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Robert L.A. Clark

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ROBERT L.A. CLARK

A queer reading allows us to see how the text's sodomitic moments not only serve to destabilize sex–gender categories but also point to a more general anxiety about the coherence of categories of race and class. Noble birth emerges as the only stable referent, the only work of Nature not undone by Nurture. (RLAC)

Although the *Roman de Silence* is a text which has had to bide its time, its time has clearly come. Now available in English, Spanish, and French translation, it is a hot item, the object of intense scholarly interest and—not inappropriately—critical desire. In this regard, Simon Gaunt's remark to the effect that *Silence* 'appears to engage deliberately with problems that interest modern theorists' (202) is especially apt. Given the ambiguities and the richness of this text, it is not surprising that it has elicited quite divergent interpretative strategies. In her introduction to the special issue of ARTHURIANA on *Le Roman de Silence*, Regina Psaki notes that the 'published criticism on the romance has tended to align itself with one of two poles: feminist and sociological' (3). I would propose another way of characterizing the poles towards which *Silence* criticism has gravitated. No fewer than eight analyses of the text appeared between 1985 and 1989 (Kathleen J. Brahney, Kate Mason Cooper, Anita Benaim Lasry, Michèle Perret, R. Howard Bloch, Heather Lloyd, Joan Ferrante, Peter Allen) in readings that very much bear the mark of that period's preoccupations: deconstruction and poststructuralist poetics, on the one hand, and feminism, on the other. Continuing the latter trend, *Silence* criticism of the 1990s has with few exceptions made gender issues its mainstay, with readings inspired by queer theory complementing the continued influence of feminism.[2] The focus on gender has, in addition to generating many insights, yielded sharply divergent conclusions among the critics. Thus Kathleen Brahney finds *Silence* 'indicative of a positive, forceful portrait of womanhood which runs counter to the misogynistic tide of much of thirteenth-century French literature' (54). At the other extreme, Simon Gaunt sees in the poet's moralizing condemnation of the evil queen

at the end of the poem a 'deeply misogynistic reflex' (210). For Gaunt, the ultimate expression of the poet's misogyny is the main character's gesture of self-silencing at the poem's conclusion when she is coopted into the patrilinear sex–gender system (213).[3] The poststructuralist critical strain postulates a linguistic play which elaborates a poetics of displacement and indeterminacy. In Howard Bloch's interpretation the referentiality of the text is primarily to its own writing (93), with sexual desire serving as the sign of the desire for language—a desire frustrated by 'the impossibility both of silence and of an always already dislocated speech' (99). Peter Allen sees the text's writing, with its ambiguity, emptiness, and gaps, as characterizing a Barthian *jouissance*, resistant to the critical violence of an univocal discourse. While maintaining that 'any attempt to relate *Le Roman de Silence* to the world outside its fiction is unlikely to succeed' (104), Allen nonetheless entertains the text's refusals as inviting multiple readings: feminist, Marxist or Freudian (109–10).

The idea of a text whose historical context we cannot recreate yet which might invite a Marxist interpretation is an intriguing and perhaps only apparently contradictory one. My goal here will be to suggest a few strategies for an ideological reading of *Silence* which seeks to respect its internal ambiguities and, in particular, the main character's queerness. Few medieval texts offer as sustained an interrogation of the process through which bodies are gendered—that is, how bodies become culturally intelligible—and certainly no other medieval text asks as anxiously and as urgently as *Silence* what it means to inhabit a queer body, a body caught in the tangle of sexually dissonant discourses. One of my main concerns in proposing a queer reading of *Silence* is to avoid the erasure which occurs in even the most divergent critical analyses, which tend to repeat in a different register the text's own closing gesture. For, as I have suggested, the criticism has tended to look on the main character as either a site/sign of indeterminacy, which in Bloch's reading occasions desire, which in turn 'produces the unnatural and heteroclitic language of poetry' (93); or as embodying 'a choice between two clearly contrasting meanings which are not compatible,' in Gaunt's view (206). What these two ways of reading have in common is their tendency—in Marjorie Garber's formulation—to look *through* and not *at* the transvestite (9), with the result that crossdressing in *Silence* is limited to its linguistic and poetic ramifications or, in more recent feminist interpretations, is read almost exclusively as entailing the suppression of Silence's 'true' (i.e., female) nature. I would like to examine briefly this aspect in some recent feminist criticism on *Silence*.[4]

Lorraine Stock's provocative 1997 article on *Silence* takes masculinity and feminine empowerment as its primary focus. Stock skillfully shows how the

poet undermines King Ebain's masculinity and authority at every turn, but regarding her second theme she reaches more guarded conclusions: 'I would like to think that the author of this extraordinary romance was as skeptical as I am of Silence's silent acceptance of the limitations of being a female in the Middle Ages, especially after experiencing another gendered life' (29). Although Stock offers a subtle and nuanced exploration of Silence's character, she attaches a negative valence to her crossdressing:

> With her mother's complicity, Silence is consigned to a life of deceit, gender-impersonation, and cross-dressing. While Silence eventually appropriates the physical strength usually gendered male, the price of that inevitability, as symbolized by her name, is suppression of *her natural female identity* (23, emphasis added)

The slippage from the 'natural' to 'identity' in this formulation is striking. For, while Heldris does indeed associate the 'natural' with biological sex (see below), the relation between sex and 'identity' is far from straightforward in his text, as Stock's own fine analysis makes clear. Nonetheless, it is difficult not to conclude that Stock, by reading Silence's 'identity' as naturally female and 'her' crossdressing as suppression of that identity, reinscribes a view of 'identity' in which biology is the indispensable if not absolutely determining factor.

In *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*, Roberta Krueger explicitly poses the problem of essentializing gender at the beginning of her discussion of *Silence*, asking: 'Is the attempt to read women's response to misogyny an "essentialist" strategy? Does a search for the "female reader" reimpose the male/female strategy division of phallogocentric culture?' (110). Her response is compelling in that it allows for the recognition of essentialism in the past as the first step toward resisting it in the present:

> Postmodern feminism emphasizes that our ideas about what is innate and natural about sex are inevitably embedded within a system of political representation. A focus on the problem of the female audience of courtly romance can reveal clearly this system's structure. (111)

Krueger reads *Le Roman de Silence* to determine whether the poem offers its (women) readers the possibility of resistance to what she sees as its overtly misogynistic message, concluding that, indeed, it does.[5] In her interpretation of the main character's crossdressing, Krueger allows that 'her success in adopting a man's role challenges the notion that gender is fixed and immutable' (126). But the price paid for this challenge to fixed ideas about gender is high. Krueger, like Stock, reads Silence as 'grounded as female' (120) and, like Stock, considers that her crossdressing entails 'her suppression

of *female identity*' (118, emphasis added). Krueger concludes that, with Silence (and also with Eufemie), female sexuality is unrepresentable (121) and that the unambiguously misogynistic portrayal of Eufeme far outweighs the ambiguities offered by Silence's gender-bending. But in positing a 'female identity' for Silence (as opposed to female sex), Krueger also seems to reinscribe the very essentialism that she is clearly at pains to defuse.

E. Jane Burns also raises the specter of essentialism in the pages she devotes to *Silence* in her *Bodytalk*. Citing the work of Diana Fuss, she argues that the opposition between nature and nurture—or between the essentialist and the social constructionist positions on gender—is in no sense as sharp a division as one might think and that it is misleading and counterproductive when applied to the study of culture. With this I agree. But for Burns, Silence's body is first and foremost a female body, as, indeed, is her 'identity.' In the two alternative readings that Burns offers of Silence's statement, 'Donc sui jo Scilentius/ Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus' (2537–8), where 'nus' may be read as 'no one' or 'nude,' there remains unchanged, as a given: 'I am silent about my *female identity*' (243, emphasis added).[6] Burns offers a hypothetical way out of the double bind in which Silence finds herself: 'What Silence needs, to begin this process of refiguration, is a third term between the dyadic pairs that structure her existence as either present or absent, speaking or silent, male mind or female body' (245). Burns's formulation is intriguing, but she goes on to say that this third term would give Silence 'a way to be a subject without playing at being a male subject, a way to move from subjection to subjecthood *without the transvestism that her story enacts*' (245, emphasis added). In short, Silence's transvestism is seen as entailing the suppression of her sex, as somehow exterior to her (female) 'identity,' and as ultimately an impediment to her accession to subjecthood. It seems especially odd that nowhere does Burns entertain explicitly the possibility that the third term she imagines might be that of a queer body, a queer identity, a queer subject.[7]

It is the figure of the crossdresser which offers a way out of what I have suggested has been something of a critical impasse in the interpretation of gender in *Silence*. As Marjorie Garber argues in *Vested Interests*, the transvestite is a potential figure of category crisis that not only blurs gender boundaries but also undermines the whole attempt to construct stable binary categories of oppositional difference, a figure onto which irresolvable crises of boundary definition can at specific historical and cultural junctures be displaced and (not quite) contained. As Garber states: 'One of the cultural functions of the transvestite is precisely to mark this kind of displacement, substitution, or slippage: from class to gender, gender to class; or, equally plausibly, from gender to race or religion' (36–7). What else might we see in the conflicted

messages of *Le Roman de Silence* if we were willing to set aside assumptions about the main character's identity as female, a move that feminist critics seem disinclined to make?

As a partial response to this question, I would like to look briefly at a key passage among the many in which the text flirts with sexual ambiguity. Indeed, it is one of the most-quoted passages from Heldris's poem, in which the adolescent Silence, strongly solicited by Nature, uses his reason to conclude that it is better if he stays a boy[8]:

Raisons ja od li tant esté,
Se li a tant admonesté
Que Silences a bien veü
Que fol consel avoit creü
Quant onques pensa desuser
Son bon viel us et refuser,
Por us de feme maintenir.
Donques li prent a sovenir
Des jus c'on siolt es cambres faire
Dont a oï sovent retraire,
Et poise dont en son corage
Tolt l'us de feme a son usage,
Et voit que miols valt li us d'ome
Que l'us de feme, c'est la some.
'Voire,' fait it, 'a la male eure
Irai desos, quant sui deseure.
Deseure sui, s'irai desos?
Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.
Nel sui, par foi, ains sui honis
Quant as femes voel estre onis.
Gel pensai por moi aäsier.
Trop dure boche ai por baisier,
Et trop rois bras por acoler.
On me poroit tost afoler
Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,
Car vallés sui et nient mescine.' (2625–50)

[Reason stayed with him
and admonished him until
Silence understood clearly
that he had believed foolish advice
when he considered putting off
and denying his good old custom
to take up that of a woman.
Then he began to remember

the games people play in private,
which he had often heard described,
and he weighed in his heart
the woman's role against his own,
and saw that a man's life is better
than a woman's, all things considered.
'Truly,' he said, 'in an evil hour
will I go underneath, when I am on top.
I am on top now, and I would have to go beneath.
Now I am most valorous and strong,
but I wouldn't be any longer; rather, in faith,
I'd be shamed if I wanted to be like the women.
I thought of it for my own pleasure.
I have a mouth too hard for kissing,
and arms too rough for embracing.
I would quickly be beaten
at the game people play under the covers,
for I am a boy, and not a girl at all.' (trans. Psaki)][9]

In this stunning passage, Silence knowingly renounces his sex, which he understands as less advantageous in his culture, and chooses to live his life according to his adopted gender, his 'good old custom.' And yet, what desires and fears are expressed about those dangerous games played under the covers as Silence tries to negotiate the dichotomies of male–female, top–bottom, 'natural'–'unnatural'! What would he, a boy, have to do if he went underneath, if he wanted to be 'like a woman' (which is something different from being a woman) in the game 'under the covers'?[10] I submit that what the text is articulating at this point—yet very carefully not naming—is, simply put, playing the passive role in sodomy. Thus Silence is in the unenviable position of first experiencing (male) homosexual panic and lesbian panic later at Eufeme's hands.[11] While medieval sodomy has most often been construed as pertaining to male–male behavior, *Silence* is useful for the way it helps us break down the conceptual barrier between male and female homoeroticism. This sodomitic moment, one of several queer moments in the text, opens it up to interpretative strategies which have not, to my knowledge, been applied to *Silence*, perhaps because the main character has almost always ultimately been read as female—essentially female. Like Judith Butler's theory of performativity (explored in Waters 1997), the hermeneutics of sodomy, as developed by such critics as Jonathan Goldberg and Eve Sedgwick, provides us with another way of reading, as Waters puts it, 'alternative sex, alternative gender' in the romance.[12] The medieval discourse on sodomy, as Mark Jordan (1997) has shown with reference to medieval theology, is fraught with

contradictions and ambiguities—necessarily, since sodomy itself was not a unified construct within medieval culture.[13] Despite this conceptual incoherence, though, the deployment of sodomy as a term of opprobrium in medieval texts is often quite specific to certain social classes or milieus: the Church, as in the writings of Peter Damian[14]; the urban mercantile class of Florence, as in the sermons of Bernardino of Siena[15]; and—most relevant for our purpose here—the royal courts.[16] The supposed corruption in the latter points us to an understanding of sodomy as a political transgression and, as others have suggested, Silence's transvestism, in the narrow view, is at least as much an offense against his lord Ebain (Nurture?) as it is against Nature.[17]

If the 'crime against nature' can ultimately be shown to be an incoherent construct in medieval (and modern) discourse, perhaps it should come as no surprise that in Heldris's text nature itself possesses the quality of incoherence. In this regard, it is telling that the first use of the word 'nature' in *Silence* occurs in the expression 'contre nature' as the lovesick Cador laments women's will as 'contre nature, contre raison, contre droiture' (671–2).[18] The parallelism in this passage is striking for the way that women's will is represented as singularly opposed to the triad of nature, reason, and right-(straight-?) acting. This would–be homology will in effect be pried apart by the crossdressed Silence, who possesses reason and acts honorably, as Ebain himself recognizes in his final speeches of the poem. Indeed, it is Silence's loyalty that prompts Ebain to right the wrong *he* has done in denying rights of inheritance to women. It is the other term, 'nature,' that is the problematic one, the one that refuses to line up with the others, and it is the instability and incoherence of the 'natural' that proves to be the site of the greatest anxiety in the poem.

Roberta Krueger has noted that the word 'nature' has multiple meanings in *Silence*: biological sex; moral temperament; class-bound character; and the status quo of gender roles; and she observes that this broad range of meanings serves to undercut the neatness of the Nature/Noreture dyad in the text (117). Heldris's deployment of 'nature,' as Krueger's analysis suggests, gravitates to two clusters of meanings, one around sex and gender, the other around issues of class and character. The first of these two clusters, that of biological sex and culturally sanctioned gender roles, is of course completely undone in the romance (however one may read Heldris's attempt at closure), and it is perhaps this instability that explains Heldris's desire to impart stability to the other set of terms. That is, Heldris's perception of the instability of the sex/gender system—as fascinating to him, no doubt, as it was unsettling—prompts him to make nobility of birth and character the bedrock of his

vision of social order.[19] Thus, at certain key moments when 'nature' as biological sex shows itself to be an incoherent category of analysis, Heldris's text slips to the other semantic pole of the 'natural'. We observe this tendency, for example, when Heldris comments on Silence's triumphs on the battlefield:

Ainc feme ne fu mains laniere
De contoier en tel maniere.
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.
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.
Et savés que dist mes corages?
Que bien ait tols jors bons usages.
Bons us tolt moult vilonie
Et fait mener cortoise vie.
Car bons us a qui bone vie uze
Et vilonie le refuse.
Mains hom fait tols jors desonor
Que s'il eüst flairié honor
Et maintenue dé l'enfance
Ki n'avroit cure de viltance.
S'il fait le honte n'en puet nient
Qu'a cho qu'il a apris se tient.
Silences ne se repent rien
De son usage, ains l'ainme bien.
Chevaliers est vallans et buens,
Mellor n'engendra rois ne cuens,
Ne vos puis dire la moitié
De si com il a esploitié. (5147–82)

[There never was a woman less reluctant
to engage in armed combat.
Whoever saw *him* jousting, stripped of his mantle,

carrying his shield on his left arm,
charging in the tournament
with well-positioned lance,
might well say that Nurture
can do a great deal to overcome Nature,
if she can teach such behavior
to a soft and tender woman.
Many a knight unhorsed by...[*her*],
if he had known the truth
at the time she knocked him down,
would have been terribly ashamed
that a tender, soft, faint-hearted woman,
who had only the complexion,
clothing and bearing of a man,
could have struck him down with her lance.
And do you know what I really think?
One should behave properly every day.
Good manners refine one's behavior
and help one lead a courtly life.
Proper behavior is the sign of a good life
and of moral refinement.
Many act dishonorably every day,
but if they had had a taste of honor
and had been raised with it from infancy,
they would reject base deeds.
If they behave improperly, they can't help it;
they're only practicing what they've learned.
Silence had no regrets
about his upbringing, in fact, he loved it.
He was a valiant and noble knight;
no king or count was ever better.
I can't tell you the half
of *his* exploits. (trans. Roche-Mahdi; emphasis added where the French provides clear gender marking)]

I have quoted this passage at such length to show how the grammatical slippage from female (*feme*) to male (*Kil*), repeated for good measure further on (*femme* to *il*), is accompanied in the text by the jarring shift after line 5165 from the discourse on gender to that of good morals. The disingenuous tone of the intervention ('And do you know what I *really* think?') should alert us to the fact that Heldris, perhaps not knowing quite what to think about gender, is shifting to what he perceives to be firmer ground.

In the passage quoted above, 'good manners' are ascribed to good upbringing, or nurture, not nature. But in an earlier passage where Heldris

describes Silence's upbringing as a boy, he emphasizes that, if Silence learns 'bones mors'[good conduct] (2379) so easily, it is because of his 'bone nature'[good nature], and here he states explicitly that the latter is attributable to his noble 'orine'[origin, or birth] (2384–5). A few lines earlier, though, he has reminded us (2373–4) that if Silence's 'nature' (i.e., sex) is revealed to anyone other than those who know the secret, his Noreture will be shown as false (*falsee*). We see here not only an example of how the two meanings of 'nature' are held in extreme tension, with the discourse on sex always ready to slip into the discourse on character, but also how the nature/nurture dyad, although it appears sharply demarcated with reference to nature-as-sex, becomes considerably less so—indeed, all but disappears—when the referent is nature-as-character. The muddling of the nature/nurture divide is perhaps most apparent when Nature herself admonishes Silence to abandon her male ways, return to her chamber and take up sewing, according to 'the custom of nature':

> 'Va en la cambre a la costure,
> Cho violt de nature li us.' (2528–29)

As Caroline Jewers rightly observes, 'Why chambers belong to Nature rather to the artificial and comfortable realm of Nurture is never explained' (102). And of course, there is no explanation, other than that the categories of Nurture and Nature are ever in danger of collapsing, as is the false binary that Heldris has constructed with them. Heldris's text thus presents us with an acute crisis in the way the category of nature is conceptualized, with the figure of the crossdresser serving as the very embodiment of this crisis.

The tendency in much of the criticism on crossdressing has been to read it exclusively as the crossing of gender boundaries, that is, drag. What has less often been noticed is the frequency with which crossdressing is not just a transgender but also, as we shall see, a transstatus or transracial masquerade or sartorial event. Claire Sponsler and I have argued that:

> the very definition of cross-dressing must be expanded to include instances of dressing across the boundaries of race and class which do not involve transsexual drag but which do show the same kinds of desire and appropriation of the other which most often characterize dressing across gender boundaries. Indeed, our present-day obsession with gender issues may have blinded us to the fact that dressing across race or status boundaries may, depending on the context, possess an equal if not greater potential of transgressiveness than transgender cross-dressing.[20]

Silence presents just such a case in which the transgression of gender boundaries occurs in conjuction with transstatus and transracial disguise,

when Silence decides to escape from the dilemma of his transgendered upbringing by joining a pair of jongleurs. Already dressed as a young man, he must find another way to alter his appearance, and he does so by staining his already tanned skin with an herb from the forest. As the narrator says: 'Ki bien l'esgarde viers le chiere/ Bien sanble de povre riviere' (2911–2)[Anyone who looked closely at him/ would think he was of humble stock]. Humble and, one could add, foreign-looking, if not actually foreign. Silence's action is exactly the same as Nicolette's in *Aucassin et Nicolette*, in which the heroine, a fair-skinned Saracen, blackens her face and crossdresses as a minstrel to escape from the court of the King of Carthage.[21] In the *Roman de Silence*, then, the noble 'boy who is a girl' jumps social class and even, perhaps, religious/racial boundaries while choosing to retain his assumed gender. Although he will quickly abandon his artificially darkened skin once he has made his escape, he lives as a minstrel for several years. It is telling that this second, transstatus disguise seems to constitute the greater threat to his physical integrity, which would seem to suggest in turn that it is also the greater transgression. For Silence so excels at the minstrel's art that his cohorts plot to kill him; and his own father, when he learns that his son has been abducted by minstrels, orders that any minstrel caught in his kingdom be killed on the spot. As a knight in the thick of the melee, the crossdressed Silence seems much 'safer'—after all, as a knight, he is true to his noble origins and education—than as a minstrel. This is but the first instance in which the transgression of social boundaries, real or imputed, nearly results in Silence's literal and figurative cover being blown. The second is his rape manqué at the hands of Eufeme (to which one can add the latter's scheme of having him killed in France). For when Silence rebuffs Eufeme's advances, her first reflex is to attack his social pedigree:

> Dist li: 'Est cho chierisscement?
> Quant vus si chier vus savés rendre,
> Bien devriés achater et vendre!
> Ciertes, bien savés contrefaire
> Felon vilain de put afaire.' (3884–8)
>
> [She said to him, 'Are you trying to jack up the price?
> If you are such an expert at selling yourself dear,
> you should go into the business.
> You certainly do a very good imitation
> of a cheap, vulgar tradesman.' (trans. Roche-Mahdi)]

Although Eufeme's remarks about affection bought and sold might be more appropriately applied to herself and her marriage to Ebain, her taunt

that Silence 'knows how to imitate' is, of course, only off the mark in so far as it imputes low birth rather than gender disguise.

Judith Butler has argued that categories of gender, as well as race and class, are not givens but that they must be continually rehearsed and performed, constantly reactualized, to maintain the hold that they have over us: 'Performativity is thus not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition' (*Bodies*, 12). Performativity, although normally concealed, allows itself to be read in a text like the *Roman de Silence*, with its anxious rehearsing of social categories and equally anxious policing of gender, class, and racial boundaries. The transgressive figure of the transvestite allows us to see at one and the same time both the arbitrariness of these roles and also their necessity for the 'proper' functioning of society and culture. Far from being an abstract sign of indeterminacy or an either/or proposition, the transvestite is, as Garber has argued, the very sign of culture in that it gives access to the symbolic order and allows us to see the multiple ways in which a given society maps its ideology onto our bodies. I do not wish to suggest that we are the passive objects of this mapping. As Butler would have it, we perform it every day, and it is axiomatic that there is no performance without performance anxiety. I have further suggested that one passage in *Silence* where this anxiety is most overtly expressed is a sodomitic moment, a moment of panic or resistance in which we see how the sexual cannot be separated from the political and ideological. As McCracken, Kinoshita, and others have also argued, the gendering of bodies has as much to do with politics and ideology as it does with gender *tout court*. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore why a courtly romance of the late thirteenth century should be the site of such a startling case of the ideological mapping of the body. The least one can say is that courtly ideology was never truly hegemonic but always in a dialogic relationship with other ideologies and discourses: clerical and/or spiritual, to be sure, but increasingly, communal, civic, and mercantilist. The *Roman de Silence* seeks to assure its audience that in a world of changing and conflicting custom, there will always be one unchanging mark of distinction, that of noble birth, for Silence's nobility is innate, the work of Nature, not Nurture. Indeed, if we return to Nature's workshop, we see that in creating Silence, she imparts fineness of matter to the child before turning her attention to its sex. And since it is, after all, Heldris's hand which guides Nature's creative gesture, we see that for Heldris Silence is noble in essence, female by accident.[22] As for the queering of

gender in the *Roman de Silence*, it is, in the final analysis, a sideshow, albeit a spectacular one, part of a larger strategy which seeks to naturalize social hierarchy. But, as I hope to have shown, it is the sideshow which tips us off to the silent workings of ideology.

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Robert Clark is Associate Professor of French in the Department of Modern Languages at Kansas State University. He has published on medieval dramatic, romance, and devotional texts and the opera *Carmen*, and has translated the *Chanson de Sainte Foy* into English. With Kathleen Ashley, he is the editor of *Medieval Conduct* (University of Minnesota Press).

NOTES

1 Versions of this analysis were presented at the Cultural Studies Symposium, Kansas State University, March 7, 1996; and at The Maiden-Knight: The *Roman de Silence* and the Romance Tradition, University of Oregon, April 26, 1998. I would especially like to thank all of the participants at that latter, remarkably productive, encounter.

2 In the first ARTHURIANA special issue on *Silence*, only Gilmore takes poetics and not gender as her primary focus.

3 Although it can hardly be said to invalidate his general conclusions, it should be noted that Gaunt renders the key line, 'Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir' (6627) as 'I only care to be silent' (213). Regina Psaki and Sarah Roche-Mahdi render the line respectively as 'and I no longer want to keep silent' and 'nor do I care to keep silent any longer.'

4 Needless to say, my remarks are offered in the spirit of critical debate and in no way should be taken as dismissing the fine work of these scholars, which has been crucial in my own thinking about *Silence*.

5 We have seen that Gaunt, who acknowledges his debt to Krueger's work, reaches the same general conclusion. Gaunt speaks not of suppression but of the poet's desire to repress the idea that 'women may indeed have the ability to take on the cultural role of men' (203).

6 Roche-Mahdi and Psaki render 'nus' as 'no one.' Burns cites Cooper, for whom the 'open-ended' meaning of 'nus' is emblematic of the poem's enigmatic textualizing of its main character (341).

7 Cf. Elizabeth Waters: 'Burns likewise invokes a "third path" that Silence might follow, a path that would allow her to acknowledge the truth of her biological difference as a female, but empower her to act outside the gender roles prescribed for her. One direction this third path might lead is toward a valuation of crossdressed, drag, or transgendered identities: queer identities' (37–8). For a useful discussion of the third term, especially the tendency to assimilate it to a male or female position and thus reinforce the gender binary, see Garber (10).

8 In using masculine pronouns for Silence, I am not positing male 'identity' but following Heldris's practice. According to Gaunt, with the notable exception of a speech by Noreture that foreshadows Nature's ultimate victory (2593–5), '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' (207).

9 Citations from the French text are given as in Sarah Roche-Mahdi's edition; translations are as indicated.

10 Roche-Mahdi's rendering of line 2644, 'if I want to be one of the women,' is closer to the original than Psaki's, stressing identity rather than similarity. Nonetheless, the body that is evoked in the following lines is clearly a masculine one, if not in fact male.

11 On the latter, see Blumreich (1997). While Blumreich reads Eufeme's transgressions as 'lesbianism' (56), I am more inclined to see these moments in the text as examples of what Michèle Perret calls 'homosexualité au second degré'[homosexuality at one remove] (1985, 328).

12 Such a reading also opens onto the many ways in which homosociality is figured in *Silence*, in Ebain's first marriage, for example, but also in the welcome accorded to Silence at the French court.

13 Jordan (1997) concludes that the medieval theological discourse on sodomy is characterized by unstable terms (including 'Sodomy'), unfaithful descriptions, and inconsistent arguments (160–70).

14 See Jordan: 'Peter[Damian] fears a church of Sodom within the church of God' (50).

15 Michael Rocke (1996, 36–44ff.) on the 'seductive links between political and sexual bonds' in Bernardino's Florentine preaching; and on the commonplace association of sodomy with the wealthy and powerful (135).

16 See, for example, the estates poem by Etienne de Fougères, the *Livre des Manières*, in which the author imputes same-sex sexual relations to the ladies of the court (1097–1124). It is fairly transparent in the poem that the court in question is that of Henry II. On the *Livre des Manières*, see Krueger, Clark (2001), and Amer.

17 My interpretation thus complements Peggy McCracken's, who argues in her essay on *Silence* that '[transvestite romances] suggest that the idea of a "natural" sexual difference indicated on the body is part of the ideology that supports the founding of institutions of medieval aristocratic society: marriage and succession' (518).

18 'contrary to nature, contrary to reason and to convention,' in Roche-Mahdi's translation.

19 Gaunt also notices the slippage between gender and class in the poem but reaches different conclusions: 'Heldris's praise of Silence[here, her 'noble birth'] reinforces class hierarchies rather than breaking down gender stereotypes' (212). I have already made it clear that I think that the poem is very successful in undermining 'gender stereotypes' but argue below that Heldris's strategy does indeed reinforce class hierarchies.

20 Clark and Sponsler (1999, 62), see also (1997).

21 The link between minstrelsy and 'blackface' has a long history which I cannot address here, but we catch a fleeting glimpse of it in *Silence* and, somewhat later, in morris dancing and mumming (the term 'morris' is derived from morisco). On *Aucassin et Nicolette*, see the articles by Callahan and Sturges in this issue.

22 See 1795–1957, especially the discourse on the refining of Nature's 'matyre', or matter (1828), and the moral developments that follow.