Chapter Five: Being Silent and Silent Being in *Le Roman de Silence*

I do not ask anyone questions, for my questions have no answer.
I know this because I live on both sides of the mirror.

— Ahmed, in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de Sable*

Echoing Chrétien de Troyes' boisterous pledge to rhyme the best tale ever told in royal court,[1] the opening lines of *Le Roman de Silence* attempt to seduce readers by lauding the precision of the poet's versification:

> [M]aistres Heldris de Cornuälle
> Escrist ces viers trestolt a talle. (ll. 1-2)
>
> Master Heldris of Cornwall
> wrote these verses [strictly to measure].[2]

As in the *Graal* prologue, this introductory rhetorical posturing signals more than just an attempt to gain the *benevolentia* of an audience.[3] A nominal form of the verb *tailler* (to cut, to attach), *talle* is the measurement of both a subtraction and an addition.[4] Therefore, the narrator's claim that Heldris' verses have been written *a talle* assigns a paradoxical status to his composition, for within it reside

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[1] The lines in question are as follows: *Crestïens, qui entent et paine / Par le comandement le conte / A rimoier le meillor conte / Qui soit contez a cort roial* (ll. 62-65). See p. 78 ff.

[2] Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence*, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1972). All references to the original Old French manuscript are taken from this edition. Two English translations of the manuscript have been published, one by Regina Psaki, and the other by Sarah Roche-Mahdi. For the majority of passages, I have chosen to use Psaki's translation. However, I have found it necessary in certain instances to offer alternative translations, which I signal with brackets.

[3] This, in spite of the fact that Quintilian asserts that, "the sole purpose of the *exordium* is to prepare our audience in such a way that they will be disposed to lend a ready ear to the rest of our speech." (IV.1.v) *Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian,* trans. H.E. Butler, 1921, Vol 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) 4 vols.

[4] Indeed, as Martin Heidegger notes, this double meaning is at the very heart of language: "The 'sign' in design (Latin *signum*) is related to *secare*, to cut – as in saw, sector, segment. To design is to cut a trace." Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language,* trans. Peter D. Hertz and Joan Stambaugh (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1971) 121.

both separation and unification, difference and sameness. Functionally speaking, writing in the *Roman de Silence* attempts to cover its own absence, the poet trying to tailor a text to the measure of that lack created by his own initial graphic stroke. Poetic composition becomes a process of supplementation, an effort to, as R. Howard Bloch has suggested, fill in the holes of language.[5] So, whereas Chrétien de Troyes exploits the fragmented, open format of his text, what Heldris prizes is quite the opposite. His ultimate desire is to begin without beginning, to name his object without subjecting it to the divisive, discordant boundaries of language:

> E or revenrai a mon conte
> De mon prologhe faire point,
> Car moult grans volentés me point
> De muevre rime et conmencier,
> *Sans noise faire, et sans tenchier.* (ll. 102-106, *emphasis mine*)
>
> But now I will return to my story
> and put an end to my prologue,
> for great desire spurs me on
> to begin my rhyme and proceed,
> *without discord [making noise] and without dissension.*

If, as suggested earlier, language is dependent upon an alternance betwen silence and speech as its organizing force, this seems like an impossible wish.[6] How could one speak without making noise, write without leaving a trace? Such are the troublesome questions that the *Le Roman de* Silence tries to answer. Even if the attempt ultimately meets with failure, its failure reveals something profoundly important about how language and its lacks affect us all.

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[5] R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The Roman de Silence and the art of the Trouvère." *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986): 81-99. This description could be extended to the text's contemporary audience. While modern critics refer to the text by its accepted title, Lewis Thorpe notes that the 6,706 lines of verse which make up what is now known as *Le Roman de Silence* actually have no title whatsoever. Rather, this appellation appears to be the work of Heinrich Gelzer, who was the first to discuss the romance in any great detail.

[6] See p. 1 f.

Romance and Truth

The Old French word *romanz* (or *romans*) refers first and foremost not to a literary genre, but to a language. Beginning with some of the first vernacular texts written in France during the twelfth-century, it was an accepted practice to offer translations of works previously available only in the learned tongues of Latin or Greek. Thus, *romanz* was initially used to signal employment of the vernacular instead of one of these other languages, and it is within this practice that the poet Heldris de Cornuälle situates his work:

> Comence chi tels aventure
> C'ainques n'oïstes tele en livre.
> Si com l'estoire le nos livre,
> *Qu'en latin escrite lizons,*
> *En romans si le vos disons*. (ll. 1658-62, *emphasis mine*)
>
> Here begins such an adventure
> as you have never heard in a book.
> As the story gives it to us,
> *which we read in written Latin,*
> *we tell it to you in romance [romans]*[7]

While the story of Silence is being told in *romans*, it is perhaps in some respect a re-telling, since the poet states that it comes from a story in *latin escrite.* Some of the earlier and more renowned examples of this type of literary activity are *Le roman de Thèbes* and *Le Roman d'Enéas*, translations of Latin works by Statius and Virgil, as well as *Le Roman de Troie*, an adaptation of the purportedly historical accounts of the Trojan War credited to Dictys and Dares.[8] Obviously, because of

[7] Regina Psaki, trans., *The Roman de Silence by Heldris de Cornuälle* (New York: Garland, 1991) ll. 1658-1662. All accompanying English translations of quotations from the *Roman de Silence* will be taken from this translation. Line numbers are identical in this book to those in Thorpe's edition. Psaki's translation is generally good, although I sometimes disagree with specific word choices. Such differences will be noted as appropriate.

[8] Guy Raynaud de Lage, ed., *Le Roman de Thèbes*, 2 vols., Classiques français du Moyen Âge (Paris: Champion, 1966, 1968). J.-J. Salverda de Grave, ed., *Enéas, roman du XII*e siècle, Classiques

their reliance upon antecedent textual matter, these compositions cannot be considered as wholly original.

Yet nor are such texts entirely unoriginal, since modifications were often made to their fictional matter during translation. Paul Zumthor has cautioned that the term translation "must be understood in a broad sense," since these translations were often altered somehow, whether combined, shortened, or simplified.[9] For *Le Roman de Troie*, this is particularly relevant, since a single text contains a synthesis of two works. In the prologue of this text, Benoit de Saint-Maure explains the motivation behind its composition: it is written for *cil qui n'entendent la letre* (those who do not understand the letter). For this reason, he states that the work must be put into *romans* (*en romanz metre*).[10] As suggested, however, this 'written-for-the-masses' version is not completely faithful to its precursors, a fact to which Sainte-Maure calls attention:

> Le latin sivrai e la letre,
> Nule autre rien n'i voudrai metre,
> S'ensi non com jol truis escrit.
> *Ne di mie qu'aucun bon dit*
> *Ni mete, se faire le sai,*
> *Mais la matire en ensivrai.*
>
> I will follow the Latin and the letter
> and I would not add anything
> to that which I find written.
> *I do not say that I will not add some good discourse*
> *if I have the talent for it,*
> *but I will follow the matter of the text.*[11]

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français du Moyen Âge (Paris: Champion, 1925-1929). Benoit de Sainte-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, 6 vols., (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1904-1912). All references to this work are taken from this edition, with citations indicated according to their line numbers (vols. I-IV). The English translations of these citations are my own.

[9] Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Phillip Bennett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 32.

[10] Benoit de Sainte-Maure ll. 36-37.

[11] Benoit de Sainte-Maure ll. 139-44, *emphasis mine.*

Following the original to the letter thus does not impede the writer from adding *bon dit* where he sees fit. A translation is, in this sense, also a modified version, a re-writing of another text. These reflections on textual composition show that, as Jean-Charles Huchet so succinctly observes: "La littérature naît de la littérature."[12] Literature, in the case of medieval writing in the vernacular, is indeed born from literature.

It is within this tradition of literary *renaissance* that *Le Roman de Silence* has its genesis: while the text's precise date of composition is not known, most critics place it sometime in the latter half of the thirteenth century.[13] Consequently, it is not surprising that the narrative contains allusions to other vernacular texts of the period and adapts a significant portion of the prose *l'Estoire Merlin* as part of its own fictional matter.[14] In this sense, the *latin escrite* mentioned by the poet is perhaps a more general reference to any adapted fictional matter, irrespective of its language of composition. Furthermore, the poet alludes to his writing as a sort of conjuction (*conjointure*)[15], in this case between truth and lie:

> Jo ne di pas que n'i *ajoigne*
> *Avoic le voir sovent mençoigne*
> *Por le conte miols acesmer*: (ll. 1663-65, *emphasis mine*)
>
> I don't deny that I have *joined*

[12] Huchet 10-11.

[13] Cf. Kelly xxi and Thorpe 1-17. In a chronology that he advises can only serve a general guideline and not a precise catalog of dates, Kelly places the composition of *Silence* in the period of 1270-1280. No specific justification is given for this choice. However, this estimate coincides with Thorpe's, which fixes *Silence* in "the second half of the thirteenth century" (17). Thorpe bases this date on various data, including the handwriting and miniatures of the manuscript, language of the scribe, and the dates of composition given for other works contained in the same manuscript.

[14] Thorpe 28.

[15] This is a term used by Chrétien de Troyes to describe his writing in *Erec et Enide*. Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1953) l. 14.

many a fiction [lie] along with the truth
to arrange the story better.

Like the *bon dit* of Benoit de Sainte-Maure, Heldris claims to add a *mençoinge* only to create a more coherent tale, to improve upon the work of those who came before him. Now, if the lines that precede those above are considered, the *mençoinge* of the poet's writing becomes even more important.

Comence chi tels aventure
C'ainques n'oïstes tele en livre (ll. 1658-59, *emphasis mine*)

Here begins such an adventure
as you have never heard in a book.

The many lies are also the locus of the text's novelty, or in Geoffrey of Vinsauf's terms, its source of rejuvenation.[16] These artistic and rhetorical flourishes are what set Heldris' tale apart from its literary antecedents, referred to summarily as the *latin escrite.* Accordingly, the 'truth' that the 'lie' of *Le Roman de Silence* contradicts is not an equivocal historical reality, but simply established versions of the textual matter that it glosses. The work of this poet thus confirms Roger Dragonetti's suggestion that medieval writing (including even historical writing) is more concerned with constructing truth rhetorically than with expressing some epistemological *vérité*:

> C'est là un phénomène solidement établi, mais qui impliquait que l'historiographie médiévale, largement tributaire des arts du langage, c'est à dire de la littérature, demeurait irréductible aux règles des méthodes modernes de l'histoire, ne fût-ce que par la manière aussi dont les médiévaux conçoivent différement le traitement des sources et encore du fait que leur discours historique ne vise pas à *exprimer* la vérité, mais à la construire rhétoriquement et symboliquement en vue de la persuasion.[17]

[16] This is another term used by Geoffrey of Vinsauf to describe his rhetorical strategies for linguistic and literary renewal. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Le Poetria Nova,* ed. and trans. Lewis Thorpe (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 55.

[17] Roger Dragonetti, *Le Mirage des sources* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987) 19.

The contradiction of textual authority creates a truth, inasmuch as the new text with its added lies now constitutes a separate, discreet work which is even better than those that preceded it.

Therefore, this practice of re-writing inherent to narrative romance should not be considered as a pejorative act of transgression, but one of differentiation. As in the case of Philip's infamous *livre*, the new text depends upon the old for its genesis, but relies on how it differs from the latter to establish itself as a discreet literary object. To borrow a term from the prologue to Marie de France's *Lais*, the poetic *surplus* is what distinguishes a text, what makes it *novel*.[18] Heldris' attempt to fashion a story completely *a talle* thus becomes a quest to communicate something that is true by translating the tacit fullness of silence into a profusion of well-chosen words:

> N'i metrai rien qui m'uevre enpire
> *Ne del voir iert mos a dire*
> *Car la verté ne doi taisir.* (ll. 1667-69, *emphasis mine*)
>
> I won't add anything to worsen my story,
> *nor truly will there be a word to add to it,*
> *for I must not supress the truth.*

The lies of a literary text such as *Silence* actually become its truth, the mark of its literary originality. In vernacular writing, truth and fiction are thus one, both subject to an endless cycle of renewal and regeneration within the poet's language.

[18] Marie de France, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. (Paris: Poche). Marie addresses the dynamics of medieval textual composition in the prologue, referring to the addition of new material as a "surplus" (ll. 1-56).

The Politics of Signification

For a narrative that claims to "preserve the memory of Silence," (*Ki de Silence fait memorie*, l. 2658), it is somewhat surprising that its central character does not appear until quite late in the romance, her name mentioned for the first time at line 2067. In addition to the prologue, the first two thousand lines of the narrative are devoted primarily to the stories of Ebains (the king of England) and Cador and Eufemie, the future parents of Silence. While several critics have addressed the amorous relationship between Silence's parents, considerably fewer have given serious attention to Ebains and the narrative's political structures. One notable exception is Sharon Kinoshita, who develops a rapport between politics and gender politics in *Le Roman de Silence*:

> For under the cover of Silence's cross dressing and refeminization, the romance reformulates the way bodies matter in the thirteenth century imaginary, redefining the function of the medieval nobility as not military service but genealogical reproduction.[19]

Kinoshita's interpretation is both interesting and well developed, and I do not wish to refute her thesis. Rather, I contend that just as political and gender issues are allied in the text, so too, are these issues tied to the narrative's discourse on language and writing. To put it another way, the feudal and gender politics of the text are also a politics of silence and signification.

The first character presented in the tale (apart from Heldris de Cornuälle) is Ebains, whose authority as a ruler – unlike Arthur in the *Graal* – is without challenge:

> Li siens conmans n'ert pas *jenglois*,
> Car n'avoit home ens el roiame,

[19] Sharon Kinoshita. "Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage," *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 398.

De Wincestre trosqu'a Durame,
S'il osast son conmant enfraindre
Nel fesist en sa carcre enpaindre,
Par tel covant n'a droit n'a tort
N'en issist point trosqu'a la mort. (ll. 112-118, *emphasis mine*)

A command from him was no *idle chatter [lie],*
for there was not a man in the kingdom,
from Winchester to Durham,
who, if he dared disobey the king's command,
would not be thrown into prison,
so that, rightly or wrongly,
he wouldn't get out again until he died.

The praise of rulers, be they historical or imaginary, is a common *topos* of European literature that had its beginnings at least as early as the Punic Wars, when political leaders began to fully realize the positive influence of rhetoric.[20] In the above passage, this strategy is used to fashion the portrait of an unmitigated aristocratic power. Furthermore, the word *jenglois* suggests that his authority has its foundation in a specific type of linguistic representation. Derived from the Latin *iactare*, *jenglois* designates, as in the above translation, "empty or idle speech." The nominal form of this word – *joglerie* – has a number of possible meanings, including singing songs (as in the case of a *jongleur*), or playing tricks, both of which portray language as pure artifice: "In either case, playing tricks, joking, and empty speech all have one thing in common - the use of signs or symbols to point to that which is not there, to indicate absence."[21] Essentially, to *jongler* is to lie. Thus, the fact that a command from King Ebains is not *jenglois* implies that his words do not deceive: they name what is there

[20] Curtius 176. In fact, as Curtius notes, many ancient leaders were themselves engaged in literary activity.

[21] Kate Mason Cooper, "Elle and L: Sexualized Textuality in Le Roman de Silence," *Romance Notes* 25.3 (1985): 349. Cooper also notes that it is fitting that *joglerie* is undertaken by Silence (l. 2863 ff.), since the heroine herself 'plays a trick' by her false appearance and name. See p. 215 ff. for a discussion of this episode.

instead of what is absent. Within the political context of the fiction, this etymological straightness or linguistic propriety becomes emblematic of a certain feature of the text's discourse on language and writing that is explored through a series of economic and symbolic exchanges among its principal characters.

The importance of economic exchange in *Le Roman de Silence* is first alluded to in the prologue, where the narrator issues an angry plaint directed at those who would hear or repeat Heldris de Cornuälle's tale:

> Ne violt qu'espars soiënt par gent
> Qui proisent mains honor d'argent,
> N'a gent qui tolt voellent oïr
> Que si n'ont soing c'om puist joïr
> De gueredon qu'il vollent rendre. (ll. 9-13)
>
> He does not want it to be spread among people
> who value honor less than money,
> nor to people who want to hear everything
> but don't want to let a man enjoy
> the reward they should give him in return.

Quite simply, if one wishes to hear the story of *Silence*, one should pay to do so. Such appeals to the financial generosity of an audience are fairly common in medieval literature, but it is essential to note that the poet is not only complaining of his personal hardship. He is also reprimanding others for their greed.[22] Whether for practical, moral, or purely rhetorical reasons, the criticism of avarice is present in many secular and religious works from this period. One finds, for instance, a rather lengthy passage in *Le Roman de la rose* that paints a decidedly negative picture of those persons with a lust for money.[23] The same is true of the poet's condemnation of *avere gent* (l. 31) in the prologue of *Le Roman*

[22] Curtius 470. One also finds "begging" poems among the Provençal troubadour lyrics as well as in Chaucer's poetry. See, for example Chaucer's "To You, My Pur and to Non Other Wight."

[23] In this case, greed is explained as the result of a "lack of love" (ll. 5120-5252).

de Silence. By their actions, these greedy people are said to lose both the practical value of their money and their personal honor:

> Ont torné en fiens entasser
> Car qui violt avoir amasser,
> Quant il n'en ist honors ne biens?
> Assés valt certes mains que fiens.
> *Li fiens encrassce vials la terre,*
> *Mais li avoirs c'on entreserre*
> *Honist celui ki l'i entasse.* (ll. 45-51, *emphasis mine*)
>
> All this they have changed into piling up manure;
> for who wants to amass wealth
> when neither honor nor good comes of it?
> It is surely worth less than manure.
> *Manure at least enriches the earth,*
> *but the wealth a man buries*
> *shames the one who hoards it.*

Despised not because they are wealthy, but because – as their name makes clear – they do not share their wealth with those who deserve it, the behavior of such individuals turns great riches (*biens*) into something even less useful than a pile of shit (*fiens*). The emphasis here is clearly on *utility*: money, like any other object of exchange, retains its value only so long as it is used. Its worth is not located in the material components of its physical composition, but in what these components stand for in their passing from one person to another. These passages allude to a functional relationship between economic exchange and the circulation of linguistic signifiers. In both cases, the object is but an abstraction – what St. Augustine might call a conventional sign – that serves as the representation of something other than its material components.[24] In fact,

[24] Conventional signs are described as "those [signs] which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood." These are opposed to natural signs, which "without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire." Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958) 35 (II.i.2 – II.ii.3).

medieval vocabulary recognized this commonality by using the word *symbolon* to refer to both word and coin,[25] a verbal conflagration strikingly similar to the one intimated in the prologue of *Le Roman de Silence*:

> S'il a .m. *mars* en une masse
> Trestolt icho tient il a nient,
> Et neporquant perdre le crient; (ll. 52-54, *emphasis mine*)
>
> If he has a thousand *marks* in a heap,
> it doesn't seem he has anything at all,
> and yet he is afraid of losing it

Heldris' courtly currency is *mars*, a term that, like its English equivalent, can denote both a measure of money and a graphic sign. Hoarding marks, the *avere gent* impede their circulation, prizing not the functional utility of the sign, but its idolatrous image. They are, as St. Augustine says, "slave[s] to a sign."[26] For the poet, whose work is based upon generating new meanings for the words he finds (*il trouve*, l. 4), such behavior problematizes the activity of poetic composition. The honor (*honors*) lost in such a non-exchange is both personal and poetic, as Geoffrey of Vinsauf's description of the challenge and benefit of effective metaphorical writing intimates:

> Haec duo mista
> Sunt et honos et onus: onus est transsumere vocem
> Ut decet, est et *honus cum sit trassumpta decenter*.
>
> Two things are mixed here: onus and honor – the onus of transferring a word properly, and *honor for having succeeded*.[27]

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[25] Eugene Vance, *Marvelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 130.

[26] Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 83-85 (III.iii.9. – III.iii.11): "He is a slave to a sign one who uses or worships a significant thing without knowing what it signifies."

[27] Ll 951-954. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *The Poetria Nova and its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine,* ed. and trans. Ernest J. Gallo (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 64-5.

By prizing the word itself instead of its power as a transferable instrument of signification, greedy people render it sterile and useless to the poet. One gets the feeling that even Chrétien might not be able to sow verse in such arid earth.

The antithesis of this avaricious conduct is found in King Ebains, whose behavior is in perfect accord with the poet's charitable guidelines. His land, we are told, is a model of virtue and honor, an accomplishment which the poet attributes to the monarch's ability to give and hold back appropriately:

> Del sien lor donoit liëment
> Et moult apparelliëment;
> Car cho doit cascuns prodom faire,
> *Doner et garder cui retraire,* (ll. 129-132, *emphasis mine*)
>
> He gave to them happily of his own wealth,
> and very becomingly.
> Every noble man should do this,
> *give and hold back appropriately*.

Such generosity, of course, stands in marked contrast to the greed of the *avere gent*, whose only reward for the poet is "a frowning face and a stingy one" (*bien laide chiere et une enfrume*, l. 29).[28] The specific vehicle through which Ebains channels his fiscal control and thus maintains the *concordia* of his realm is the *don*:

> Il maintenoit chevalerie,
> Si sostenoit bachelerie
> Nient par falose mais par dons. (ll. 121-123)
>
> He upheld chivalry,
> and kept his young knights

[28] Thus, the poet does, in reality, use a 'gloss' to explain the *avere gent*, even though he claims to have no need for such strategies (ll. 68-9). By showing how Ebains' practices (which are the exact opposite of those discussed in the prologue) are honorable, he also shows why the greedy people are dishonorable. This is an oft-employed rhetorical tactic, and its use is specifically mentioned in the *Roman de la Rose*: "*Ainsi va des contraires choses:/Les unes sont des autres gloses;/Et qui l'une en veult defenir,/De l'autre li doit souvenir*" (Thusly go the contrary things. The ones are of the others glosses, and he who wishes to define one has to remember the other, ll. 21577-21580). For a brief description of *contraires choses*, see Dragonetti, *Le Mirage des sources* 51.

not by deception but by gifts.

While selfish people recompense their subjects with a frowning, deceptive face, Ebains offers gifts – *don* is derived from the Old French verb *doner* (lat. *dono*), meaning to give, present, or bestow – to his loyal subjects. If for no other reason than the excessive repetition of its diverse forms in this part of the text (there are no less than nine instances of *don* or etymologically related words in the span of fourteen lines, ll. 122-135), this act of giving warrants further attention.

What, then, are these gifts that play such an important role in Ebains' control of his feudal realm? At least in part, they reflect the historical composition and function of the fief, although the narrative ultimately adapts this material to its own poetic ends.[29] While returning to the court one day, Ebains and his entourage are attacked by a terrible serpent who kills several of the king's men. Disturbed by this loss, Ebains offers a reward to any knight who would kill the offensive beast:

Jo lie donroie *une conté*
Et feme li lairai coisir
En mon roiame par loisir
Ki miols li plaira, celi pregne
Mais solement soit sans calengne. (ll. 382-386)

I would give him an *earldom*

[29] Economic exchange, in the form of rewards, or dons was the cornerstone of early French feudalism. In France, feudal society first came to the forefront during the Carolingian empire, beginning in the early ninth-century. For this group of rulers, feudal rewards were the logical means to an end. In order to accomplish their goal of spreading the doctrine of Christianity as far as possible, a wider-reaching network of power than that offered by a traditional centralized monarchy was required. Such a network was found in the series of dependent relations first established during their rise to power. The maintenance of these older ties, as well as the creation of new ones came to depend strongly upon economic compensation. As Marc Bloch explains, "Once in power, they had to reward these 'men'. They distributed lands to them, by methods which we shall describe in detail later. Furthermore, as mayors of the palace and then as kings they had to get supporters and above all create an army. So they attracted into their service - frequently in return for gifts of land - many men who were already of high rank." March Bloch, *Feudal Society*, vol. 1, trans. L.A. Manyon (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964) 158.

and I would let him choose
any wife in my kingdom, at his pleasure.
He may take whichever pleases him most,
as long as she is not already spoken for.

This *don*, then, includes two main features: a *conté* and a *feme*. The symbolic exchange of a woman occurs one other time in this text, when the King of Norway offers his daughter to Ebains as "a chattel of war" – tangible evidence of an accord between the warring countries.[30] Hence, within the context of the fiction, it is not surprising that Ebains makes this offer. What is interesting is that the names of both Ebains' queen (Eufeme) and Cador's first choice for a mate (Eufemie) are – like that of the father in *La Vie de Saint Alexis* – variations on the word euphemism (Gk. "use of good words").[31] A substitution of one signifier for another, these women are pleasing tokens in a symbolic exchange realized as part of the fiction's feudal politics. The female body is thus represented as a sort of human currency, one in a series of signfiers that negotiate a transfer of power between lord and vassal.

Similarly, the conception of a *conté* as tangible retribution only partly explains its textual significance: the endowment of valuable assets (e.g., a castle, land) is not its only feature, especially in the case of a high-ranking vassal who receives a landed fief. To give a *conté* - or any such fief - also implies the accordance of a title, a name.[32] He who gives the *don* is therefore also he who

[30] Kathleen J. Brahney, "When Silence Was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*," *The Spirit of the Court: Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society (Toronto 1983)*, eds. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Dover, NH: Brewer, 1985) 55.

[31] See p. 45 ff.

[32] Marc Bloch 131. It is interesting that during the assumed period of composition of *Silence*, the feudal title became a more important feature of the *don*, supposedly because fewer landed fiefs remained available for this use.

gives a name. Different from blood relations, which are founded on biological links, a feudal tie such as the one created between Cador and Ebains is based uniquely upon a cultural and symbolic system of signifiers. This pact creates a tie which need not exist in nature: Cador is now 'related' to the king by virtue of his new role in the monarchy.[33] Without this linguistic enunciation to designate a relation between them, there is no actual basis for the existence of a feudal tie. In this sense, the currency of Ebains' feudal politics is also a linguistic one. If we return to the *avere gent* of the prologue for just a moment, the inherent verbal fault of their conduct is now obvious: responding to the committed service of their subjects with only a muted facial expression, their crime is a crime of silence.

Breaking this silence is thus an authoritative discursive act, the practical and linguistic effects of which are clarified by further examination of the story of Cador and his chosen wife, Eufemie. A short time after the two are wed, Eufemie's father, Renaut of Cornwall, dies. And although he has already been promised the count's land and castle by both Ebains and Renaut, Cador immediately takes possession of them by force:

> Cador a fait com hom voisiés,
> Que anchois que li cuens morust,
> Que folors n'i entrecorust
> En tols les castials mist ses gardes.
> Tels gens ki ne sunt pas coärdes. (ll. 1646-1650)
>
> Cador behaved like a prudent man,

[33] Although Ebains refers to Cador as his "bials niés" (fair nephew, l. 532) nephew", this reference can not be understood as a clear indication of a genealogical tie between the two. Before Cador succeeds in slaying the serpent, he is only referred to as "Un vallet" (a young man, l. 391). It is not until after he has demanded that Ebains acknowledge his reward and thus the receipt of his *conté* and his title that Ebains refers to him as his "fair nephew". The actual sense of the term is therefore ambiguous, and Ebains' remark could simply reflect the fact the he and Cador are now affiliated by virtue of the *don*.

for as soon as the count died,
to prevent any disorder from erupting
he placed guards all around the castle,
men who were no cowards.

Clearly, this act is an assumption of the material trappings of power, but it is also the appropriation of a signifier, since Cador's claim to Renaut's physical property (part of his *conté*) is followed by his almost immediate adoption of the latter's title. In fact, the proper name Cador is mentioned only twice more, shortly after the above passage.[34] Certainly, the character *li cuens* (the count) is also the character Cador in the fiction, but this former name is replaced by a new one with his entrance into an alternative social and symbolic structure. Throughout the more than 5,000 remaining lines of the romance, he is only referred to as *li cuens*, the name he receives thanks to his newly acquired position in the feudal politics of the fiction. One signifier is substituted for another, with this change in appellation mediated by a transfer of physical assets.

The *metaphoric* relationship between these two names is an indication of the *metonymic* nature of the text's feudal symbolic structure as a whole. Symbolic signification is important not only to those who receive a *don* from the king, but also to the king himself. Ebains is praised because he is a king who keeps his honor and his knights by offering gifts. It thus seems logical that by not giving gifts, one could, like the *avere gent*, lose these things:

Car ki done derriänement
Il n'i a gré ains pert son don
Et plus avoec, son los, son non: (ll. 134-136, *emphasis mine*)

For he who gives grudgingly
gains no profit from it, but rather loses his gift,
and more along with it: his reputation and his good name.

[34] Cador (l. 1657), Li cuens Cador (l. 2148).

Note the paradox of feudal homage: he who gives grudgingly, can actually lose his *don* and, the text says, his *name*. While the king, by the nature of his social position, has the power to name, he depends upon the same process to give him his own title, his own feudal signifier. A feudal monarch such as Ebains retains his position and his power only as long as all the other members of this cultural structure continue to recognize him as 'the king.' Indeed, Ebains also defines himself with respect to others in the text, including the king of France: *Jo sui ses hom, il est mes sire* (I am his man, and he is my liege lord, l. 4255). Thus, a feudal title exists solely in relation to other titles, with no one title possessesing meaning in and of itself. Unable able to speak as an 'I' on its own, the feudal subject is quite literally "nothing other than that which slips into a chain of signifiers."[35] Since a subject can speak of himself only in relation to other subjects, identity is always generated by displacement; he who signifies must also be signified if he is to have any significance at all.[36] The accordance of a *don* not only rewards loyalty, but also perpetuates feudalism's symbolic order by reinforcing the identities of its otherwise faceless participants.

Law and Loss

However, as is so often the case when reading *Le Roman de Silence*, it is extremely difficult in this instance to maintain a single, definitive path of analysis. Although the differential symbolic network described above is indeed

[35] Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 48. "Le sujet ce n'est rien d'autre – qu'il ait ou non conscience de quel significant il est l'effet – que ce qui se glisse dans une chaîne de signifiants."

[36] I am using Lacan's term (displacement), which itself is developed from concepts of Freud and Jakobson, to denote the essentially associative means of definition inherent to metonomy. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977) 156.

at work in the Ebains' feudal politics, it only partially explains the subtle interplay of language, economic exchange, and political power in this narrative. The same is true of the historical relationship between lineage, inheritance, and the *don*. In his book *Etymologies and Genealogies*, R. Howard Bloch studies the evolution of familial structures and structures of signification throughout the Middle Ages.[37] He describes the medieval family as "a loosely defined grouping of relatives and retainers," a condition resulting from the equitable recognition of agnatic (male) and cognatic (female) lines, as well as family members with no blood or marriage ties.[38] Like the aforementioned relationships of exchange between Ebains and his feudal subjects, ties between members of such kinship groups are defined by spatial associations: an individual's status and the meaning behind his name or title is created and maintained through fluid structures of personal service to and compensatory rewards from other individuals, rather than an immutable or static affiliation between them.[39] In Bloch's opinion, it is a shift in how these family members identify each other as such that points to a shift in the signifying structure of the medieval family:

> The kin group as a spatial extension was displaced from within by the notion of the blood group as a diachronic progression: the power of feudal princes, once established geographically, produced a corresponding sense of the family through time. And not just any sense, since the "horizontal" clan, loosely spatially conceived, took on, through increased emphasis upon time and blood, a necessarily tighter and more "vertical" slant.[40]

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[37] R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983).

[38] R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies* 65-66.

[39] Note that the English word 'relative' can have either of these two connotations.

[40] R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies* 69.

In other words, biological relationships became more important than functional (feudal) ones, a realignment that greatly influenced the way in which assets (including both tangible ones like land and intangible ones such as titles) were transmitted.

While fictional texts are under no obligation to provide accurate reflections of historical trends – indeed, they often do quite the opposite – it is interesting to note that the political and symbolic structures of *Le Roman de Silence* also become increasingly "vertical," as sexuality, inheritance, and the power of Ebains converge. In what is perhaps the key event of this narrative, an unnamed count and his twin daughters arrive at the court, where two young counts are to marry the twins. However, the identical visual appearance of these sisters triggers a clash between their suitors over which shall receive the larger portion of a collective inheritance:

> Cho dist cascuns qui a l'ainsnee;
> Por quant li uns a la mainsnee.
> Mellee i ot por son avoir,
> Car cascuns [violt] la terre avoir. (ll. 281-284)
>
> Each one said that he had the elder,
> although in fact one had the younger.
> There was a war for the property,
> for each one wanted to have the land.

Specularly indiscernible from one another, these brides make it impossible to determine whom should receive the land and title of their father, a dispute that eventually leads to the death of both young counts. However, while the original argument was centered on the women's ages, Ebains' *venjance* is visited upon their sex:

> 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. (ll. 313-318)

But, by the faith I owe St. Peter,
never again shall a woman inherit
in the kingdom of England
as long as I hold this land.
This shall be my vengeance
for this wretched situation.

Missing or ignoring the true source of the problem, Ebains avenges one loss with another by suspending inheritance through the cognatic line. Women have lost the ability to inherit: what they lack – that which now determines whether or not a person will have the right to inherit in the kingdom of Ebains – is a male sexual organ. In the feudal politics of *Le Roman de Silence*, physical lack is also a lack of the phallus, for possession of male genetalia is now also what gives one the right to possess and control language through the feudal title (*conte*).[41]

Furthermore, by making inheritance dependent on biological sex, Ebains' legislative decree establishes a law within the narrative that mandates a continuity between corporeal features and social signifiers of gender, such as dress, name, and conduct. Indeed, agnatic biological inheritance shares an affinity with etymology, which seeks to establish a definite, traceable path of meaning through time. Just as the sense of a newer word is understood by the meaning of those from which it developed,[42] the power associated with the

[41] Lacan does not equate the phallus with the penis (although this is often a metonymic displacement of the phallus), for it is not an object, but a signifier — the master signifier — which allows for the metonymic and metaphoric functions of language. Inasmuch as Ebains law accords only males with the ability to inherit, and thus control the signifying function of the *conté*, it masks over the sexual non-specificity of this concept. Lacan, *Ecrits* 284-5.

[42] An example of this strategy is found in *De Doctrina Christiana*, (II.xi.16), where etymology is advocated as a means for understanding names in the scriptures: "The great remedy for ignorance of proper signs is knowledge of languages. And men who speak the Latin tongue, of whom are those I have undertaken to instruct, need two other languages for the knowledge of

agnatically inherited *patrimoine* is not validated by fluctuating horizontal associations, but by a vertical progression from father to son.[43] Ebains' demarcation of sexual difference within familial inheritance results in a similar, though not identical tightening of linguistic signification in the narrative. Linguistically speaking, the twin brides are homographs: identical in appearance but different in meaning. Although logically faulted (the same problem could still occur with twin sons), the king's legislative decree strives to avoid this situation by linking sexuality, writing, and death together in a new law of linguistic signification. Once all his subjects have taken an oath to abide by this ruling, Ebains buries the bodies of the two counts, inscribing an ominous *memento mori* on their coffins:

> Li rois fait les mors enterrer,
> En .ii. sarqus bien enserrer.
> Escrire i fait: "Par covoitise
> Tolt a maint home sa francise,
> Et plus avoec quant s'i amort
> Troter le fait jusque a la mort. (ll. 327-332)
>
> The king had the dead buried,
> Closed up in two fine coffins.
> There it was written: "Covetousness
> robs many a man of his nobility
> and still more when he is bitten by it:
> he hastens to his death.

This gesture bonds words to loss, transforming writing into a definitive mark of difference, the visible trace of a forbidden desire. Outlawing desire (*covoitise*), Ebains hopes to avoid any further misunderstanding (*mesestance*) within his

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Scripture. Hebrew and Greek, that they may have recourse to the original texts if the endless diversity of the Latin translators throw them into doubt." St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958) 43.

[43] A striking graphic model of this verticality is of course the family tree, which was in use during the Middle Ages. In the case of Ebains, he alludes to a straightness in his lineage when he refers to his possessions as his *droiture* (l. 5410), while females are said to be *contre droiture* (l. 672).

feudal realm by establishing a uniformity between appearance and identity, between words and their meaning.

Desire and the Silent Other

But just as Saint Paul suggests that he did not know sin until he knew the Law,[44] this new linguistic commandment incites its own transgression, as illustrated by the story of Silence's parents, the knight Cador and the maiden Eufemie. Respectively, these two characters are presented as idealized figures of masculine and feminine behavior. Cador,[45] for example, has all the attributes of the perfect knight:

> Un vallet o le roi avoit,
> Cador le preu, ki moult savoit.
> Il ert le plus vallans de tols,
> Li plus amés, et li plus prols. (ll. 391-394)
>
> But there was a young man with the king,
> Cador the valiant, who was very wise.
> He was the most valorous of all,
> the bravest and the most beloved.

Similarly, Eufemie is praised for her intelligence and superlative feminine beauty, which exceeds that of all her peers:

> Li cuens n'avoit enfant que li:
> Tols ses païs en abeli,
> Qu'el mont n'avoit plus bele mie,
> Et si l'apielent Eufemie.
> Des .vii. ars ert moult bien aprise. (ll. 399-403)
>
> The count had no other child,

[44] Take, for example the following passage from Romans 7:7-9: "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead."

[45] One of the more obscure points of intertextuality in in *Le Roman de Silence*, it is nevertheless interesting to note that a character named Cador also appears in the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth and, like the Cador of *Silence*, he is also the quintessential knight. For more information on his role in this narrative, see Douglas Kelly, *Medieval French Romance* (New York: Twayne, 1993) 5.

and she graced the whole land,
for there was no lovelier creature in all the world.
Her name was Eufemie.
She was well instructed in the seven arts.

Surpassing other men and women in both physical and mental refinement, Cador and Eufemie are the text's rhetorical exempla of 'ideal' gender behavior vis-à-vis biological sex. Granted, some of Eufemie's attributes and actions do not coincide with historical tradition, but this does not mean that the character represents an "unrealistic feminine ideal."[46] As a poetic work, *Le Roman de Silence* is not concerned with creating realistic representations, for it is first and foremost a fiction, a conjunction of *truth and lie*.[47] Therefore, its characters should not be construed as representations – faulty or otherwise – of a reality, but as literary figures, the pure products of poetic artifice. So, whether the idealized personages of Cador and Eufemie are unrealistic is of little consequence to their significance within the fiction. Rather, as deliberately constructed models of ideal masculinity and femininity, their importance lies in their role as purposeful elements of the text's discourse on sexuality.

A considerable portion of the narrative is devoted to the problematic courtship of this exemplary couple, and it is through an examination of relevant passages that its sexual/textual significance becomes more explicit. Given their common perfection, an amorous union between Cador and Eufemie would perhaps seem to pose few practical problems. Such is the reasoning used by Ebains when he considers the possibility of their marriage:

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[46] Anita Benaim Lasry, "The Ideal Heroine in Medieval Romances: A Quest for a Paradigm," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 32.3 (1985) 231.

[47] Recall that these are the words used by Heldris to describe his composition. *Jo ne di pas que n'i ajoigne / Avoic le voir sovent mençoigne / Por le conte miols acesmer* (I don't deny that I have joined many a fiction [lie] along with the truth to arrange the story better, ll. 1663-1665).

Die lor qu'il sunt d'un eäge,
D'une bialté, de halt parage,
Et quent eäges les ivuelle,
Et bialtés n'estroit pas mervelle
S'andoi quesisent l'aparel
Qu'il en amor fuscent parel. (ll. 1267-74, *emphasis mine*)

Tell them that they both of the same age,
and the same beauty, and noble birth;
and since age and beauty unite them,
it would be no wonder
if both of them sought the means
to be united in love as well.

Indeed, Ebains (who is ignorant of any actual sentiments between the two characters) is correct in his supposition, for the two are, in love with each other. However, whereas beauty, age, and noble lineage serve to unite Cador and Eufemie, love's effect upon the couple is more ambivalent.

Although their desire for each other is mutual, it is this same desire that so resolutely divides them. Evidence of this division between Cador and Eufemie, and thus, between the two textual poles of sexuality, is most noticeable in the means (*aparel*) by which their desire for one another must be expressed – language. Shortly after his initial appearance in the text, Cador's secret love for Eufemie is revealed to us by the narrator:

Cil l'ainme et dire ne li oze,
Ainz a s'amor si fort encloze
Que nuz ne l'aperçoit en lui. (ll. 405-407)

He loved her and dared not tell her;
instead he had so concealed his love
so that no one perceived it in him.

Held in secret, Cador's amorous sentiments are imperceptible to others as well as the desired other. Similarly, Eufemie loves Cador without daring to say so (*Fors lui amer sans ozer dire*, l. 770). So, the expression of desire is subjected to a mental silencing (l. 573), a repression of its presence from discourse that perpetuates

separation.[48] Desire thus becomes the locus of an absence or lack in the verbal exchange between the lovers, pointing to a fundamental interaction in the narrative between it and the powers of language.

The linguistic dynamics of this relationship become even more pronounced after king Ebains rewards Cador and Eufemie for services that they have rendered to the crown. Once again, they are pushed apart even as the their stories draw them together. As previously mentioned, Cador is accorded the privilege of choosing as his wife whichever woman in the kingdom pleases him the most (*Ki miols li plaira, celi prenge*, l. 385) as compensation for killing a dragon. Due to smoke inhaled during this battle, he falls ill and the king summons Eufemie, whose great ability in the seven arts qualifies her the best doctor in the land (*El pais n'a si sage mie*, l. 594). Having promised to cure the knight of his illness, Eufemie is offered a reward nearly identical to Cador's:

> N'i a prince si riche mie
> Qu'a baron ne l'ait Eufemie
> Celui que miols desire et ainme,
> Por c'altres forçor droit n'i clainme. (ll. 605-608)
>
> There was no prince in the world so powerful
> that Eufemie would not have him for her lord,
> whichever she most desired and loved,
> as long as no prior claim bound him.

At first blush, such a state of affairs might seem to clear the way for the revelation of this couple's hidden love. Instead, their frustration is all the more evident when they try to capitalize on these rewards by transposing their silenced desire into the medium of speech. In one of the most interesting

[48] This is the same sort of disjuncture that Freud, in contemplating the dreams and their representations, identified as repression or censorship, which for him occurred at both psychic (in the dream itself) and linguistic (in the patient's recounting of the dream) levels. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 310-338.

passages of the narrative, the linguistic results of this attempt are presented in poetically striking fashion. Having lost a battle to control her desirous heart, Eufemie goes to Cador's room to speak to him:

> Vient al cambre a son ami.
> Dist li: "Amis, parlés, haymmi!"
> Dire li dut: "Parlés a moi,"
> *Mais l'Amors li fist tel anoi*
> *Que dire dut: "Parlés a mi,"*
> *Se li a dit: "Parlés, haymmi!"* (ll. 881-886, *emphasis mine*)
>
> She went into her ami's room,
> and said to him; "Ami, speak, alas!"
> She should have said, "Speak to me,"
> *but love [Love] so troubled her*
> *that when she meant to say "Speak to me,"*
> *instead she told him, "Speak, alas!"*

Apart from the above translation of 'alas,' the word *haymmi* in this passage has also been interpreted as "to the middle" and "hate me."[49] Although such translation choices are certainly justifiable, the most important feature of this term is its literal status as a signifier of disappointment or loss. This is because the substitution of *haymmi* for the directive *a mi* is both a subtraction and an addition, the replacement of an intended meaning with another. In its overt contemplation of this metaphoric mistake, the text ascribes the blame to *Amors* (Love), who troubles Eufemie. The fact that love is personified in this passage is significant, since it shifts the sense of the word from an emotion that is *sensed by* Eufemie to an emotional force that *acts upon* her, or more accurately, upon her words. All of this suggests that a subject's speech can never really say what it wants to, its request for the desired object or other subjected by its desire to a

[49] R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986) 94. Loren Ringer, "Exchange, Identity, and Transvestism in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Dalhousie French Studies* 28 (1994) 10.

series of transformations and contaminations as it passes from silence into speech.[50] Elsewhere in the text, the power of the lover's heart is explicitly likened to the power of fire to deform or destroy written signs:

> Nient plus n'a cuers d'amant valor
> De bien retenir s[a] mimorie,
> Que cire encontre fu victorie
> De retenir la lettre escrite. (ll. 1174-1177)
>
> The heart of a lover can no more
> retain its memory [writing]
> than wax can prevail against
> the fire to retain the written letter.

Burning with desire, so to speak, the lover's heart melts its own writing (*mimorie*), thereby impeding the formal expression of its silent impulses. In this sense, language is not the means by which desire for the other can be articulated, but rather the means by which it is betrayed, always entering into the symbolic structures of language as a corrupted version of itself.

In Eufemie's case, the corrupted demand (*Parlés, haymmi!*) as well as its correct, but sublimated version (*Parlés a mi*) are also requests for Cador to speak. Here then, desire for the other is equated with a desire for the speech of the other,[51] and Cador responds to Eufemie's request, analyzing her confused *parole*:

> Cis mos "amis" fait esperer
> Cador qu'or para averer
> Cho qu'il plus convoite et desirre.
> "Aimmi!" demostre le martyre,
> Le paine d'amor qu'a sofierte;

[50] Lacan describes desire as "an effect of the subject of that condition which is imposed upon him by the existence of discourse, to make his need pass through the panes of the signifier." Jacques Lacan, "La Direction de la cure et les principes de son pouvoir," *La Psychanalyse* 6 (1961): 190.

[51] Here, Collete Soler provides an enlightening interpretation of this dynamic, which Lacan articulates in the article "Function and Field of Speech and Language": "Revelation in speech is produced between the subject who speaks and the subject who listens. More precisely, what produces revelation – and revelation in speech is revelation for the subject him or herself – is interpretation. Collete Soler, "The Symbolic Order (I)," *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Janus (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996) 42-43.

Mais que li parole est covierte (ll. 903-908, *emphasis mine*)

This word "ami" made Cador hope
that now he would be able to realize
what he most craved and desired.
"Alas" showed anguish,
the pain of love that she had suffered,
only the word was hidden.

Interpreting the troubled phrase, Cador attempts to find the hidden word or meaning of her speech. Like the poet, Cador is a *trouvère,* trying to 'find' words to fill in the lacunae of the empty or partially empty page. In this passage, then, two modes of representation are depicted. One – feminine – exposes an absence, the unintelligible but meaningful residue of desire, "a metonymic remainder" as Lacan calls it, while the other – masculine – attempts to eliminate that absence, to supplement its lack with signs, and thereby arrive at a revelation of the truth behind words, the Word itself.[52] Thus, in this episode, language is presented as the means by which desire – as that which is silent – might be revealed.

However, this revelation is the truth that appears only as a product of the 'play' in language, not an actual signifier. Thus, when Cador and Eufemie come to recognize their mutual love for the first time, this revelation is achieved not dialogically, but with a *silent kiss*:

Sans dire font, si com moi sanble,
De fine amor moult bon ensegne,
Car li baisiers bien lor ensegne
Et li qu'il trait paine et martire,
Et lui qu'ele l'aime et desire. (ll. 1094-98, *emphasis mine*)

[52] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 154. "This nodal point is called desire, and the theoretical elaboration that I have pursued in recent years will show you, through each stage of clinical experience, how desire is situated in dependence on demand – which, by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it, an element that is not indeterminate, which is a condition both absolute and unapprehensible, an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued (*méconnu*), an element called desire. Cf. Cooper 352.

They acted without speaking, it seems to me,
a very clear sign of noble love,
for the kiss taught them well;
her, that he suffered pain and martyrdom;
and him, that she loved and wanted him.

This kiss – literally a joining of *langues* (tongues) – is also the figurative joining of the couple's different representational languages (*langues*). Incapable of being expressed by either of them individually, the sign that is produced as well as what it teaches Cador and Eufemie, remain unspoken. This fusion of masculine and feminine is also equated – as it was in the *Conte du Graal* – to a medicine, which the text says will appear as a product of the exchange between these lovers:

Et lui garir par la mescine
Et li avoir par lui mecine.
U cascuns d'als son per garra,
U la mecine n'i parra. (ll. 875-878, *emphasis mine*)

Cador must be cured by the maiden
and she must have her medicine from him.
Either each one will cure his mate,
or the medicine will not appear.

Another name for the philosopher's stone of medieval alchemy, the *medecine* is that mysterious material reputed to have the power to change ordinary metals into gold, to perfect the imperfect, to unite the divided.[53] Here, alchemical transformation takes on the guise of sexual copulation, also a recurrent theme in texts from that field.[54] Furthermore, *mecine* (medicine) can be translated

[53] Saint Augustine also refers to God as the "Physician and Medicine" and suggests that textual analysis is a medicinal exercise. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 15 (I.xiv.13).

[54] The thirteenth-century doctor and alchemical practitioner Roger Bacon speaks of the attributes and uses of this *medicinam propriam* at considerable length in the *Speculum alchimiae*. *The Mirror of Alchimy Composed by the Thrice-Famous and Learned Fryer, Roger Bachon*, ed. Stanton J. Linden (London: Garland, 1992). For a summary of the ideas of Bacon and other alchemists, see Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

phonetically as "maiden" or, by use of a phonetic elision, as "my sign" (*me cine*). If the subject of this 'my' is the 'I' of narration (i.e., the poet) his sign leads us back to his desire to speak that which cannot be spoken, to name the ineffable, symbolized here by the silent kiss of Eufemie and Cador.

Nature's Nurturing, Nurture's (de)Naturing

Telling the story of Silence – the eventual product of this physical coupling between Cador and Eufemie – would thus represent an attempt to tell the story of silence, to recreate the tacit fullness of her parents' linguistic copulation by eliminating the difference between presence and absence, between desire and its linguistic signifiers. Certain traces of this attempt are easily discerned, including the ambiguous names used by the poet to refer the character: *li vallet qui ert meschine* (the boy who was a girl, l. 3704) or simply *li vallés mescine* (the boy-girl, l. 3763).[55] In these confused epithets, the conflation of the binary opposites 'boy' and 'girl' is symptomatic of a central movement in the narrative's thematic and poetic structures to eliminate both sexual and linguistic difference, with the character Silence serving as its ambiguous archetype.

The initial creation of this figure of linguistic and sexual totality is carried out by the goddess Nature who, like the *natura formatrix* of Alain de Lille's *Anticlaudianus*,[56] decides to fashion a paragon of her creative abilities. But whereas the goddess of *Anticlaudianus* chooses to create the perfect male, Nature here longs to fashion the perfect female form, to be distinguished from all other

[55] My own use of the word 'her' is marked by this same relationship, but for the sake of simplicity and consistency, I will refer to Silence using feminine pronouns.

[56] The goddess Natura in Anticlaudianus de Antirufino calls on her fifteen celestial sisters to aid her in the creation of a perfect man. For a detailed examination of this and other medieval texts that incorporate the goddess Natura, see Georges Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

women – much like her terrestrial mother Eufemie – by a superior feminine beauty:

> La matere ai moult estuïe,
> Si a[i] estei moult anuïe
> De grosse ouvre, et de vilainne.
> Or voel a cesti mettre painne.
> En li sole, car bel me sanble,
> Metrai plus de bialté ensanble
> Que n'aient ore .m. de celes
> Qui en cest monde sont plus beles. (ll. 1877-1884)
>
> I have saved this material for a long time,
> and I am very weary
> of coarse and ugly work.
> I want to take good care with this.
> In her alone – for so I wish –
> I will put more beauty together
> than now belongs to a thousand
> of the most beautiful women in the world.

The jealously-guarded material for this project must be free of imperfection, equated in the narrative to a well-sifted white flour, free of any chaff or straw (l. 1808 ff.), of which the product is a fine cake: *Et de la fleur fait ses gastials* (From the flour she makes her cake, l. 1821). Completely pure, integral, and without a mark of difference to blemish its surface, Silence's stark white body recalls the state of the blank page prior to poetic composition, a silent fullness that has not yet been transgressed by an intrusion of the written word. Indeed, Nature intimates that she is striving to create a lack of lack, a plenum: *Cho dist Nature: "Jo m'en duel/Si riens i falt*." (Nature said, "I shall grieve if anything is lacking." l. 1921).

Just as a well-baked cake brings about hunger, so too, does the perfectly white body/page of Silence induce a desire to signify, to recuperate its fullness in writing. Nature herself literally inscribes features onto the flawless face of her creation:

La bouce *escrist*, fait l'overture
Petite e levres a mesure
Sor le menton les dens serrés.
Ja nul si bel volt ne verrés. (ll. 1931-34, *emphasis mine*)

She *inscribed* [*wrote*] the mouth,
made the opening small, and the lips to match,
the teeth she set above the chin.
You will never see such a beautiful face.

Thus, the formation of Silence's body corresponds figuratively to the genesis of a written text which, like the poet's verses, are made *a mesure*. However, this text is so exquisite that it will *never be seen*, existing in written form only as a simulacrum of that which it names. Beyond the descriptive powers of language, integral only in its linguistic absence, Silence's body is the locus of an ultimate articulation, the Other that escapes language and whose most accurate expression "is a circumscription of absence or emptiness."[57] To some extent, Cador's choice of the surname Silence for his child (l. 2067 ff.) acknowledges the futility of an attempt to name such a figure, for this word belies its own lack. That which cannot be signified points not to something, but to nothing, a no-thing that cannot be directly expressed in language.

At the same time, both the absence of Silence's perfect female body and and her grammatically indeterminate name pose a problem for her father. Because of Ebains' recent law against female inheritance, Cador requires a male heir in order to preserve the genealogical continuity of his estate: a female child would result in forfeiture of the patrimony. Therefore, prior to the birth of their child, Cador suggests that, in the event their child is a female, he and Eufemie should circumvent the law by means of a specular ruse:

[57] Cooper 346.

Faisons li com un fil norir,
De priés garder et bien covrir,
Si le poons, del nostre engier. (ll. 1757-1759)

Let us raise her as a son,
keep and protect her closely [guard and cover her well],
if we can, with our endowments [trick].

In this way, Cador will have a 'son' even if he truly has a daughter, giving him a legal successor, or at least the appearance thereof. To do so, he must cover, or silence, the politically disadvantageous body of his daughter by dressing her in male clothing:

Quant li enfes pot dras user,
Por se nature refuser
L'ont tres bien vestu a fuer d'ome
A sa mesure, c'est la some. (ll. 2359-62, *emphasis mine*)

When the child could wear clothes,
in order to deny her nature
they dressed her all in a man's fashion,
scaled down to her size [*measure*], that's the truth.

Like the poet, who promises to tailor (*tailler*) his verses strictly to the measure of the silent holes in language, so too, does Cador intend to cover the ineffable female body of his daughter with masculine clothes, cut strictly to her measure. Within the political drama of the fiction, Silence is a representation of the poet's own desire to fashion the illusion of presence where there is only absence.

This change in clothes is accompanied by a change in the heroine's name, a frequent occurrence in medieval texts with cross-dressing female characters. However, whereas re-namings in other texts consist of a simple re-writing of the original feminine names,[58] this same activity in *Le Roman de Silence* involves the application of both a feminine and masculine supplement to a common root:

[58] Cf. Perret 332.

Mellor consel trover n'i puis.
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'atres seroit par nature (ll. 2073-2082)

I can find no better solution.
He will be named Silentius,
and if it happens by chance
that his true nature is discovered,
we will change the -us to -a,
and she will be named Silentia.
If we remove this -us from her,
we will give her more natural custom,
for this -us is against nature,
but the other would be according to nature.

Defying what he himself considers a natural continuity between biological sex and outward signifiers of gender, Cador violates grammatical laws of proper linguistic representation. A female body covered by a masculine signifier, the child Silentius is, in the parlance of Alain de Lille, a barbarian in grammar, an over-exaggerated metaphor that bends the rules of expression too far by confusing gender categories, which Alain considers a defect.[59] At the same time, however, it is this linguistic defect that allows Cador to correct what in the fiction's feudal politics amounts to a physical one: by grafting the suffix *-us* onto the radical Silence, Cador is able to confer upon his daughter, at least artificially,

[59] Alain describes homosexuality in grammatical terms: "A man turned woman blackens the fair name of his sex. The witchcraft of Venus turns him into a hermaphrodite. He is subject and predicate: one and the same term is given a double application. Man here extends too far the laws of grammar. Becoming a barbarian in grammar, he disclaims the manhood given him by nature. Grammar does not find favour with him but rather a trope. This transposition however, cannot be called a trop. The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects." Alain de Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1980) 68. Cf. R. Howard Bloch, "Silence" 85.

that which she lacks – a penis. Creating the linguistic illusion of a physical presence, Cador undermines the same exterior signifiers of sexuality upon which Ebains' new etymologically-inspired law is founded.

The grammatical prosthetic -*us* can thus be understood as the narrative's graphic mark of falsified genealogical continuity, an image recuperated later in the narrative when Silence presents herself to her own father disguised as the jongleur *Malduit*. The significance of this name would be hard to miss, since it literally means "poorly educated." However, despite the clue contained in this name and the vehement claims of an old white-haired man that this *jongleur* is Silence, Cador is not convinced of Malduit's sublimated identity until he receives written confirmation:

> Sor diestre espaule li ensegne
> *Une crois qu'il ot a ensegne*
> Ormais puet li cuens bien croire:
> Donc a baisié son fil en oire. (ll. 3647-50, *emphasis mine*)
>
> He showed his father a mark
> on his right shoulder *in the shape of a cross, as a sign*.
> Then the count could finally believe it,
> and he kissed his son at once.

The only means by which Cador is able to recognize the *jongleur* Malduit as his son, this graphic mark on the body is, like the -*us* of her masculinized name, a contrived signifier of familial succession. It is also the mark of linguistic continuity, for the inheritance that Cador wishes to pass on – his *conté* (earldom) – is almost orthographically indistinguishable from the *conte* (tale) and his holdings include an allowance of *.m. livres* (a thousand pounds/books, l. 1295). Silence, or more precisely, Silentius is not only Cador's son (*fil*), but also the continuation (*fil*) of literary production for the poet. Graced with a seal of the familial *conté,* Silence is next in line to rise to the status of *li cuens* – he who

administers the *conté* and the *conte*. So, the barbarous *-us* of her name and the cross inscribed on her shoulder are marks of linguistic authority, the phallus.[60]

In fact, Silence's nurturing is so complete that there is almost no trace of femininity left, either in her or on her. Raised by Cador's cousin and a seneschal of the count, Silence receives all the instruction of a male child, surpassing even her biologically male peers in traditionally masculine pursuits like jousting and swordplay. In addition, her skin is deliberately altered by frequent exposure to the elements in order to make it more closely resemble what the text deems to be that of a male:

> Sel mainne plus sovent el halle
> Por cho qu'il violt faire plus malle.
> 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.* (ll. 2473-78, *emphasis mine*)
>
> He [the seneschal] took him most often out in the sun,
> to make him look more like a male.
> The child was so used to *masculine ways*,
> and had so refused the feminine,
> that he was very nearly a boy;
> *what could be seen of him was entirely male.*

His daughter completely covered with both vestimentary and corporeal signifiers of masculinity (*us d'ome*), Cador seems to have succeeded in his attempt to turn a girl into a boy, in naming the unnameable body of Silence. Thus, the allegorical character Nurture (*Noreture*) – presented as Nature's sworn enemy – claims that she has completely denatured Nature's creation (*Jo l'ai tolte*

[60] Here, it is interesting to note one of Lacan's descriptions of the phallus: "Because the phallus is not a question of form, or of an image, or of a phantasy, but rather of a signifier, the signifier of desire. In Greek antiquity the phallus is not represented by an organ but as an insignia; it is the ultimate significative object, which appears when all the veils are lifted." Jacques Lacan, *Seminar of April-June, 1958* p. 252, quoted in Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,* ed. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) 187.

desnaturee, l. 2595). This boast proclaims not only the failure of Ebains' laws of sexualized representation, but also the success of the poet's efforts to modify language to his will: the verb *desnaturer* is, to borrow Geoffrey of Vinsauf's expression, a *rejuvenated* word,[61] a poetic invention created by transforming the noun *nature* into a verb with the addition of a prefix (*des*-) and a suffix (-*er*). Tailoring signifiers to fit the needs of his tale, the poet transforms language into a pliant instrument of his desire, his *mescine*.

That Which is Not There

The only noticeable threat to this otherwise successful *vita in camera* is Ebains' wife Eufeme, whose unwelcome advances eventually lead to the undoing of Silence's vestimentary disguise and the rest of her sexual ruse.[62] When Silence first arrives at the court of Ebains, she is enthralled with *li vallés mescine*, a sensual attraction brought on solely by the young person's outer appearance:

> La roïne en est molt esprise
> Por sa façon, por sa bialté (ll. 3693-3694)
>
> The queen was very taken
> by his appearance and his beauty.

This admiration is unfortuante, for much earlier in the tale, Nature warns Silence of the problems that her indeterminate sexuality will create in relationships with members of the female sex:

> .m. femes a en ceste vie
> Ki de toi ont moult grant envie
> Por le bialtet qu'eles i voient,
> *Car puet scel estre eles i croient*

[61] See p. 113.

[62] Edward J. Gallagher, "The Modernity of *Le Roman de Silence*," *University of Dayton Review* 21.3 (Spring 1992): 35.

Tel cose qu'en toi nen a mie (ll. 2513-17, *emphasis mine*)

There are a thousand women in this life
who will greatly desire you
for the beauty they will see in you,
and because they will think to find in you
something that is not there at all.

Reducing feminine sexual desire to a desire for the sexual member of the male other, Nature bemoans the *cose* that Silence does not really have. Rather, with her masculine dress and the *-us* of her name, possession of this biological signifier is strictly an appearance, an illusion.

This illusion however, is enough to fool Eufemie, whose understanding of signs is based not upon their *hidden word*, but upon the emptiness of their visual representation:

Seroit la roïne sanee
Kist par *sanblant* moult enganee. (ll. 3721-22, *emphasis mine*)

The queen would be healed,
who was so mislead by *appearances*.

This lack of hermeneutic ability allows the queen to fall in love with Silence, and in an effort to seduce her, she feigns illness so that boy-girl will remain by her bedside. Once there, Eufeme proclaims her love for the boy and proposes an amorous exchange of kisses:

Por .i. baisier vos donrai .ii.
Et ne vos sanble bien estrange
Que vos avrés si riche cange? (ll. 3761-3763)

For one kiss I will give you two.
Does it not seem strange to you
that you should have such a rich exchange?

As was true in the coupling of Cador and Eufemie, kisses here are the means by which Eufeme hopes to realize the physical union between her and Silence, revealing the 'medicine' that would be the cure for her illness. However, this

exchange is tilted in Silence's favor from the start, and what little Eufeme does receive in return for her lovely and amorous kisses is not what she expected:

> Li dona .i. baisier sinple,
> Car il n'entent pas, al voir dire,
> Con fait baisier ele desire. (ll. 3766-3768)
>
> And he gave her one simple kiss,
> and truth to tell he did not understand
> what kind of kiss she wanted.

Thus, all that Eufeme encounters in her exchange with Silence is loss, for Silence is unable to give her what she wants. Her desire leads only to deception, for what she desires the other is not able to give, whether this *don* be physical or symbolic.

In fact, the sexual indeterminacy generated by Silence's disguise turns her into the narrative's "object of universal desire."[63] In both her masculine and feminine guises, Silence garners the admiration of a score of different characters, both male and female: the king of France, her parents, Ebains, and Eufeme. Thus, when she leaves the country to follow two wandering minstrels who passed the night in the home of the seneschal, everyone laments her loss. Cador, who is under the impression that Silence has been kidnapped by the *jongleurs,* conceives of their crime as such:

> Li cuens set que li jogleör
> Ont pris del mont le mireör. (ll. 3115-3116)
>
> The count knew that the jongleurs
> had taken away the mirror of the world.

Despite the fact that Cador is mistaken in his accusation, this passage is notable for its use of the term *mireör*. The image of the mirror, or *speculum* is a common

[63] R. Howard Bloch, "Silence" 89.

one in medieval literature, appearing in several works of fiction from this period, including *Le Roman de la Rose*. In addition, medieval grammar generally conceived of language as an indirect *reflection* of inaccessible truths, and was thus referred to as *grammatica speculativa*.[64] Here, what Silence reflects, or at least did reflect before her disappearance, is the speech of others, linguistic desire. For without Silence, Cador's kingdom is a land of linguistic crisis where all *joie* (joy) has been lost, a joy which is essentially that ecstasy of hearing ones' own speech reflected back in the mirror that is s/Silence:

> Quant il est lius de *mener joie*
> Apertement, si con bien *l'oie*,
> U quant il est lius de parler
> C'on *voit* sa coze devorer,
> Moult grieve mains par certes l'uevre
> Quant on le cuer si en descuevre
> Com li afaires li requiert,
> Et si c'on a le coze afiert.
> *Mais cist nen osent faire noise* (ll. 3035-43, *emphasis mine*)
>
> When it is time to *rejoice* openly,
> so that everyone *hears* it,
> or when it is time to speak
> and one *sees* one's speech received eagerly,
> the matter is much less painful
> when one can open one's heart about it,
> as need requires it,
> and speech is suitable to it.
> *But these lords did not dare to make any noise.*

The rhyming play that associates *joie, oie,* and *voit* in this passage is a striking portrait of the poet, whose joy is to emit signs, have these signs be heard, and see them reflected back through the mirror of written language. Deprived of s/Silence – the mirror onto which linguistic desire is reflected – no noise can be made.

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[64] Julia Kristeva, *Le langage, cet inconnu: Une initiation à la linguistique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981) 134-42.

Possessing this mirror, however, does not necessarily guarantee great *joie*. When Silence escapes to France with the *jongleurs*, they are at first enthusiastic about having the child as a companion and apprentice. However, once Silence has learned the poet's trade, she very quickly surpasses her teachers, and the audiences no longer want to listen to anyone else. This enrages the tutors, who accuse *li vallés mescine* of having stolen their poetic knowledge and, along with it, their money:

> Duree n'i puet nus avoir:
> Cis a emblé nostre savoir. (ll. 3267-3268)
>
> No one can deny it:
> This one has stolen our knowledge.
>
> Nostre damages doblera,
> Car nostre avoir enportera (ll. 3277-3278)
>
> He will double our loss,
> for he will take away our wealth.

Differing by only a single letter, the *savoir* and the *avoir* of the poets are nearly identical and, as in the prologue of this text, the wealth in question is composed of *marcs* (marks, l. 3356). Thus, the *avoir* that Silence steals is not only monetary currency, but also the linguistic currency of poetic signifiers, while the purloined knowledge (*savoir*), is the ability to manipulate and control them. In an attempt to reappropriate this treasure, the poets plot to take Silence's head, the physical locus of this stolen (*s)avoir*. However, this plan ends in failure as Silence, who is now a master of signs, is able to interpret a dream in which dogs attempt to tear her from limb to limb as a foretelling of her masters' scheme:

> Silences entent et escolte.
> Or n'est il pas de cho en dolte,
> Que li doi culviert desperé
> N'eüsscent son songe averé
> Des chiens dont il avoit songié

Se il n'eüscent le congié. (ll. 3403-3408)

Silence listened and heard.
He was no longer in any doubt
that the two desperate villains
would have made his come dream true,
the dream about the dogs,
if they hadn't plotted aloud together.

Here then, Silence uses the same type of dream-interpretaion that Freud equates with "hitting on a clever idea," an inventive, poetic interpretation of the dream material.[65] Listening and hearing, Silence's linguistic quietude is what allows her to avoid harm: her stillness creates a space for poetic activity.[66] As a result, she is able to walk away with more marks than each of the *jongleurs*: *Et l'enfens .c. mars en depart/A çals en lasce plus de .c.* (And the boy took a hundred marks for his share, leaving them over a hundred, ll. 3474-3475). It is in fact Silence – the *mirror of the world* – who steals something, not the *jongleurs*. Exchanging signs with the poets, but never returning a like amount, Silence is a symbol of the silent mirror of language that refracts rather than reflects desire.

The Silent Truth

From the moment when Silence is first given her adaptable surname by Cador, *Le Roman de Silence* taunts readers with the possibility of seeing beyond this disguise. Like her masculine clothes, Silence's name constitutes a paradoxical attempt to stitch over a silent fullness and recuperate it within the

[65] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 97. See p. 3 ff.

[66] Martin Heidegger suggests that both motion and stillness are vital characteristics of a poetic 'presence.' "What is moved is brought to the stand and position of a presencing (verbal), brought in a bringing-forth. This can occur in the manner of *physis* (allowing something to emerge of itself) or in the manner of *poesis* (to produce and represent something). The presence of presencing, whether it is something at rest or in motion, receives its essential determination when motion and, with it, rest as fundamental characteristics of Being originating from presencing are understood as one of its modes. Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 5.

confines of language. Silentius, which is *contre nature* (against nature, l. 2081) can, says Cador, be replaced by Silentia, which would be *par nature* (by nature, l. 2082). Yet in almost the same breath, we are told that removal of the suffix *–us* would grant the child more *natural us* (natural custom, l. 2080). Natural and unnatural are thus not so clearly separated as other passages in the text would have us believe. Even the poet seems uncertain of which side of this debate he supports. After a particularly heated exchange between Nature and Nurture, he interrupts the tale in order to address his audience directly:[67]

> Con di me tu? Qui somes nos? (l. 2416)
>
> What do you have to say about it? Who are we?

Often, the purpose of such interrogative exchanges is not to solicit a response but to support a particular position or claim advocated by the poet.[68] In this instance, however, a definitive response is not forthcoming. For while we are told a few verses later that "Nature rules over Nurture" (*Nature signorist desor Noreture*, l. 2423-2424), the fiction itself repeatedly asserts the opposite, suggesting that beings can be "completely denatured" (*tolt desnaturée*, l. 2595).

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[67] Though relatively rare in contemporary fiction, such deliberate breaks are often used as a means of maintaining the attention and goodwill first established in the prologue of medieval texts. Like some of the other rhetorical strategies discussed in the previous two chapters (self-denegration, brevity, etc.), such feigned dialogues are part of the poet's attempt to obtain the attention and goodwill of an audience a task most often undertaken in the prologue. See Curtius' chapter entitled "Topics of the Exordium," where he discusses many of the poetic tools used in the *captatio benevolentiae*. Certainly, it would be easy to ascribe these intrusions to what many consider to be the oral foundations of vernacular romance. However, to limit our understanding to the practical realm would be to occlude their poetical function as part of a written manuscript.

[68] Such is often the case in the *Roman de Silence*. See, for example, verses just before the one in question (v. ll. 2307-2309), where the narrator offers his own, emphatic "*Oïl*" (Yes!) in reply to his query. The general rhetorical term for this category of figures is *interrogatio* (Gr. *erotema*), an appellation which encompasses what is referred to in contemporary parlance as a 'rhetorical question.' For Quintilian, this passage would be an example of what he calls *communicatio,* a moment when an orator takes an audience into consultation (*...quae dicitur communicatio, cum aut ipsos adversarios consulimus...,* IX, ii, 20).

Working against itself, the narrative seems to preclude any answer to this critical question.

That events fall so resolutely in favor of Nature during the closing episodes of *Le Roman de Silence* thus seems more than a litle suspect. Furthermore, given the fact that Silence manages at one point to deceive even her own father, it is somewhat surprising that Cador and Eufemie's hoax is discovered at all. However, the narrative holds what amounts to a literary trump card: the all-seeing, all-knowing Merlin.[69] Thinking she has found the perfect means to a lasting revenge of her unrequited desires, Eufeme convinces Ebains to send the *vallés mescine* on a search for Merlin who, says the queen, claimed that he could be captured only by a woman's trick (*engien de feme*, l. 5803):

> Mais il le pora .m. ans quierre
> Anchois que il le prenge mie.
> U cho n'est mie prophezie
> Icho que Merlins dist adonques,
> U cis revenra mais onques. (ll. 5814-5818)
>
> But he could seek him for a thousand years,
> before he could ever catch him.
> Either what Merlin said then
> was not a true prophecy,
> or Silence will never return.

She is, of course, mistaken in her reasoning, yet another tactical error caused by her inability to read past the exterior signifiers of masculine gender that cover Silence's female body. Thus, assisted by the goddess Nature (who claims that Merlin has also been turned from her righteous path), Silence does, in fact, manage to capture the wizard.

[69] This is one of the traditional attributes of his fictional character. It is the seventh book of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *L'Estoire de Merlin* that contains accounts of his various prophecies.

Yet Silence's unexpected return to the court does not immediately provoke suspicion regarding her biological sex. Rather, as Ebains' reaction to the arrival of the boy-girl and her captive shows, it is the veracity of Merlin's prophecies that is called into question:

> Or est il viers Merlin espris
> Por cho qu'il dist ja n'estroit pris
> Se ne fust par engien de feme (ll. 6177-6179)
>
> He was astonished at Merlin,
> who said that he would never be captured
> except by a woman's trick.

Because the continuity between biological sex and appearance remains an inconturnable truth for the king, Merlin's soothsaying is necessarily so much *joglerie*. So, when Merlin presents the court with a whole new set of prophecies, they are subjected to a harsh scrutiny of their content. Most prominent among these is the allegation that Silence fooled him with her boy's dress (*Silences ra moi escarni/En wallés dras, c'est vertés fine*, ll. 6534-6535), a claim that verified by the disrobing of Silence (along with a nun who Merlin says is also guilty of deceptive dress):

> Li rois en est encor en dolte.
> Fait Merlin fermement tenir
> Et dont a fait avant venir
> La nonain, sil fait despollier,
> Et Silence despollier roeve.
> Tost si com Merlins dist les trueve. (ll. 6568-6573)
>
> The king was still in doubt.
> He had Merlin firmly restrained
> and then had the nun come forward,
> and had her stripped,
> and requested Silence to strip.
> They found the two just as Merlin had said.

Like the other prophecies, this one is found to be accurate, with Merlin's words corresponding to the physical evidence uncovered by the court. As a result,

Ebains proclaims that the actual sexual identity of *li vallés mescine* can now be seen: *Nos veöns bien que tu iés feme* (We see clearly that you are a woman, l. 6586). The truth, it would seem, has been revealed.

However, the reliability of this proclomation as a gurantor of the truth is questionable at best. First, her body is never really described in the fiction, the veracity of its sex "guaranteed by the king's authority, not by evidence on the body."[70] In addition, the text itself problematizes the signifying power of the body, reducing it to yet another piece of clothing, another imperfect disguise:

> Li cors n'est mais for sapelliere (l. 1845)
>
> The body is nothing but another rough garment

If this is so, then not even nakedness reveals anything.[71] Rather, it hides an identity which cannot be signified, cannot be explicitly written or said. In this sense, *any* covering of the body is an illusion, with its propriety based upon a body which is itself an abstraction. So, when Silence is returned to her 'natural' appearance, even this appearance betrays its supplemental nature:

> D'illuec al tierc jor que Nature
> Ot *recovree* sa droiture
> Si prist Nature a *repolir*
> Par tolt le cors et a tolir
> Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle. (ll. 6669-73, *emphasis mine*)

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[70] Peggy McCracken, "'The Boy Who Was a Girl': Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*," *Romanic Review* 85 (1994): 535.

[71] Silence herself alludes to this fact earlier in the tale. Enraged by Silence's manly lifestyle, Nature enjoins the boy-girl to take up more feminine activities, including sewing. Silence listens carefully, but ultimately rejects any possibility of an identity other than the one at the level of the signifier –us. "My name is Silentius, I think, or I am someone else than I was. But this I know well, by my right hand, that I cannot be any other! So I am Silentius, it seems to me, or I am no one [naked]." (*Silencius ai non, jo cui, / U jo sui altres qu ne fui. / Mais cho sai jo bien, par ma destre, / Que jo ne puis pas altres estre! / Donques sui jo Scientius, /Cho mest avis, u jo sui nus*, ll. 2533-2538). Were she stripped of the name Silentius and her masculine clothes, Silence would not only be naked, she would be *no one*, the source of her identity not the immutable corporeal features her body, but rather her social comportment. For further information on this topic, the reader is directed to consult Roger Dragonetti's comments on this topic in *Le Mirage des Sources* 50.

On the third day after Nature
had *regained* [*recovered*] her right,
she began to *reembellish*
Silence's whole body, and to remove
everything masculine about her.

One set of signifiers that simply takes the place of another, even Silence's *natural* gender appearance is an embellishment. The verb *repolir*, literally the recovering of the skin with hair, figuratively reflects the re-writing of Silence's masculine name that is the other mark of her supposed return to a state *par nature*:

Silence *atornent* come feme.
Segnor, que vos diroie plus?
Ains ot a non Scilensiüs:
Ostés est -us, mis i est -a,
Si est només Scilentiä. (ll. 6664-68, *emphasis mine*)

They *dressed [rearranged]* Silence as a woman.
Lords, what more should I say?
Before, her name was Silentius;
the -us was removed and -a put in its place,
and she was named Silentia.

Similar to Nature's reembellishment of Silence's body, the substitution of the suffix *–a* is but an exchange of signifiers, with neither one able to express what lies beneath them Defying accurate categorization and classification, Silence's name is inherently non-grammatical, and any attempt to make it so merely reveals the impropriety of the words used.

Just as the various disguises and names that attempt to enclose Silence with vestimentary and linguistic signifiers meet with failure, so too, does the poet's desire to tailor his verses strictly to the measure of silence – that ultimate articulation – end in division in resignation. The final word in the narrative – the one with which he ends a poem for which he claims there will be not a word left to say – does not indicate rest or repose, but continued longing, *désirent*:

Beneöis soit aui le vos conte,

Beneöis soit qui fist le conte.
A cials, a celes qui l'oïrent
Otroit Jhesus cho qu'il desirent. (ll. 6703-6706)

Blessed be he who tells the story,
And blessed be he who wrote it.
And to all those who hear it
May Jesus grant them what they desire.

Confronted with the task of naming that which is unnamable, of turning absence into presence, the poet is only able to desire, and not name his desire, for the fullness of silence is present only in its absence, in the termination of the poet's verse.