to the present essay: *Le Gai savoir dans la rhétorique courtoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 111-130.