WHEN *SILENCE* WAS GOLDEN: FEMALE PERSONAE IN THE *ROMAN DE SILENCE*

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One does not have to look far to find elements of antifeminism in medieval French literature. In almost any *genre* one discovers statements describing woman's fallen state, her imperfection, her untrustworthiness, deception and treachery. Even in the lyric, that most 'courtly' of *genres*, one hears outbursts such as that of Conon de Béthune who tells us that his lady, 'plus bele k'image,' (more beautiful than a statue), is, in reality, just like a wild wolf-bitch who attracts the worst of the pack to mate with her:

> K'ele fait tout aussi
> Com le louve sauvage
> Ki des lous d'un boscage
> Trait le poiour a li.[1]

Likewise, Thibaut de Champagne, the *roi-trouvère*, assures us in language less harsh that his lady violates the courtly code by loving a hundred or more ('. . . ma dame aime cent/ Et plus assez . . .'),[2] and that he must have been mistaken to have ever described her as the best in the world:

> Chançon ferai, que talenz m'en est pris,
> De la meilleur qui soit en tout le mont.
> De la meilleur? Je cuit que j'ai mespris.
> S'ele fust teus . . .
> De moi li fust aucune pitië prise.[3]

Similar examples drawn from the romance are almost too numerous to mention. As Professor Joan Ferrante has demonstrated, there is, in fact, a rise in the misogynistic treatment of women in literature as one moves from the twelfth to the thirteenth century. What is surprising, then, is to discover in the latter part of the 'rigid, repressive, and even hysterical'[4] thirteenth century, a romance in which the central

[1] F. Goldin, *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères* (N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1973), p. 342, vv. 21–4.
[2] A. Wallensköld, *Les Chansons de Thibaut de Champagne* (Paris: Champion, 1925), Chanson 4, 11. 17–8.
[3] Ibid., Chanson 23, 11. 1–5.
[4] Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature* (New York—London: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 11.

figure is a woman who, having been raised since infancy as if she were male, surpasses her male counterparts in all respects.

The romance in question is *Le Roman de Silence*, written in the third quarter of the thirteenth century by Heldris de Cornuälle.[5] The romance has received relatively little attention from critics since its publication in 1972. A thorough analysis of the text is merited both for the romance's comments upon the nature and capacities of woman and for its assumptions concerning the proper place of woman in society. Since its content is not well known, a brief summary of the *roman* is perhaps in order:

> In the kingdom of Ebain, king of all England from Winchester to Durham, a daughter is born to Count Cador and his wife, Eufemie. Because a bloody dispute over which of two twin heiresses should inherit land around Chester had earlier resulted in the deaths of two of Ebain's best supporters, Ebain has decreed that no woman should henceforth inherit wealth or position in England as long as he holds the throne. Knowing this, Cador and Eufemie have decided to raise their daughter as if she were a boy and place her in the care of a trusted seneschal who has a son of his own and an aunt of Cador's, a widow who has recently lost her own infant and who will serve as nurse to the girl. Cador and Eufemie name their daughter Silence or Silentius (m.) and she is raised in seclusion in the seneschal's house in the woods.
>
> As a child, Silence learns quickly and even teaches herself letters. She receives a good moral upbringing from the nurse and, under the seneschal's tutelage, becomes skilled in gymnastics, hunting, and the various chivalric arts. Exercise in the woods and fresh air complement her masculine disguise. She remains, nonetheless, Nature's most beautiful creature.
>
> As she approaches adolescence, Silence's father explains to her the reason and need for her disguise. Silence accepts her lot but, upon reaching puberty, is torn by Nature, who urges her to be a woman, and Nurture (Noreture), who dictates that she remain a man. Reason (Raison) prevails. Silence continues to live as a man.
>
> Adventures follow. Two jongleurs arrive in Cornwall. Silence, determined to learn their trade, runs off with them and subsequently surpasses them in talent, skill, and popularity. When the Duke of Burgundy prefers Silence's performance to that of the two jongleurs, they plot to kill her. Silence, however, confronts them, takes half their earnings, and remains in Burgundy alone.
>
> Silence eventually rejoins her parents in Cornwall, still perceived by the public as their son and heir. She is subsequently called to serve in King Ebain's court. Ebain's wife, Queen Eufeme (not to be confused with Silence's mother, Eufemie) falls in love with Silence and tries to seduce her during the king's absence. Silence resists, and like Potiphar's wife, the Queen tells Ebain that Silence had attempted to seduce her. Silence is exiled to the court of the King of France, is subsequently dubbed a knight, and becomes one of the leading knights in Christendom.
>
> Faced with internal strife within his kingdom, Ebain recalls Silence to his

[5] Lewis Thorpe, ed., *Le Roman de Silence. A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse Romance by Heldris de Cornuälle* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., 1972). All references are to this edition. Translations mine.

court, whereupon the sequence between Silence and Queen Eufeme is repeated. This time Eufeme convinces Ebain to send Silence into permanent exile by declaring that Silence cannot return to court until she finds Merlin, living as a wild man in the woods. True to tradition, Merlin has declared that only a woman will be able to capture him. Silence, of course, succeeds, and a series of revelations voiced by Merlin bring about the downfall of the evil queen and the establishment of Silence's true identity.

Silence explains the reason for her disguise to Ebain. The queen is executed, and Silence marries Ebain and becomes Queen of England.[6]

Questions which arise as one approaches the romance are: What was Heldris' intent in writing the romance? Was Heldris, as Benoîte Groult would put it, a '*féministe avant la lettre*?' In Heldris' view what could or should women aspire to? Are there fundamental differences between men and women, and can these differences mesh as a functioning whole within a society where masculine values prevail? Though such questions may never be fully answered by a single work of art, it is my view that the *Roman de Silence* does afford insights into the role of woman in medieval society. Its postulates concerning the capacities of woman are both innovative and surprising. They are, moreover, indicative of a positive, forceful portrait of womanhood which runs counter to the misogynistic tide of much of thirteenth-century French literature.

On our first point of inquiry, that of the intent of the romance, Heldris gives us little overt assistance. Unlike the prologues of numerous medieval writers who proclaim that their motivation to write stems from a desire to impart wisdom to successive generations or to lead one to truth through the telling of an entertaining tale,[7] Heldris uses his prologue to launch a diatribe against those who fail to compensate poets and entertainers for their services. Like Colin Muset with his '*boursse mal farsie*,[8] Heldris does not mince words. 'Miserly folk,' he states, 'are worse than manure. At least manure enriches the earth' ('Assés valt certes mains que fiens. / Li fiens encrassce vials la terre,' 48–9). Thus taking the stance of an outspoken critic of his times, Heldris turns to the *matière* of his story.[9]

What Heldris posits in the first narrative section of the poem, the section preceding the birth of Silence, is a traditional world where masculine values prevail and in which the relationships between men and women follow patterns previously established in epic and courtly tradition. Two male–female relationships inform this section of the romance—that of King Ebain and his wife, Eufeme, and that of Count Cador and Eufemie, future parents of Silence.

In both instances, the pattern of courtship defines the nature of the couple's relationship. In the case of Ebain and Eufeme, marriage is used to settle a long and

[6] A fuller summary is available in Thorpe's edition, pp. 17–22.

[7] On the various functions of the prologue or exordium in medieval literature see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (N.Y., Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 85–9. For prologues expressing the value of the transmission of wisdom see, among others, the *Roman de Thèbes*, Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, Marie de France's general Prologue to the *Lais*, and Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon*.

[8] Goldin, p. 426, Chanson 27, v. 9.

[9] Heldris ends his 102-line diatribe abruptly, stating, 'Dé or revenrai a mon conte/ De mon prologhe faire point,/ Car moult grans volentés me point/ De muevre rime et conmencier,/ Sans noise faire, sans tenchier.' Vv. 102–6.

bloody dispute between Ebain and Beghe, King of Norway. As a reward for the cessation of hostilities between her father, Beghe, and Ebain, Eufeme is nothing more than a chattel of war. Because of her social status she is deemed an appropriate match for Ebain but her fate is determined entirely by the emissaries of those in power. Eufeme herself has no voice in the decision-making. We are told that Ebain and Eufeme are wed three days after her arrival in England. Had she not been a little seasick, the nuptials might well have taken place immediately.

The mention of Eufeme's seasickness, though trivial, gives the audience at least a minute indication of Eufeme's humanity, a detail which otherwise would be overlooked amid the attention given to the fitness and legality of the exchange. As we will see later, Eufeme, 'el mont . . . [la] plus biele gemme (v. 166)', does not conform to the mold sketched out for her here, a mold whose binding substance is the maintenance of the honor of King Ebain.

The marriage of Ebain and Eufeme, with its emphasis upon Eufeme as the rightful booty of a warrior,[10] and its deemphasis of the love element, is reminiscent of epic tradition. This impression is strengthened by its juxtaposition to the subplot of the warring counts who fight one another to the death over the matter of which of the two has married the rightful heiress—a dispute which occurs immediately after the marriage feast of Ebain and Eufeme. Ebain's decree demonstrates that, in his mind, the question of inheritance for women is simply not worth the trouble:

> 'Ahi! ahi! fail il. Chaieles!
> Quel duel por .ii. orphenes pucieles!
> Que mes barons en ai perdus
> J'en sui certes moult esperdus;
> Mais, par le foi que doi Saint Pere,
> Ja feme n'iert mais iretere
> Ens el roiame d'Engletiere
> Por tant com j'aie a tenir tiere.
> Et c'en iert ore la venjance
> De ceste nostre mesestance.' (vv. 309–18)

The subsequent presentation of the relationship between Cador and Eufemie is, in contrast, eminently 'courtly' in nature. More importantly, however, their relationship introduces into the romance the notion of a new ordering of male-female roles, one in which man and woman share equally in status, human potential, and power.

Cador and Eufemie are brought together by love for one another, an affection which, though mutual, remains undisclosed for a time, causing each to be wrought by the pain, uncertainty, and sleeplessness traditionally associated with courtly love. The stage is set for the disclosure of their love and subsequent union when Cador is wounded by a dragon and can be cured only by Eufemie who is learned in the seven arts (404) and in the art of healing.[11] To each, King Ebain has promised the free choice of a spouse—to Cador for having slain the venomous dragon and to Eufemie for having

[10] In response to Beghe's offer, Ebain states, 'Or ai ge moult bien guerriié/ Et bien mon traval emploié/ Se jo a feme puis avoir' (vv. 179–81).

[11] The literary reference to the story of Tristan and Iseut is obvious.

cured Cador. In Eufemie's case, Ebain stresses that she may choose a husband of any social rank:

> 'Amie, ne vus esmaiés:
> Ja n'iert si haus que nel aiés,
> Soit cuens, u dus u castelains.'
> 'Ne vos ruis, sire, plus ne mains,'
> Cho li respondi la puchiele. (1243–7)

Their union, based upon free choice and mutual all-consuming love, brings forth overt discussion of the possibility of equality between woman and man. When Eufemie discovers she is pregnant, she and Cador, in the process of deciding to raise the baby—boy or girl—as a boy, define the nature of their relationship. The metaphor chosen to represent the couple is that of Adam and Eve, a seemingly curious choice given the usual typology of Eve as corrupter of mankind. Here, however, the Adam and Eve story is used to communicate a positive ideal—a couple who are one in substance and in will:

> 'Ma dolce amie, dist li cuens,
> Jhesus li pius, li vrais, le buens,
> Il fist Adan, cho est la voire,
> Et Evain de sa coste en oire . . .
> Qu'ensi fuscent d'une voellance;
> Com il sunt fait d'une voloir,
> A l'esjoïr, et al doloir.
> Entr'ome et feme a grant commune
> Car d'als .ii. est la sustance une.' (1701–3; 1707–12)

The image here is one of pre-lapsarian harmony with no indication of the standard exegetical differentiation between man, 'by nature . . . strong, virile, constant [and] reasonable,' and woman, 'inherently weak and prone to vice.'[12]

Heldris' use of the Adam and Eve story is, in fact, exceptional. In contrast to prevailing thirteenth-century currents of thought, his version echoes ideas expressed in the twelfth-century writings of Hugh of St. Victor. In his first essay on the Sacraments, Hugh states that

> 'the essence of marriage is the pure love of the mind, the mutual consent of loving spirits. Eve, he says, was formed from Adam's side to show that she was created for love, not as a mistress or handmaid; not from the head, to dominate, or from the feet, to be his slave; she was to be his companion, to be placed beside him for equality of association' (Sa. I, vi, 35).[13]

In Heldris' text, moreover, the unity between husband and wife, exemplified by the Adam-Eve model, is tied to the New Testament (1712 ff.) which is itself symbolic of a new order of equality signified by the redemption of all sinners.

Within the context of the romance, the fruit of this new order is the baby, Silence—

[12] Ferrante, p. 21.

[13] Ibid., p. 32. See also her discussion of the writings of the thirteenth-century mystic, Bonaventure, for a similar, but exceptional for the period, perspective on the sacrament of marriage, pp. 99–127.

or Silentius—, a being who will be given every opportunity to overcome her 'nature'. If Heldris is convinced, as were the bulk of his contemporaries, that woman was nothing more than a 'defective male', he gives little indication of such a point of view to his audience, saving such statements for the closing lines of the romance. What he does present is a creature who is endowed by Nature—personified—with all the best qualities.

In a long passage describing Nature at work (1795–1958), one is struck by a combination of masculine and feminine symbols. Nature herself is described as powerful ('qui moult grant force a,' 1805), but clearly a woman, since the predominant metaphor given for her work is not that of a forge, the masculine symbol used by Jean de Meun, but of breadmaking. She announces that she is going to make a work 'of great strength' ('Or voel faire ouvre forcible,' 1807) and proceeds in the manner normal to the fashioning of 'a valiant man whom she wishes to create in majesty' ('Quant faire violt un vallant home/ Que voelle ovrer par majestyre,' 1826–7). She thus uses all her finest materials and gives great attention to the physical perfection of the woman she wishes Silence to be. The portrait drawn by Nature accords with that of the standard medieval heroine [14] but for one flaw, the narrator tells us, she was too beautiful ('en li n'a niënt a blasmer/ Fors solement qu'ele est trop biele,' 1950–1).

Silence's beauty, of course, will be a source of difficulty for her, as when Queen Eufeme falls in love with her, but Nurture and those who raise her are quick to overcome this defect. The major question dominating the romance from the birth of Silence on is, which is stronger, nature or nurture?—heredity or environment? It is my view that the remainder of the romance constitutes an experiment yielding empirical data which demonstrate that, were she freed from the constraints of society, woman's capacity for development would be unlimited. In the final analysis, however, Nature and society align to place Silence or 'woman' in what is deemed a proper but—from a feminist point of view—very limited role.

Silence's development takes place, then, within the dialectic of the nature/nurture debate. During the first developmental phase, Silence's childhood, conclusions about the ultimate victor of the debate are held in abeyance. Both Nature and Nurture are powerful forces. While Nature contends that nothing can exist for very long if it acts contrary to its nature, the narrator intervenes to tell us that a bit of bad nurturing is like bile—a small amount of it can contaminate an enormous quantity of honey:

> Prover le puis par cest affaire
> C'uns petis hanas plains de fiel
> Honiroit plus un mui de miel
> C'uns muis de miel n'amenderoit
> Un lot de fiel, ki li metroit. (2335–8)

Once Nature has created Silence, she is, in fact, powerless to intervene. She can only lament the fact that her beautiful creation, her 'daughter' (1927), is being turned into a man. Balanced against her lament we witness the wonderful accomplishments of which Silence is capable: she grows more in one year than an ordinary child would in three (2352–3); she learns letters as soon as she is able to understand (2367–8); she is

[14] Cf. A. M. Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature: An Example of the Stylistic Originality of Chrétien de Troyes* (Genève: Droz, 1965).

able to teach herself to read (2384–6); she masters gymnastics, jousting, hunting, and becomes more handsome, valiant, and worthy than all her peers. In fact, she makes them all tremble.

It is important to note that one of the most significant elements of this idyllic phase of Silence's existence is the atmosphere of praise which surrounds all her undertakings. 'L'enfant plus et plus se painne/ De faire bien, quant il le loent,' (2408–9) the narrator states. The end result is the complete transformation of Silence:

> '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:
> Il est desos les dras mescine.' (2475–80).

Having assumed the appearance and skills needed to make her way in the world, Silence is then ready to leave the seneschal's secluded retreat. To do so, however, she undergoes what might be termed an adolescent rite of passage during which she is forced to come to terms with her identity and choose which path she will follow in life. It is at this point that the nature/nurture debate becomes the most strident. Silence vacillates for a time between following her nature or living according to her upbringing as each personification poses its arguments. Ultimately, however, Nurture is the stronger for she has a powerful ally in the figure of Reason who urges Silence to choose a path which might seem difficult at first, but which will lead (literally) to a rich inheritance later. 'Choose abstinence,' she says, 'make your heart a fortress. . . . Don't think that the king will give you your fief. . . . if he perceives your nature' ('Croi mon consel, amis Silence,/ Et aiés en toi abstinence./ Fai de ton cuer une ferté. . . . Ne cuidiés pas li rois vos mete/ En l'onor, . . . S'il aperçoit vostre nature.' 2615–7; 2622–4).

Silence sees the light. She tells herself:

> 'Miols valt li us d'ome
> Que li us de feme, c'est la some.
> Voire, fait il, a la male eure
> Irai desos, quant sui deseur.
> De seur sui, s'irai desos . . .
> Or sui jo moult vallans et pros. (2637–42)
>
> Car vallés sui et niënt mescine.
> Ne voel perdre ma grant honor,
> Ne la voel cangier a menor . . . (2650–2)
>
> Por quanque puet faire Nature
> Ja n'en ferai descoverture. (2655–6)

In the adventures that follow there is a progression from simple confrontation between Silence and her adversaries—as in the *jongleur* episode—to situations which are more complex in that they reveal defects or weaknesses in the value system within which Silence must function. In each instance, Silence is victorious, that is, she escapes those

who seek to destroy her. Her actions, moreover, can be seen as noble in that they lead to a correction of injustice and the curbing of power that has exceeded its limits.

In the *jongleur* episode, for example, Silence is able to thwart the jealous minstrels' plot to kill her simply by refusing to be led into their trap. It appears noteworthy, too, that, although Silence is certainly well equipped to defend herself with physical force, she does not automatically opt for the *force de frappe* as one might expect a man to do. Her verbal confrontation is, in fact, more than effective in that not only does she avoid being killed, she walks off with half of her rivals' earnings. She subsequently returns to her father's court disguised as a minstrel although as a consequence of her earlier disappearance, Cador had banished all minstrels from his court under pain of death. Upon discovering Silence's identity, Cador repeals his decree and Silence, still perceived as a man by all others, enters the sphere of Ebain's court.

There the pattern outlined above recurs, but with an additional complication involving the honor of King Ebain. Silence can easily escape the trap set by Queen Eufeme simply by refusing to participate in the queen's attempted seduction. Unfortunately, however, once the rebuffed queen adopts the role of Potiphar's wife and tells the king that Silence tried to rape her, Ebain is faced with a dilemma. If he chooses to avenge his wife who, to his knowledge, has just been assaulted, he would, he fears, lose face. The wider public would think that Ebain had found his wife in bed with another man, and the king's honor would automatically be called into question. A further complication is that the service of the valiant Silence is worth a great deal to Ebain. He chooses, then, to treat the matter lightly, phrasing it in terms which have a familiar ring. 'He only did it because of his youth,' states Ebain. 'It was nothing; it is nothing; it adds up to nothing.' ('Cho qu'il a fait est par enfance,' 4237; 'Niens fu, niens est, a rien ne tagne,' 4247.) Rather than execute Silence, Ebain decides to cover up the matter by banishing her to the court of the King of France.

This first encounter between Silence and Ebain's court serves to reveal that the honor of King Ebain is but a brittle façade. Queen Eufeme, previously described as the world's most beautiful jewel, is shown to be lustful, deceitful, and thirsty for vengeance to soothe her injured pride. Ebain, for his part, is self-seeking and unwilling to avenge his wife's honor if it involves risking his own. Worse yet, from a twentieth-century feminist point of view, he subscribes to a boys-will-be-boys attitude that participates in and perpetuates the abuse of women.

The exile of Silence does not quite serve the ends intended by Eufeme and Ebain. Eufeme had hoped to destroy Silence once and for all by sending a false letter to the King of France asking for Silence's immediate execution. The deception is uncovered, however, causing Silence to be viewed as an innocent victim. As for Ebain, Silence's meteoric rise to fame as a knight in the King of France's court causes Ebain to recall her to his kingdom to quell troubles in the lands around Chester, thereby setting the earlier cycle of events in motion a second time.

During the final and climactic episodes, the rejected queen convinces Ebain to send Silence into permanent exile by setting a seemingly impossible task before her. Silence is to capture Merlin who has declared that only a woman will be able to find him. Silence, not knowing that she has a secret advantage, sets out, despondent, to find Merlin who is living as a wild man in the forest. Significantly, Silence's reentry into the isolation of the woods echoes her earlier experience in the seneschal's sylvan retreat. She is once again freed from the constraints of society, embarking upon activities which will shape her identity. This time, however, her efforts will lead to her

'undoing', in the sense that she will be stripped—literally and figuratively—of her identity as man and will once and for all assume a woman's role in society. It is at this point, too, that the nature/nurture debate resurfaces and that we have the first indication that Nature will be victorious.

The debate centers this time on the person of Merlin. After two years of wandering in the woods, Silence meets a white-haired hermit who tells her that if she tempts Merlin with a meal of salted meat, wine, and honey—food which Merlin would eat in his 'natural' state as a civilized man—she will be able to capture him. Merlin's wild state, which has accustomed him to eating roots and herbs rather than cooked meat, is seen to be his 'nurtured' existence. When Nurture hears of the plan, she knows she has lost:

> '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)

After further debate Nurture turns pale, steps aside, and relinquishes her place to triumphant Nature.

Silence's undoing is just as precipitous. Upon returning to Ebain's court with Merlin in tow, the wizard's revelations bring to an end, in a single day, Silence's entire nurtured life as a man. Within the context of the romance—setting twentieth-century feminist considerations aside for the moment—this divestiture is a positive turn of events, representing a restoration of order, balance, and justice. To the shock and amazement of all, Merlin reveals not only that Silence is a woman but that a nun accompanying Queen Eufeme is really a man, and that the Queen and the 'nun' are lovers. Both the nun and Silence are stripped of their garments to verify Merlin's claims and, in a quick fifty lines, the queen and the nun are executed, Nature intervenes to make of the tanned and hardened Scilent*ius* a soft, feminine Scilenti*a*, and she and Ebain are wed.

While we, from a twentieth-century feminist perspective, might regard this as a defeat for the person Silence has shown herself to be, in terms of the romance it is a victory. Silence has shown herself to be valiant, worthy, and honest and is rewarded with the highest status a woman could attain—she becomes a queen. Her triumph is also a gain for other women as well since, because of his admiration for Silence, Ebain restores to all women the right to inherit. What troubles feminists is to see Silence disappear into the role of queen, wed to a king who is clearly not, from our perspective, worthy of her. As Ebain himself says, 'Silence, . . . your loyalty is certainly worth more/ Than my royalty' ('Silence . . ./ Miols valt certes ta loialtés/ Que ne face ma roialtés,' 6630–2), and we cannot help but agree.

But what about Heldris? In his conclusion he states that the moral of the story is that one ought to love a good woman more than one ought to hate or blame a bad one, since women have less opportunity to be good rather than bad, even if they do work to overcome their nature. He states that he has only presented Eufeme as cause for blame so that one might esteem Silence all the more. His romance, he says, should serve not to upset good women but to encourage them to act well. 'With this,' he states, 'I end my tale.' And, with a wave of benediction to all, he proclaims a farewell.

I am still left with the question, 'What about Heldris? Who was he?' Lewis Thorpe, editor of the romance, points out that precious little is known about the author other than his name—the author identifies himself in the opening lines of the romance. I, however, like to fantasize that the little bearded man pictured at the outset of the original manuscript is really a woman in disguise, about to engage in her own fantasy—the tale of what a thirteenth-century heroine could do if she only had the encouragement and opportunity to do so.