The significance of Silence

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Heldris de Cornouaille's *Roman de Silence* appears to engage deliberately with problems that interest modern theorists. First, it explores the possibility that gender is a cultural construct: it is the story of a girl brought up as a boy and the heroine is allowed to become a successful man before her sex is revealed. Secondly, linguistic play abounds in the text as if to highlight the indeterminacy of signifiers: witness the androgynous name of the heroine, Silence, which quite apart from the ambiguity it allows in relation to her gender, cannot be uttered without paradox since it derives its significance from its designation of an inability to signify. Thirdly, the text pivots on an eminently deconstructible opposition, for woven into the narrative are several debates between two allegorical figures who claim power over Silence: Nature, representing innate qualities, and Noreture (Nurture), representing education and upbringing. Finally, the use of Nature in this way is significant in the light of the theories of feminist anthropologists on the symbolic value of nature in sex/gender systems. My main interest is in the text's treatment of gender, but I will touch in the course of this article on all of these issues.[1]

The first part of this thirteenth-century romance is the story of Silence's parents, Cador and Eufemie, and contains the explanation of why Silence is brought up as a boy: girls have been prohibited from inheriting property by Ebain, King of England. During her childhood and adolescence Silence is the subject of several arguments between Nature and Noreture and is finally so confused that s/he runs away to become a minstrel. After various adventures s/he returns to her/his father's house, from whence s/he eventually proceeds to court (still masculine). Ebain's queen, Eufeme falls in love with Silence; rebuffed twice she accuses him/her of attempted rape and demands his/her execution. Ebain merely exiles Silence to France, where Eufeme tries, but fails, to have him/her killed. Silence returns from France an accomplished knight to help Ebain put down a rebellion. Eufeme again tries to seduce her/him and again accuses him/her of attempted rape. This time Silence's punishment is to try to capture Merlin, who has become a wild man, and who, unbeknown to Silence, can only be caught by a woman. S/he captures him by luring him with cooked food, but not before Nature and Noreture have argued over what he will do: if he reverts to his *nature* (that of a civilized man!) he will eat the food and be caught. At court he not only reveals Silence's sex, but also that of a transvestite nun, a man who is the queen's lover. He and Eufeme are executed and Ebain marries Silence.

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As will be clear even from this brief summary, the *Roman de Silence* explores the possibility that gender is a cultural construct before firmly reinstating the *status quo*, in other words it offers 'proof' that the role of women is determined by biology, not by upbringing: Silence cannot escape the fact that she is a woman.[2] But if the patriarchal aphorism that 'sex is destiny' is ultimately endorsed, Silence's success as a knight serves to articulate precisely what the poet ostensibly seeks to repress,[3] that is, that women may indeed have the ability to take on the cultural role of men, or, put more abstractly and in the text's own terms, that Noreture may in fact have a good deal of power to subvert Nature. The length of the narrative (over 6600 lines, of which over 4000 are devoted to Silence) suggests that Heldris is fascinated by what he is trying to censure and the very fact that he should feel the need to refute the idea that gender might be a cultural construct is curious, for the idea has no currency in the Middle Ages. Indeed it could be said to be a product of twentieth-century feminism.[4]

The emergence in a medieval text of an idea which appears anachronistic can perhaps be explained by what Fredric Jameson calls the political unconscious. He suggests that although literary texts tend to preserve only a single voice, that of the hegemonic class, they are necessarily dialogical; they 'cannot be assigned their relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterance scattered to the winds, or reappropriated by the hegemonic culture'.[5] Perhaps, despite the repressive *dénouement* of the *Roman de Silence*, one can hear distorted echoes of the voices of silenced and marginalized women.

Yet if this offers an attractive explanation of the source of Heldris's ideas, it does not explain why he wrote about them: the text goes to elaborate lengths to prove something that is apparently deemed irrefutable not just by its author, but by his entire culture. Why does the idea of gender as a construct surface here only to be quashed, when elsewhere it fails to surface at all? I shall argue that Heldris's text expresses fear of women disguised as misogyny, and that, ironically, this misogyny draws attention to the very anxiety he wishes to conceal.

As Heldris portrays the return to the order he wishes to endorse as the triumph of nature over nurture, the starting point for my investigation will be the opposition in the text between Nature and Noreture. This perennial opposition is inscribed in Old French culture in the form of a proverb: 'Mieuz vaut nature que nourreture'.[6] The sense is that innate qualities (*nature*) will always predominate despite education or upbringing (*nourreture*). The proverb is usually used to illustrate the point that 'breeding will

out': for example, it is the subject of an elaborate exposition in *Guillaume d'Angleterre*, a romance by one Chrétien, perhaps Chrétien de Troyes.[7] Separated from their parents, Guillaume's twin sons are adopted by merchants, but they have an instinctive sense of their nobility, because of their *nature* and in spite of their *noreture* (1341–8). Their *nature* has equipped the two boys with such innate worth that they are unscathed by their upbringing (1368–77). They recognize each other's qualities because of their *nature* (1416–20), whilst their adoptive fathers are moved by their *nature* to cruelty (1475–6, 1503–6). *Nature*, in this text, is used as a crude justification of social hierarchy: the rank or class into which one is born dictates one's position in the social hierarchy because of innate moral qualities associated with it.

There is a long tradition of Nature as an allegorical figure in medieval French and Latin texts, witness the *Roman de la Rose* and Alan of Lille's *De planctu naturae*, but there are substantial differences between Heldris's use of Nature as an allegorical figure and that of his predecessors or contemporaries.[8] The most notable of these is his placing of Nature in opposition to another figure called Noreture, which to my knowledge is unique in the vernacular, for the exploration of *nature* and *noreture* in *Guillaume d'Angleterre* stops short of allegory.[9] In his treatment of Nature, Heldris probably draws on the courtly tradition that beauty is due to the special attention of Nature,[10] but more particularly he seems to be inspired by the proverbial opposition between *nature* and *nourreture*, rather than texts like the *Rose* or the *De planctu*.

If the nature/nurture polarization in the *Roman de Silence* is an intentional play on the proverb 'mieuz vaut nature que nourreture', then the outcome of the conflict between the two is predetermined, for a proverb is not usually cited to undermine its contention. On the contrary, proverbs suggest that what is said is self-evident, giving the impression of an irrefutable consensus.[11] If Heldris is inviting his readers to interpret the text in the light of this proverb, he creates an expectation, from the very beginning of Silence's story, that Nature will triumph.

Nature herself echoes the proverb when she first realizes what Silence's parents and Noreture are doing:[12] 'Il ont en mon desdaing cho fait / Quanses que miols vait Noreture / Que face m'uevre! dist Nature' (2266–8) (they have done this in defiance of me, as if Nurture were better than my work, said Nature). Nature's reversal of the contention of the proverb suggests that those who work against her are doomed to failure, for how can a proverb be wrong? Any doubt about this is quashed at the end of this plaintive attack on Noreture, for the narrator intervenes to declare his own position:

Segnor, par Deu, Nature a droit!
Car nus hom tel pooir n'aroit
Qu'il peüst vaintre et engignier
Nature al loig, ne forlignier. (2295–8)

(My Lords, by God, Nature is right, for no man could have such power that he may vanquish, cheat or avoid Nature in the long run.)

After a lengthy excursus on Noreture's power to corrupt men whose *nature* is bad, the narrator asserts that Silence's education is successful not because of her *noreture*, but because of her *nature*, the innate goodness that comes from nobility, and he concludes 'Et por cho di jo que Nature / Signorist desor Noreture' (2423–4) (and for this reason I say that Nature is superior to Nurture). Heldris thus theorizes the opposition in relation to class as well as gender, ostensibly in order to justify Silence's success: if her feminine *nature* makes her weak, the 'natural' goodness of nobility helps her succeed. It is evident that one view of *nature* is overlaying another to show that the outcome of the nature/nurture conflict is predetermined from the moment it is introduced.

The predetermination of the nature/nurture conflict remains constant throughout the romance. For example, when Merlin smells the cooked food Silence has prepared for him, Noreture is aware that her plight is hopeless:

Ahi! fait Noreture. Ahi!
Com cil sont malement trahi
Ki noriscent la gent a faire
Cho que lor nature est contraire.
Quanque jo noris et labor
Me tolt Nature a un sol jor. (5997–6002)

(Alas, says Nurture. Alas! Those who nurture people to behave against their nature are wickedly betrayed. Nature takes away from me in a single day everything that I nurture and work at.)

Nature's victory over Noreture concerning Merlin (6088–99) makes her victory concerning Silence inevitable. Moreover, once nature has reasserted her authority over Merlin, he becomes the diviner of truth, *la verté fine* (6525 and 6535). This association between nature and truth is evident from the outset of Silence's tale. Her father covers her at her christening so that the priest does not realize she is a girl, or, as the text puts it, does not 'perceive her nature' (2090). To perceive *nature* is to perceive the truth; to 'cover' *nature* is to conceal truth. If *nature* is associated with truth, is there any likelihood of her losing the conflict?

Covering and clothing play a key role in the *Roman de Silence*, for it is largely because of her masculine attire that Silence is perceived as a man. For Howard Bloch, clothing is a metaphor for representation, illustrating the way in which language masks meaning and the indeterminacy of poetic language in general, which he views as a central preoccupation of the text (93–9). There is a good deal of linguistic play in the text, but I would suggest that this serves less to valorize ambivalence than to censure it and thereby to reinforce the predetermination of the conflict between nature and nurture. Furthermore, the ambivalence to which Heldris draws attention does not involve indeterminacy as such, but a choice between two clearly contrasting meanings which are not compatible.

For instance, Silence's name is the subject of linguistic play. In French it is not specifically gendered, for it occurs with masculine and feminine agreements, depending on the stage of the story.[13] In Latin, however, the language of learning, the name requires a masculine or feminine ending, and it is the Latin form of the name to which Cador gives careful consideration:

> Il iert només Scilenscius;
> Et s'il avient par aventure
> Al descovrir de sa nature
> Nos muerons cest -us en -a,
> S'avra a non Scilencia.
> Se nos li tolons dont cest -us
> Nos li donrons natural us,
> Car cis -us est contre nature,
> Mais l'altres seroit par nature. (2074–82)

(He will be called Scilenscius; and if by chance, it should happen that his nature is uncovered, we will change this *-us* into *-a*, and she will be called Scilencia. If we deprive her of this *-us*, we will give her natural customs (*us*), for this *-us* is contrary to nature, but the other would be in agreement with nature.)

As Michèle Perret suggests, the *-us* which ends the masculine form of Silence's name evokes the practices, the *us*, of Noreture, whilst the *-a* of the feminine form, evokes the third person singular of the verb *avoir* and thus designates what she really possesses, her *nature* (335). This play does not, however, highlight indeterminacy: it creates a rigid opposition between the masculine and feminine, and therefore between two opposed and mutually exclusive meanings, suggesting that misnaming is a serious crime against nature, consequently against the truth. If Heldris explores

the indeterminacy of poetic language here, he appears to do so unwittingly, for his declared aim is to criticize its misuse: he sees language as an important tool with which to define and control the world, if it is used appropriately. To break linguistic rules, in this case by using an inappropriately gendered signifier, is to use language misleadingly. This is a serious offence *contre nature*, against the true order of things, as Heldris sees it. He censures ambivalence, but paradoxically as he does so he affirms its existence by offering a demonstration of how it functions, and this parallels his impulse to talk about the idea of gender as a construct as he suppresses it. It is noteworthy, however, that he does not play at all on the truly indeterminate French form of Silence's name, only the Latin version, which must be either masculine or feminine. For Heldris, to call Silence Silencius, rather than Silencia, is not legitimate play, it is simply wrong. At the end of the romance this error is corrected: with a castrating gesture that prefigures the Freudian notion that a woman sees herself as a castrated man, Heldris deprives Silence of her *-us* (her masculine ending and her masculine pursuits) and her name is restored to its 'natural' form (6664–8).[14]

The most obvious area in which Heldris could have privileged linguistic indeterminacy is in the gendering of pronouns and adjectives. Yet, with one significant exception, Silence is designated by masculine pronouns and adjectives throughout the period she lives as a man, even by people who know she is really female. What is the effect of the one exception? In the second exchange between Nature and Noreture Silence is addressed as feminine. It is hardly surprising that Nature addresses Silence in the feminine (2510, 2512), but Noreture's use of feminine forms when talking of Silence to Nature is more striking: 'Lassciés ester ma noreçon, / Nature, a la maleÿçon. / Jo l'ai tolte desnaturee' (2593–5) (let my child be, accursed Nature. I have completely changed her nature). By talking of Silence in the feminine here (*ma noreçon*, *tolte desnaturee*), Noreture augers her own defeat long before the conflict reaches its climax.

With similar prescience, the narrator intimates that Silence's attempt to become a man is doomed to failure, since she lacks one vital ingredient of maleness:

> Il a us d'ome tant usé
> Et cel de feme refusé
> Que poi en falt que il n'est malles:
> Quanque on en voit est trestolt malles.
> El a en tine que ferine:[15]
> Il est desos les dras mescine. (2475–80)

(He has lived as a man and refused the ways of women so much that he is almost male. As far as one can see he is all male: yet he has something in his pants other than flour: under his clothes he is a girl.)

Because she lacks a penis (and thereby the phallus), Silence can never be a man. 'He' is really a girl. The masculine pronoun *il* and the feminine noun *mescine* are juxtaposed, but the intention is not to valorize indeterminacy, whatever the effect: on the contrary the point is once again that for Heldris signifiers must be appropriate to their referent. Heldris draws attention to this fact continually in the scenes where Eufeme attempts to seduce Silence by referring to her as *li vallés mescine* (the man-girl) or *li vallés qui est mescine* (3763, 3785 and so on). This epithet, which Bloch takes as a sign of 'the very undetermined nature of Silence' (89), occurs only rarely elsewhere in the romance, and could equally well be read as highly determined, meaning 'the boy who is really a girl', as if Heldris were particularly concerned to highlight the fact that Silence is really female when talking of the one act she cannot perform as a man: the sexual act. Moreover, it is this one 'deficiency' that triggers the events that lead to Silence's unmasking, as if her only failure as a man, not having a penis, sufficed to make all her successes meaningless.

Heldris clearly has an essentialist view of sexual difference. He deems socio-cultural roles ascribed to men and women to be 'natural', to stem from innate qualities. To deviate from 'natural' practices is perverted. Thus, Nature exhorts Silence to leave her masculine pursuits and to take up the occupation to which she was 'naturally' born: sewing (2527–9)! *Nature*, in the *Roman de Silence*, is used as it was in *Guillaume d'Angleterre*, as a crude justification of hierarchy. Just as Guillaume's two lost sons have an innate sense of their nobility, so Silence has an innate sense of her femininity, lamenting 'Fu ainc mais feme si tanee / De vil barat, ne enganee?' (2583–4) (was any woman ever tormented by such vile dealings or so deceived?). Similarly, Silence recognizes her femininity by assuming the name Malduit 'badly instructed' when she runs away to become a *jongleur* (3175–9). The difference between *Guillaume d'Angleterre* and the *Roman de Silence* is that whereas both Chrétien and Heldris reinforce class hierarchies, only Heldris applies the idea of *nature* to gender.

Heldris's use of the nature/nurture opposition is at variance with the controversial modern paradigm that female is to male as nature is to culture,[16] for in the *Roman de Silence*, Nature is a force that governs both genders, rather than a property associated with women. But recent work on gender and the nature/culture opposition disputes the symmetry and

universality of the paradigm and stresses that like gender nature and culture are constructs, the symbolic value of which will vary, and that such binary oppositions may be fruitfully deconstructed.[17] The symbolic value of Nature in the *Roman de Silence* is its justification of the sex/gender system: appropriating the culturally constructed idea of Nature for his text, Heldris transforms it into a rhetorical device which he deploys to suggest that the sex/gender system he wishes to endorse is part of a 'natural' order. For the device to function successfully, Noreture must be marginalized and shown to be impotent, but the artificiality of the constructed opposition is evident as flaws in its underlying logic emerge. Words like *us* (customs) which are associated with Noreture become attached to Nature, and Nature is responsible for Silence's ability to learn 'unnatural' ways from Noreture.[18] If the different values ascribed to Nature and Noreture are on one level rigidly delineated, on another distinctions break down. This disintegration of distinctions between Nature and Noreture suggests that however much one term in the opposition is privileged, its placing in opposition to the other is a premonition of its possible subversion, if not its destruction.

There is never any doubt that Silence's attempt to become a man is doomed to failure, yet Noreture's power is portrayed as considerable and Silence manages to fool everyone except Merlin. She is successful enough in her training to beat men in battle, which Heldris specifically attributes to Noreture's ability to work against Nature:

> Kil veïst joster sans mantel
> Et l'escu porter en cantiel
> Et faire donques l'ademise,
> La lance sor le faltre mise,
> Dire peüst que Noreture
> Puet moult ovrer contre Nature,
> Quant ele aprent si et escole
> A tel us feme et tendre et mole. (5149–56)

(Whoever saw him jousting without a helmet and carrying his shield on his left arm and thus attacking with his lance rested, could say that Nurture can indeed work against Nature when she can teach and instruct a tender and weak woman in such pursuits.)

Heldris deliberately problematizes gender and posits a view of sexual difference that is culturally rather than biologically determined, only to conclude that the problem is not a problem.

As already suggested, Heldris's trip up this lengthy and tortuous blind alley is primarily due to his misogyny. At the end of the poem Heldris himself admits that he has spoken badly of women:

> Se j'ai jehi blasmee Eufeme
> Ne s'en doit irier bone feme.
> Se j'ai Eufeme moult blasmee
> Jo ai Silence plus loëe. (6695–8)

(If I have criticized Eufeme, a good woman should not be angry. If I have criticized Eufeme a good deal, I have praised Silence more.)

Eufeme is a counterpart to Silence, representing for her creator unbridled female sexuality. We witness her lying and cheating in order to seduce Silence or to have her killed; she accuses Silence of being homosexual when her advances are ignored, and finally, it is revealed that she has been an adulteress all along, the implication being that she deserves execution. Throughout the romance descriptions of her actions are punctuated by virulent misogynistic tirades, for example:

> Feme oze tres bien envaïr
> L'amor d'un home fierement.
> Ja nel laira por cri de gent.
> Mais s'amor nen est mie ferme,
> Ains est moult fole et moult enferme.
> De moult legier et ainme et het. (3906–11)

(A woman arrogantly dares to intrude upon the love of a man. She will not stop doing this no matter what people say. But her love is not true, rather it is very foolish and sick. She is very fickle both in love and in hatred.)

The portrayal of the character is in itself revealing of Heldris's attitude to women, but using her to generalize about women from the particular in this manner is a deeply misogynistic reflex.

Why, if Heldris is such a misogynist, does he praise Silence? The division of women by men into good and bad women is in itself misogynistic, for the standards set for being a good woman are usually impossibly high, and the woman who fails to meet them is instantly demoted. However, Heldris may have another purpose in praising Silence. His final praise of her is double-edged, for it involves a misogynistic commonplace. He explains that good women deserve praise more than bad women deserve criticism, for a woman's *nature* predisposes her towards being *malvaise*:[19]

Maistre Heldris dist chi endroit
C'on doit plus bone feme amer
Que haïr malvaise u blasmer.
Si mosterroie bien raison,
Car feme a menor oquoison
Por que ele ait le liu ne l'aise
De l'estre bone que malvaise.
S'ele ouevre bien contre nature,
Bien mosterroie par droiture
C'on en doit faire gregnor plait
Que de celi qui le mal fait. (6684–94)

(Master Heldris says here that one should love a good woman more than one hates or criticizes a bad one. I will show this to be true, for a woman has less occasion to have the opportunity to be good rather than bad. If she works against her nature, I will indeed show that by rights one should take more note of her than of the one who does evil.)

To be virtuous and praiseworthy a woman must struggle against her *nature*. But as the whole text has been directed towards proving that *nature* is invincible, women are left little hope of ever being good. They may aspire to virtue, but this involves a constant, yet hopeless battle *contre nature*.

I suggested earlier that misogyny can be a disguised form of fear,[20] and thus the extent to which a man feels threatened by women can be measured by the extent to which he resorts to misogyny. This is not to say that women are a real threat to the misogynist; it means that he displaces his own insecurities (feelings of inadequacy?) about himself (his masculinity?) on to a scapegoat. The psychological reflex that leads to misogyny is therefore repression. Since Silence's attempt to be a man is doomed to failure, and since in any case it is against women's *nature* to be good, Heldris is able to suggest that men have nothing to fear from women: the poet and his male protagonists recognize and punish the bad woman; and the good woman, Silence, poses no threat as she has no chance of ever appropriating masculine virtues: she may only aspire to them, as her *nature* would not allow her to become a man. As women are suppressed, so fear is repressed, and masculine insecurities are consequently protected from any threat, real or imaginary.

For Heldris, Silence's success cannot be attributed to the potential of women to assume the social and cultural roles of men. The ease with which Silence, whose nurse is her only teacher, masters the masculine pursuits that are an essential part of her education is specifically attributed to her *nature*, not in the sense of her gender, but rather her noble birth.

The child is quick to learn 'Car cho li fait bone nature. / Li enfes est de tel orine / Que il meïsmes se doctrine' (2384–6) (for his good nature makes him do this. The child is of such good stock that he teaches himself). Similarly, when Ebain refuses to believe that Silence has tried to rape Eufeme, it is Silence's noble birth that leads Ebain to suspect his wife of lying (4234–6). Heldris's praise of Silence reinforces class hierarchies rather than breaking down gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, Silence's triumph in battle is not seen in relation to the potential of women, but as a reflection on men, indicating that the clerk who uses a female character cross-dressed as a man could be said to show anxiety about masculinity, as much as femininity:

> Tels chevaliers par li i vierse
> Que se il le tenist envierse
> Et il peüst la fin savoir
> Que grant honte en peüst avoir
> Que feme tendre, fainte et malle,
> Ki rien n'a d'ome fors le halle,
> Et fors les dras et contenance,
> L'eüst abatu de sa lance. (5157–64)

(Such a knight is knocked down by him there that if he could have held him upside down and known the end of the story, he would have been very ashamed that a tender, weak and feeble woman, who is not a man at all in the dark, and without the clothes and the countenance, had knocked him down with his lance.)

Silence's motivation has nothing to do with the promotion of her sex, or the desire to prove that women are as good as men. On the contrary, she knows that men are better than women: 'Et voit que miols vait li us d'ome / Que l'us de feme, c'est la some' (2637–8) (and she sees that the ways of men are better than the ways of women, and that's all there is to it). This is one of the reasons why Silence is persuaded to live as a man, but the principal motive for her choice is that she does not wish to betray her father: 'ne voel mon pere desmentir' (2653). In obeying her father, she demonstrates exceptional loyalty, and it is her loyalty that Ebain praises when he classifies her as a 'good woman' at the end of the romance and rewards her by restoring the right of inheritance to women (6629–50). But the implication of Ebain's speech is that loyalty in women is rare and he cites a misogynistic proverb to this effect: 'Il n'est si preciose gemme, / Ne tels tresors com bone feme' (6633–4) (there is no more precious gem or treasure than a good woman). The very rarity of Silence's qualities in a

woman, coupled with the fact that her attempt to be male can never succeed, indicates yet again that the poet is trying to demonstrate that women represent no threat to men.

The ultimate suppression of women in the *Roman de Silence* is that they are silenced. At the end of the romance Eufeme accuses Merlin of being overcritical of women: 'Merlin, dist la roïne Eufeme, / Com tu ses mesdire de feme!' (6371–2) (Merlin, says queen Eufeme, how you do slander women!). She appeals to her husband for support, only to be told that wise women do not speak: 'Sens de feme gist en taisir' (6398). This, in a romance in which the heroine is called Silence, is highly significant, prefiguring the way Silence silences herself at the end of the text: 'jo n'ai soig mais de taisir' (6627) (I only care to be silent). If women do not speak, they cannot threaten. Silence is a good woman because she is loyal and has dutifully assimilated male values, but also because she sacrifices her right of access to language. She herself suppresses any threat she might pose men and is consequently an ideal woman, a silent woman whose very name paradoxically suggests her removal from the symbolic order of language as it inscribes her in it: Silence.[21] As Cador says when choosing the name 'silensce tol*t* anse' (2069) (silence prevents anxiety).

Heldris, however, is unable to keep silent. His romance is an eloquent testimony to his inability to resist the desire to speak not just about his doubts, perhaps unconscious, concerning the 'natural' inferiority of women, but also his fears regarding the possible inadequacy of men. He is drawn to examine the subversive ideas he wishes to censure, just as he is drawn to subvert linguistic propriety whilst preaching its virtues. He desires what he fears and his solution to the dilemma this creates is characteristically masculine: suppress and repress. If, in his text, we can hear the traces of voices raised in opposition to this reflex, this is perhaps a measure of the force of these oppositional voices as well as of the extent of his anxiety.[22] The enforced silence of the women's voices whose existence I posited at the beginning of this article speaks volumes when heard against the deafening thud of Heldris's attempt to justify his sex.

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NOTES

This article is based on a paper written for a round table discussion which took place at the 1989 French Studies Conference in Swansea. That first draft was revised in the light of invaluable comments by Roberta Krueger.

1 Some of the problems I raise here have been addressed by others, though with different conclusions. R. Howard Bloch, 'Silence and Holes: the *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the *Trouvère*', *Yale French Studies*, 70 (1986), 81–99, Kate M. Cooper, 'Elle and *L*: Sexualized Textuality in the *Roman de Silence*', *Romance Notes*, 25 (1985), 341–60 and Peter L. Allen, 'The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing and *Le Roman de Silence*', in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, edited by Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1989), pp. 98–112 offer stimulating analyses of the text's linguistic play, but they read sexual difference as a metaphor for linguistic difference, thereby divesting the narrative of referential import and of any implications it might have for sexual politics. Kathleen J. Brahney, 'When *Silence* was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*', in *The Spirit of the Court*, edited by Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Cambridge, Boydell and Brewer, 1985), pp. 52–61 and Anita Benaim Lasry, 'The Ideal Heroine in Medieval Romances: a Quest for a Paradigm', *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, 32 (1985), 227–43 see the representation of women in *Silence* as positive. Heather Lloyd, 'The Triumph of Pragmatism: Reward and Punishment in *Le Roman de Silence*', in *Rewards and Punishments in the Arthurian Romances and Lyric Poetry of Mediaeval France*, edited by Peter V. Davies and Angus J. Kennedy (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1987), pp. 77–88, suggests the text is not concerned with gender, but is dominated by 'a workaday spirit of pragmatism and a strong sense of moral relativity'. Finally, Michèle Perret's thought-provoking study 'Travesties et transsexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine', *Romance Notes*, 25 (1985), 328–40, examines the text alongside three others in which women cross-dress, including the *Estoire de Merlin*, a possible source for the last part of *Silence*; but Silence is not just a *travestie*, as Perret suggests, she is brought up a man and undergoes a serious identity crisis (2527–38). Critical writing on *Le Roman de Silence* is necessarily recent, since it was virtually unknown before Lewis Thorpe published the text in a series of articles in *Nottingham Medieval Studies* in the 1960s. I shall quote from *Le Roman de Silence: a Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse-Romance by Heldris de Cornuälle*, edited by Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge, W. Heffer and Sons, 1972). The title *Le Roman de Silence* is Thorpe's invention; the text has no title in the manuscript, but Heldris refers to it in lines 1655–7 as a 'conte . . . de Cador, de s'engendreüre' (a tale . . . of Cador and of his offspring).

2 On this point see also Perret, p. 329.

3 See the comments of Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: la volonté de savoir* (Paris, Gallimard, 1976), pp. 20–1 on the *mise en discours* of the repressed in relation to sex. Foucault sees this not as effective prohibition, but as a means of strengthening control (52–62).

4 Simone de Beauvoir was the first to formulate the theory explicitly, see *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris, Gallimard, 1949), and most writing on the subject bears the mark of her influence. Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead,

'Accounting for Sexual Meaning', in *Sexual Meanings: the Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1–27, offer perhaps the best recent contribution to the debate.

5 *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London, Methuen, 1981), pp. 85–6.

6 On *nature* see A. Tobler and E. Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, 10 vols (Berlin/Wiesbaden, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung/Franz Steiner Verlag, 1925–), VI, 515–24 and on *nourreture*, 806–11; examples of the proverb are listed in column 808; see also *Proverbes français antérieurs au XV^e siècle*, edited by Joseph Morawski (Paris, Champion, 1925), §1328.

7 See *Chrétien de Troyes: Guillaume d'Angleterre*, edited by Maurice Wilmotte (Paris, Champion, 1962). For a further literary citation of the proverb see *Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun: Le Roman de la Rose*, edited by Daniel Poirion (Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1974), 14, 037–8.

8 Bloch, pp. 83–8, suggests close connections between Nature in *Silence* and Natura in the *De planctu*; he also believes Heldris may have drawn on the *Rose*. But apart from the absence of Nurture in the *De planctu* and the *Rose*, there are three important differences between this tradition and *Silence*: first, procreation, a major concern of Alan's Natura and Jean's Nature, is not an issue in *Silence*; secondly, the metaphors associated with nature in *Silence* are quite different from those associated with Natura and Nature in the *De planctu* and the *Rose*; finally, Alan and Jean are concerned with sexuality, rather than gender, which are connected, of course, but not the same thing. It is true, however, as Bloch argues, that Alan and Heldris share a preoccupation with language.

9 I am grateful to Sarah Kay for drawing my attention to a possible Latin precedent for this allegorical opposition. In the twelfth-century *Phillis and Flora*, Natura and Usus appear briefly as judges at the court of the God of Love, see *Les Débats du clerc et du chevalier*, edited by Charles Oulmont (Paris, Champion, 1911), pp. 107–21 for the text, and lines 305–8 particularly. But the significance of the names is not explored in this text, see Edmond Faral, *Recherches sur les sources latines des contes et romans courtois du moyen âge* (Paris, Champion, 1913), p. 225. The notion of *noreture* or *usus* is, of course, not uncommon in isolation.

10 Compare 1861–8 and *Chrétien de Troyes: Erec et Enide*, edited by Mario Roques (Paris, Champion, 1981), 411–32 and *Le Roman de Flamenca*, 2 vols, edited by Ulrich Gschwind (Bern, Francke, 1976), 1561–6.

11 The use of proverbs to create the impression of a consensus was widely recognized by rhetoricians, see for example the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, edited by H. Caplan (London, William Heinemann, 1954), IV, XVIII, 24–5.

12 Line 2267 reads 'Qu'anses . . .' in Thorpe's edition, but see Félix Lecoy, 'Le *Roman de Silence* d'Heldris de Cornualle', *Romania*, 99 (1978), 109–25 (p. 118).

13 In line 6698 the past participle *loëe* agrees with Silence.

14 There is also an echo of the notion that a woman is a castrated man in line 2047: Cador says that if Silence's sex is ever discovered 'cesti ferons desvaleter'. *Desvaleter*, which is apparently otherwise unattested, is derived from the word *valet* (a young man) and probably therefore means 'to unsex', but it must also give the sense 'to deprive of masculinity'. I am grateful to Roberta Krueger for this point.

15 Thorpe glosses line 2479 as 'He has something else in his personality other than purely masculine qualities' (p. 255), which misrepresents the text. *Tine* means 'basin', 'bucket', but in Marcabru's poetry, its Occitan cognate, *tina*, is a metaphor for the female sexual organs, see *Les Poésies complètes du troubadour Marcabru*, edited by Jean-Marie-Lucien Dejeanne (Toulouse, Privat, 1909), Poem xxxi, 63, hence my translation. The absence of flour in one's pants is, as Lecoy, p. 118, explains, because Heldris is drawing on a proverb; compare Morawski §627.

16 See Sherry B. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', *Feminist Studies* I (1972), 5–31.

17 See Carol P. MacCormack, 'Nature, Culture and Gender: a Critique', in *Nature, Culture and Gender*, edited by Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 1–24, particularly p. 8 on how the equations nature=female and male=culture lead to a metonymic *non-sequitur*; and Henrietta Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988), pp. 13–19.

18 See, for example, lines 2074–82, quoted on p. 206 and lines 2384–6 quoted on p. 212. Compare also lines 5996–6020, where Merlin's *nature* is shown to be that of a civilized man. The same disintegration of distinctions occurs in *Guillaume d'Angleterre*, 1368–77, where *nature* 'teaches and instructs'. See Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris, Seuil, 1972), pp. 145–6 on the disintegration of oppositions.

19 I have altered Thorpe's punctuation: he places a comma at the end of line 6690 and a full stop at the end of line 6691.

20 On misogyny as a symptom of fear see Katherine M. Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1968), pp. 265–72 ('The reason why'), and particularly pp. 274–76.

21 See also Allen, p. 105 on the meaning of Silence's name.

22 Roberta Krueger's study of the text in her forthcoming book on the female reader in Old French romance also looks at its engagement with women, but her focus is on the female reader and on female response. She argues that Heldris's unsolicited defence against the accusation of misogyny (6695–8, quoted p. 210), inscribes the problem of female response in the text; our two interpretations are mutually supportive and this article is indebted to her work.