Lyric Discourse and Female Vocality: On the Unsilencing of Silence

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The practice of lyric allows both Silence and Nicolete of *chantefable* fame to transcend the limits of gender, by validating both their male and female personae at once. Whether purely literary convention or reality, this empowerment is characteristic of medieval lyric discourse.(CC)

At the age of twelve, Silentia must face the first major crisis involving her dual identity. Though she concedes this round to Nurture, and decides to remain Silentius, she is not entirely at peace with her male persona, as her actions reveal: when she sets off with the pair of itinerant minstrels and learns their trade, Silentia is affirming her dual gender rather than choosing one or the other. For by becoming a jongleur, she is able to step into a space where gender circularity is the norm, and where the tension between her public and private identity does not have to be resolved. Lyric, in Frederick Goldin's now classic study (1967), is a discourse which defines maleness in female terms: the idealized female sung by men is a mirror which reflects men's aspirations for perfection (70–77). By placing himself in the service of a woman he exalts, moreover—by assuming the subservient role customarily assigned to women—the troubadour in effect blurs the gender boundaries between himself and the object of his desire. The result is not a sharing of real power between the sexes, as the rhetoric of love service bespeaks a profound ambivalence about female sexuality.[1] There is nonetheless a tangible benefit in the gender blurring which characterizes lyric discourse, for just as men can use lyric to describe themselves in female terms, women are by the same token able to pose publicly as men. Lyric is a space where men can write for women who then sing as men, or sing as men do—where under the transvestite's cloak, there is a greater mingling of male and female voices than was otherwise possible. The example of Silentia leaves no doubt that this process, when it occurs, is highly intentional.

Silentia had in fact no choice, no other mechanism by which to live with her double gender than to be a singer. For by the time her story is told, there is an established tradition which recognizes lyric as a form which gives a

public voice to women,[2] and Master Heldris of course taps into this tradition when he develops Silence as a singer and instrumentalist. She is already adept at martial pursuits, and has certainly found her place in the masculine world of knightly prowess, but as Silentius, she is incomplete: she has no voice as a woman. By becoming a minstrel—and Nature naturally ensures that her prodigy be as accomplished at minstrelsy as at chivalry—she has found a way to live the twofold aristocratic ideal of 'armes et amor.' Following her brilliant career as a singer/instrumentalist, she distinguishes herself in battle but is by then so far removed from herself that her half year of solitary wandering in search of Merlin is arguably essential to the recovery and reassertion of her female self.

Straight narrative, and this narrative more than others of its period, is a very ineffective medium for exploring the issue of lyric space and gender flexibility. Lyric practice is observable only from a very oblique angle in *Silence*, and we must look to other genres in order to find a mirror for the psychodynamics of singing and engendering as Silence experiences them. The contemporary *chantefable Aucassin et Nicolete* offers us a revealing *mise en scène* of the empowerment of women through lyric, and allows us to understand as central to the thirteenth century the questions of gender and voice which have for so long kept the *Roman de Silence* in canonic obscurity.

Both Silentia and Nicolete embody many of the period's contradictions regarding woman's place in the masculine world of loving and singing. Like Silentia, Nicolete is a paragon of courtly virtue, and like Silentia, she is shrouded in mystery. Though apparently noble by virtue of her striking beauty and exemplary behavior, she is a freed slave, and worse, presumably of Saracen origins. She is thus, by the conventions of society, inaccessible to Aucassin, like every good *domna*, though for opposite reasons. But Nicolete has in fact never accepted her place on the pedestal. She is a flesh and blood lover: tender, courageous, resourceful, and every bit Aucassin's equal. Aucassin is not able to recognize her equality with him, however, and he expresses all of the courtly lover's usual ambivalence about his love object. When Nicolete has succeeded in locating Aucassin in prison despite the price on her head, he still insists that women aren't capable of loving as men do: 'Li amors de la fenme est en son oeul et en son le cateron de sa mamele et en son l'orteil del pié'[A woman's love is located in her eye and in the nipple of her breast and in the toe of her foot] whereas for men, 'li amors est ens el cué plantee, dont elle ne puet iscir'[love is planted in the heart, from which it cannot leave].[3] In women, he claims, love is a purely physical impulse; woman is pure *eros*, whereas only a man can experience *agape.* Nicolete does not appear at all slighted by this misogynistic blindness, for she knows better—she is a far

better reader of courtly lyric than is her *ami*. She knows that through lyric expression, men and women can experience love in the same way.

Not only does Aucassin shun the notion that lyric discourse can allow women to merge partially with men, he is frankly outraged by the realization that through the same process, men can become women. Though exaggeratedly comic, the episode of Torelore (laisses XXVII–XXXIV) is significant in that it writes large the anxiety which surrounds this question. It is in a lyric laisse that the king of Torelore informs Aucassin of the ultimate physiological consequences of lyric cross-gendering. As we know, he is pregnant and in childbed, and the queen is at present on the battlefield in command of the army. Aucassin is sufficiently threatened by this situation that he beats the unfortunate king until the latter promises never to subvert proper gender roles again. But subverted they must be, or Aucassin would never see his Nicolete again. For when they are separated by fate after a period of blissful indolence in the kingdom of Torelore, Nicolete's initiative is again responsible for bringing them together. She, like Silence, becomes a minstrel, disguises herself with a potion of skin-darkening herbs, and travels unhindered as a man in search of her beloved. In the end, the resumption of her femininity is accompanied by the revelation that she is royal, and she and Aucassin are married forthwith.

The nature of Nicolete's position within the marriage is of paramount importance. For while nothing precludes her accepting the role of dutiful, submissive and silent spouse, everything the tale has shown us about Nicolete suggests otherwise. Most significantly, she has acquired vital expertise in the use of lyric to express herself, and is quite capable of making her marriage a partnership of equals.[4] In order to understand the dimensions of this lyric voicing mechanism, let us now examine its workings in the *chantefable*.

The sung portions of this work are not lyric insertions in the classic sense, and their relation to the tale is more complex than we find in verse romances with lyric insertions. Lyric does not interrupt the progress of the narrative; rather the story is developed in both forms of discourse: the tale proceeds by pairs of passages, one sung in verse and the other recited in prose, which complement each other. It is through this complementarity that the psychological richness of the tale and its characters is best developed. Lyric is first and foremost the discourse of the private person, while prose tracks the public person.[5] The lyric sections probe the inner thoughts and feelings of a character, and they allow for extended monologue, the lyric *complainte* which enables us to view what is otherwise hidden. Though some of this monologue masquerades in the sung portions of the story as dialogue, it is always more detailed and expressive than passages of dialogue in the

corresponding prose sequences. Lyric space is in its essence paradoxical, as it must be both private and public at the same time. This paradox is quite unproblematic within the conventions of theatre, however, and this theatricality is the dimension of medieval literature which best equips it for the kind of playful transgression which we observe here. In *Aucassin*, the first instance we encounter of lyric voicing of usually silent characters is the most striking, because it involves Aucassin's mother. She takes up in the second lyric passage of the tale the argument made by her husband Count Garin a moment earlier. The prose sequence informs us that both parents urge Aucassin to lead the defense against an aggressor, Count Bogart of Valence. But as Aucassin tries to use Nicolete as a bargaining chip in the agreement, only the father opposes his refusal to negotiate:

> — Pere, fait Aucassins, qu'en parlés vos ore ? Ja Dix ne me doinst riens que je li demant, quant ere cevaliers, ne monte a ceval, ne que voise a estor ne a bataille, la u je fiere cevalier ni autres mi, se vos ne me donés Nicholete me douce amie que je tant aim.
> — Fix, fait li peres, ce ne poroit estre. Nicolete laise ester, que ce est une caitive qui fu amenee d'estrange terre, si l'acata li visquens de ceste vile as Sarasins, si l'amena en ceste vile, si l'a levee et bautisie et faite sa fillole, si li donra un de ces jors un baceler qui du pain li gaaignera par honor: de ce n'as tu que faire. Et se tu fenme vix avoir, je te donrai le file a un roi u a un conte: il n'a si rice home en France, se tu vix sa fille avoir, que tu ne l'aies. (laisse II, 23–35)
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> ['Father,' said Aucassin, 'what say you now? May God never grant me anything I ask, if when I become a knight, take to horse and ride into battle to strike down knights or be struck down, you do not grant me Nicolete, my sweet friend whom I love so much.'
> 'Son,' said the father, 'this cannot be. Leave Nicolete alone, for she was brought as a captive from a foreign land, and the Viscount of this city bought her from a Saracen, and brought her to his home, raised her, baptized her and made her his daughter. He will grant her some day to a young gentleman who will support her honorably. But this has naught to do with you. If you want to take a wife, I will give you a king's daughter, or a count's. There is no man in France, however rich he be, whose daughter you cannot have, if you desire her.']

The countess's turn comes with the ensuing lyric passage, which repeats the essentials of the discussion:

> De Nicole le bien faite
> nuis hom ne l'en peut retraire,
> que ses peres ne l'i laisse
> et sa mere le manace :
> 'Di va! faus, que vex tu faire ?

Nicolete est cointe et gaie ;
jetee fu de Cartage,
acatee fu d'un Saisne ;
puis qu'a moullié te vix traire,
pren femme de haut parage.' (laisse III, 1–12)

[From comely Nicolete
no man can deter him,
such that his father leaves him
and his mother threatens him:
'Come off it! You dishonest boy, what are you trying to do?
Nicolete is fair and gay;
she washed up from Carthage,
she was bought from a Saracen.
Since you insist on taking a wife,
take a woman of high birth.']

The countess, who expresses herself lyrically here, does not speak again. In fact, she is not even named, and the tale makes no further mention of her until it informs us that she has died.

After this initial exchange between Aucassin and his mother, fourteen of the remaining nineteen lyric passages are either devoted to lyric lament and dialogue, or feature lyric performance. Each of the lovers apostrophizes the other while imprisoned; on one occasion Nicolete communicates directly with the captive Aucassin in song; and on multiple occasions, each voices his/her sorrow at the other's absence. When the lyric portion features dialogue, which occurs in a minority of cases, the scene is viewed as in slow motion, with only a minimum of action. The dialogue passages in lyric are thus strikingly reminiscent of pastourelle motets, where the narrative component has been stripped away, leaving only discourse, whether interior or public. This makes the corresponding prose passage doubly important, as it is essential to an understanding of the story development. When Nicolete builds her bower in the woods, finally, she is not even voiced directly, but the lyric passage, in its most interior manifestation, allows us to read her thoughts.

Nicolete realizes the life-giving value of the lyric paradox early in the story, when a watchman on a tower sings an *aubade* in order to warn her that she is about to be arrested. What anyone else listening would presumably interpret as a private form of expression, Nicolete is able to interpret as a public message, and thereby save her life. Though she is not yet a public singer, as she only responds to the watchman's kindness in prose, the lesson is not lost on her. She is able to use the lyric voice, near the tale's end, in order to be recognized by her father and received into her inheritance, and finally, by adopting all the public conventions of lyric expression, she is able

to effect a reunion with her beloved. There, disguised as a minstrel, she performs before Aucassin's keep.

Nicolete's natural courage and resourcefulness underscore her gender shift and define her new, publicly male persona. As she disembarks in Beaucaire and sets out for the count's palace, she is described as *preus* and *sage*, whereas Aucassin is characterized with much more traditionally feminine epithets such as *biaus, blons, gentius, cortois,* and *amorous*. This overt swapping of genders in our two protagonists is reflected in their behavior following their kidnapping and separation. Aucassin is only able to sit and pine for Nicolete, wondering where she may be, whereas Nicolete has become the quintessential woman (or man) of action. Without wasting words—or time for reflection—she sets out for Beaucaire; after all, since she washed up on the shores of her own home, why should not Aucassin have done the same? She sings before her beloved of the story of Aucassin and Nicolete, and is of course pressed by him for news of her. Significantly, she does not reveal her identity at that time. Rather, she must ceremoniously (though privately) re-become female, in marked contrast to Silentia's public stripping, and the return of both heroines to their true nature is followed by their weddings.[6]

Even though the gender reversal we witness in *Aucassin et Nicolete* deals with the issue in a humorous way, even on a coarse, slapstick level, the lesson is not lost on us. The modern reader roots unabashedly for Nicolete: she is entirely sympathetic, precisely because—seen through the prism of our age's concerns—she holds the key to transcending social and gender limits. She is at the same time an extremely effective and a non-threatening user of power, and as was the case between Guillaume and Guibourc,[7] Aucassin will learn to respect and defer to his capable countess.

But what lesson is there in Nicolete's experience for Silentia? The prospect of Silentia's marriage evokes far less joy and confidence in the reader than Nicolete's. For while Nicolete's double engendering has reshaped Aucassin despite his expression of outrage in Torelore, Ebain appears far less amenable to the notion of gender blurring, and even less so to the question of female empowerment. The implication, as everything resumes its rightful place at tale's end, is that Silentia will be truly silenced. Her only hope for retaining her voice lies, as she perceives (but for the wrong reasons),[8] in the practice of lyric. Skill in instruments and singing will prove to be far more than pleasant domestic pursuits. They will give her a strong and flexible persona, both male and female, through which she can maintain a measure of the independence and resourcefulness which have always been her trademark.

What, finally, of the posterity of this lyric convention? What survivals of this gender-mixing mechanism are visible in post-medieval lyric? To answer

this complex question with a single example, I offer the following folk song, collected in coastal New Brunswick by folklorists working out of Laval University, Quebec, in the 1950s. This song is an undoubted survivor from the late Middle Ages, and contains several elements of the Aucassin and Nicolete story.

La belle est en prison d'amour,
voilà–z–un mois ou six semaines.
Son Pierre la cherchait partout,
son cher amant qui est en peine.
Il faut–z aller voir le berger,
si...nous enseigne.[incomprehensible line]
— Berger, berger n'as–tu point vu
par ici passer la beauté même?
— Oui je l'ai vu, je lui ai parlé,
assise auprès de la fontaine.
Dans sa main droite tient un oiseau
a qui la belle contait ses peines.
— De quels habits est–elle vêtue?
vêtue en satin ou en laine?
— Elle a-t-une jupe en satin blanc,
dedans ses mains des gants de laine.

[Beauty has been in Love's prison
for the last month or six weeks.
Her Pierre has been searching for her everywhere,
her dear lover who grieves for her.
You must go see the shepherd
to see if ... inform us.
'Shepherd, have you not seen
beauty herself pass by here?'
'Yes, I have seen her, I have spoken to her,
seated at the fountain.
In her right hand she held a bird,
to whom she was telling her sorrows.'
'How is she dressed?
In satin or in wool?'
She has[on] a dress of white satin,
on her hands linen gloves."][9]

Even though the song as we have it is incomplete, what is immediately striking is that only the male characters are voiced. The lover and the shepherd exchange words, but the medieval convention of using lyric to sound the interior voice has not survived, and the only discourse exploited is a strictly narrative one. Thus, although the beloved has been observed expressing her

woes, there is no mechanism for transmitting her words to us. This is characteristic of what happened in the devolution from pastourelle to bergerette in the fifteenth century and beyond: to the extent that they survived beyond the Middle Ages, the multi-dimensional lyrical narratives of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries became flattened onto a purely narrative plane, and the opportunity to lyrically voice characters who were not otherwise allowed a psychological space of their own, was lost. This process began earlier than the Renaissance, actually, for its seeds are present in the *ars antiqua* motet. Pastourelle texts which were appropriated by motets often contained only the narrative frame, or only the lyric lament.[10] As fragmentary as this song appears to us, it is no more fragmentary than many pastourelle motets, and in fact closely resembles a motet part which has survived intact. With the establishment of the *formes fixes* in the fourteenth century, popular song did us an immeasurable service by rescuing both the *bergère* of the medieval pastourelle and aristocratic women like *Nicolete li preus* from oblivion. But in the process of preservation, it has dispensed with the complex mixing of discourses that enabled such characters to clamor for our attention.

The evincing of lyrical narrative discourse at the close of the Middle Ages undoubtedly reflects the progressive restriction of women's public space as Roman law reasserted itself.[11] The extent to which the lyric space discussed here, however, was purely literary convention and the extent to which it reflected, and indeed permitted, a genuine *échappatoire* for women in the feudal period, is a topic beyond the scope of this essay. It suffices to have shown here that writers of the thirteenth century who grappled with the issues raised in *Silence*, had access to a discourse rooted in the courtly tradition which permitted them to work with motifs of cross-gendering which were original and insightful. Silentia's first profession is not at all a fortuitous choice; Heldris gave her the only means available to be heard as a woman while at the same time living as a man. What more natural choice, after all, than an art form which had already blurred the lines between love experience and the poeticizing of love experience? Silentia and Nicolete are thus exemplars of a socially subversive challenge in which life is rendered more flexible, more inclusive, by its imitation of art.

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NOTES

1 This ambivalence is visible, for our purposes, in Aucassin's treatment of his beloved Nicolete as well as in Ebain's relationship with Silence. Yet the mixing of genders explored in these texts allows for a lighter, more egalitarian view of the lyric space than that argued for by Burns 1985 and Kay 1990. For these writers, the 'elaborate rhetoric of coercion disguised as service' (Burns 1985, 265) is irremediably manipulative, and they do not view lyric space as potentially beneficial to women. It is the positive aspects of lyric space for which I argue here.

2 The southern Trobairitz had given voice to their own concerns, literally, and the established tradition in the north of women's song *(chanson de femme)* did so fictionally.

3 English translation in all examples by Eugene Mason, 1958.

4 Nicolete is reminiscent in this respect of Guibourc who, in *La chanson de Guillaume*, proves a feisty partner to her castellan husband, and every bit his equal. The chanson de geste thus offers a model—the unfortunate Aude aside—for equality among the sexes which valorizes the woman's role as warrior and administrator.

5 See Boulton, especially chapter 2.

6 It is significant that Nicolete remains in control of her destiny. The adoption of male dress and the return to her female identity are entirely her choice, and lead to a wedding for which she is more actively responsible than her indolent lover. Silentia's marriage, on the other hand, is as much imposed on her as was her male identity, and indeed as was the quest which allowed her to recover her true self. The contrast between the heroines is sharply drawn in this respect.

7 I am grateful to Bill Calin for his observations concerning the epic tradition, which may, in the *Chanson de Guillaume*, constitute an exception to the norm with regard to equality in marriage.

8 As she formulates her plan to run off with the minstrels, Silentia offers herself the argument that music will provide her with a suitable domestic pastime, since she has not been raised to do needlework:

'Et s'il avient que li rois muire	['And if the king should happen to die,
Es cambres t'en poras deduire.	you will be able to entertain yourself in private
Ta harpe et ta viële avras	you will have your harp and vielle
En liu de cho que ne savras	to compensate your lack of skill
Orfrois ne fresials manoier.'	at embroidering a fringe or border.']
	(2865–69)

She cannot of course realize at this time the full import of her new skills.

9 English version by C. Callahan.

10 See Huot 1997.

11 See Wiesner 1986.