'Li Mireor du Monde': Specularity in the *Roman de Silence*

KATHY M. KRAUSE

Silence, twice called 'le miroir du monde,' embodies both positive and negative symbolic aspects of the medieval mirror. She exemplifies courtly and chivalric virtue, and reveals hidden truths, but she is also a 'miroir trompeur,' reflecting surface appearances while hiding her real identity.(KMK)

Midway through the *Roman de Silence*, the protagonist is abducted by *jongleurs*, or so her parents believe—although the audience knows that she has run away to join the *jongleurs*. The perfect son/daughter has been stolen and her parents, who were so concerned with having an heir that even before her birth they concocted the elaborate cross-gendering scheme which motivates the text, are now truly without one. Frantic at their loss, their lament contains an unexpected description of Silence:

> 'Trestolt duel nos vienent ensenble
> Quant nostre fils de nos s'en emble,
> *Ki mireöirs estoit del mont,*
> et de la mer trosqu'ens el font
> Devriemes querre nostre preu.' (3061–65)
>
> ['We are afflicted with all sorrows at once,
> having our son run away from us.
> *He was the mirror of the world,*
> the best thing for us to do
> would be to drown ourselves at the bottom of the sea.'][1]

'Mirror of the world' is an unusual designation, yet one that is, I believe, supposed to represent the anguish of Silence's parents at their loss. The narrator repeats the expression as he describes her father's grief: 'Li cuens set que li jogleór/ Ont pris del mont le mireór' (3115–16) [The count knew that *jongleurs*/ had taken the mirror of the world]. The narrator's statement, that the count knows that the mirror of the world has been stolen, turns a parent's lament into a fact to be known, giving it the force of objective truth. It is certainly more typical for a narrator to call his heroine *miroir* than for a

parent to do so, as I shall discuss below; however the addition of 'du monde' is rather more unusual. I mean here to tease out the resonances of the phrase, and from them some implications for an understanding of Silence, and of the *Roman de Silence* in general.

In the Middle Ages the term *miroir* carried multiple valences. When the *Roman de Silence* was written (during the middle third of the thirteenth century) there was a flourishing culture of the literary mirror, begun in the twelfth century in vernacular poetry and Latin theological texts. The courtly lyric richly exploited the mirror of the Narcissus myth, culminating in Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose*, with its 'miroir aux amoureux' [mirror of lovers] in which Narcissus's mirror is transformed into the fountain of the God of Love. The mirroring function is transferred onto two crystals at the bottom of the fountain, reflections of the lover's eyes—themselves the 'mirrors' which reflected not only the soul but also, in lyric poetry, the beloved. During the same period, in a more clerical milieu, Vincent de Beauvais wrote his encyclopedic *Speculum majus*; other authors moved the didactic 'genre' of the speculum towards questions of moral instruction, for example the very popular *Miroir du monde*, a treatise on the vices and virtues.[2]

While moderns generally think of a mirror as an object which reflects physical reality with fair accuracy, in the Middle Ages the mirror was perhaps not even primarily a 'physical' item—both physical and 'spiritual' or moral, it carried a number of deeply contradictory valences. Frederick Goldin (1967) organizes medieval ideas about the mirror into three major categories. Each stems from the basic platonic concept that a mirror, because it is made of matter, shares the capacity of matter to receive and thus to reflect images of ideal forms. First, if one stresses the ideal nature of the reflected image and ignores or downplays the materiality of the mirror, one can see in it what 'one is,' and what one ought to be. From such a conception comes the 'mirror of princes,' which attempts to show the behavior and attitudes which a ruler *should* demonstrate—in other words, the text provides a reflection of the ideal. By looking into such a mirror the addressee can measure him/herself against the 'ideal' in order (at least in principle) to ameliorate his/her behavior. Secondly, if one stresses the materiality of the mirror, and thus also its passivity, the mirror becomes indeed that of Narcissus, a snare seducing with false images of corporeal vanity. This view is reflected not only in love lyric but also in the iconography of vanity itself—a woman looking into a hand mirror.[3]

Thirdly, the mirror can be conceived as equally of matter and image, reflecting (but not exactly) an ideal by translating it into material form, into sensible images. But such a reflection is a fleeting and imperfect image, for

by definition, nothing material can be perfect. (Also, clearly, mirrors in the Middle Ages were themselves far from perfect.) In this most important formulation it is St. Paul's well-known letters to the Corinthians which undergird the concept, and indeed underlie much of Patristic and medieval thought not only about mirrors but more generally about knowledge and how we know (Colish 1983). The famous phrase in I Corinthians 13:12, 'videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc facie ad faciem' [now we see in a mirror in a riddle, but then we will see face to face] is complemented by the passage from II Cor. 3:

> Nos vero omnes revelata facie gloriam Domini speculantes, in eadem imaginem transformamur, a claritate in claritatem, tanquam a Domini Spiritu.
>
> [But we all, with face unveiled contemplating as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image, from splendor into splendor, as by the Spirit of the Lord.]

Medieval theologians, following the church fathers in general and Augustine in particular, saw Scripture as the primary mirror which provides this mediated image of God, and thus of what man should be; for we were created 'in God's image' and are destined to be transformed back into that glory lost with the Fall. In addition, Nature, as God's creation, was also seen as reflective of God, as revealing essential clues to God's own 'nature.' But both Nature and (to a lesser degree) Scripture are flawed mirrors, Nature because it has fallen with man in the garden, and Scripture because it is a *copy* of the eternal Word of God, one that is mediated by human language and human writing. Moreover, both of these mirrors are being looked into by fallen man and so anything 'we' see will necessarily be distorted: 'This mirror, [...] debases an ideal reality so that it may be seen by man in his mortal infirmity' (Goldin 13). However, the pessimism of such a conclusion must be counterbalanced by the understanding that not only were we originally a perfect image of God, and will be again at the end of time, but also that even now, in our fallen state, while we never see perfectly, we can improve our sight (Goldin 12–15).

Without such a possibility there could be no 'mirror of princes,' nor could there be a Silence, for she is Nature's *chef d'œuvre* and as such she 'reflects' the ideal human female form, the 'idea' of a woman, better than any other:

> Nature i mist s'ententiön.
> Li matere est est biele et pure.
> Ainc de mellor n'ovra Nature. (1864–66)

[Nature puts forth her noblest efforts.
The clay is beautiful and pure.
Nature never made anything better.]

The irony is that this most perfect reflection of the ideal female form becomes the most perfect reflection of the male, chivalric ideal (e.g., 5179–82). Silence then combines in one 'person' a double mirror; mirror of female beauty, she is also the mirror of male ideal behavior. She is Enide and Erec in one body.

I use Erec and Enide as reference points because Chrétien, according to Alice Colby (1965), is the first in Old French verse to use the rhetorical topos of 'natura artifex'—Nature as divine 'sculptor' and the heroine as her supreme creation—which we saw in the original description of Silence. Indeed, in describing Enide as Erec and the audience sees her for the first time, Chrétien also compares Enide to a mirror:

Ce fu cele por verité
que fu fete por esgarder
Qu'an se poïst an li mirer
ausi com an un mireor. (438–41)[4]

[To be honest, she was made to be gazed upon, for a man could see himself reflected in her as in a mirror.]

As Jeanne Nightingale shows, Chrétien's combination of these two tropes draws on the exegetical tradition of the Song of Solomon, which had become increasingly popular in the twelfth century.[5] In addition, in the earliest known texts other than *florilegia* to use 'speculum' in their title—the *Speculum ecclesiae* and the *Speculum virginum,* which date from the very beginning of the twelfth century—the symbol of the mirror is also drawn from the Song of Songs episode in which the bride holds a mirror into which she looks in order to dress and adorn herself for her bridegroom (Jonsson 1990).

In the theological tradition, particularly in the sermons of Saint Bernard, the mirror-function is displaced onto the bride herself. In sermons 25 and 27 she is read tropologically as a double mirror:

Her visible beauty is such that it can reflect the image of earthly man and serve as a model to all those who seek to be worthy. On the other, her inward beauty reflects eternity and mirrors the eternal Bridegroom. (Nightingale 142)

St. Paul's 'speculum in aenigmate' serves to substantiate Bernard's argument about the dual nature of the mirror; the speculum of Scripture takes on flesh in the body of the bride. Nightingale concludes that Enide also holds up this double mirror, which in Chrétien reflects not the narcissistic self-

absorption of the courtly chevalier but the 'perfectibility of Erec's soul,' and permits his movement towards true self-knowledge.[6]

As if Heldris has to go Chrétien one better, Silence is not a double but a triple mirror. The mirror of ideal female form and apogee of male chivalric prowess also demonstrates the inward beauty of moral rectitude. When Silence surpasses the *jongleurs* in skill and popularity, (s)he still serves them to the best of her ability (3188–93). At Ebain's court, when propositioned and then threatened by Queen Eufeme, Silence remains true to her/his model—she is Joseph in the episode with Potiphar's wife. Silence not only does not succumb to the queen's blandishments (no great feat given that he is a she), but she also does not expose or denounce the queen's behavior.

However, whereas in the Song of Songs and in *Erec et Enide* (as well as in courtly love lyric) the female perfection of the lady serves as mirror to the male protagonist/lover, in our text there is no hero to look upon Silence and become more worthy. For whom then is she a mirror? Where Chrétien did something new in giving his mirror a voice—and indeed it is through her *parole* that Enide 'causes' Erec to improve in the second half of the romance—I would argue that Heldris is more radical, if more pessimistic. By transforming the mirror into the knight he empties the image of the female mirror of all its former play. Nobody improves, or indeed really changes, in the romance; nobody is inspired by the reflection in Silence of beauty either earthly or eternal to truer self-knowledge or greater chivalric prowess. Instead Heldris has the characters in his romance mirror the warning given by Bernard in his discussion of the bridal mirror of the Song of Songs. As Nightingale notes, Bernard warns against deceptive appearances. Even as the bride's beauty and wisdom provide a model for perfection, they cause resentment among those who cannot share the peace and sanctity of the nuptial bedroom. Scornful maidens, who judge according to appearances and are therefore incapable of reading through the reflected enigma of the literal text, 'feed on what is evil' and 'unleash their wanton tongues in odious gossip' (Nightingale, 142).

What better description could we have of Queen Eufeme? She reacts to Silence's external beauty with adulterous desire, and to Silence's moral, internal beauty first with spiteful comments on his homosexuality and then with the staged accusation of rape and the forged letter to the King of France. She indeed reacts to Silence's beauty and wisdom with resentment and odious gossip! But Eufeme, villainess par excellence, is not the only one to react badly in the romance; the *jongleurs* also pay back Silence's 'perfection' with jealousy, resentment, and attempted murder.

The evil characters are not alone in their inability however; truly no one in the text except Merlin can see through the enigma that is Silence, and Heldris seems to delight in demonstrating his characters' incomprehension. Heldris may well, like Natura, have fashioned the ideal *miroir du monde*, combining the ideal beauty of the bride with the moral rectitude of Joseph and the chivalric prowess of Roland; but no one in the text profits from such a mirror. None can see through the *speculum in aenigmate* to the ideal forms it reflects.

While it is tempting to stop here, I will attempt to set aside the narrator's pessimism and return briefly to my central question—for whom is Silence a mirror?—for I have yet to answer it except in the negative. If she is not a mirror for the other characters in the romance, then we are left with the extra-diagetic onlookers, or hearers—the audience. So what do we see when we look into, or through, her?[7] We see other texts: Silence 'models' ideal beauty and behavior because she is constructed of tropes, intertextual borrowings, allusions, winks, and nudges.

Physically she is blonde, with a wide brow, a complexion the perfect mixture of white and red. The trope is so well established that I need not quote Chrétien, or the *Roman d'Enéas*, the classic loci of female description (Colby). As I remarked above, even her status as Nature's *chef d'œuvre* is 'borrowed' from Chrétien and other romance authors. All aspects of her behavior are also reflections of earlier stories. For example, the narrator explicitly invokes the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife before relating Silence's first misadventure with Queen Eufeme (3705–09). Again, as a knight Silence demonstrates not only Camille-like Amazon strength but also 'epic-perfect' fighting style, including both the arming sequence before battle (5330 ff.) and her epic prayer as she fights the rebellious count:

> Silences dist: 'Bials Dex, chaieles,
> Ki m'a jeté de maint anui,
> Done moi vertu viers cestui!
> Cho qu'afoiblie en moi Nature
> Cho puist efforcier T'aventure.
> Mais se Tu viols ne me puet nuire
> Rois, n'amirals o son empire.' (5604–10)
>
> [Silence said, 'Dear God, for heaven's sake,
> you who have rescued me from many a peril,
> let me prevail against this foe!
> Only your intervention can strengthen
> that in me which Nature has made weak.
> If it is your will, none can harm me,
> neither king nor emir with his whole army.']

Of course Silences's decision to run away with the *jongleurs* follows a long tradition of women disguised as *jongleurs* in romance—Nicolette in *Aucassin et Nicolette*, or Fresne in *Galeran de Bretagne*, for example. One could continue to cite episodes such as Silence's hunt for Merlin and its 'source' in the *Estoire Merlin* (Thorpe, 14–7) and many others.

Silence as mirror thus has a fourth side—she is a mirror of previous texts, or more precisely, she is a mirror of previous heroes and heroines and the romance is the mirror of previous texts. As such it joins, or returns to, the earliest tradition of *specula*. As I have mentioned, the only texts to be called *speculum* before the early twelfth century were *florilegia*, compilations of sacred texts, 'familiar quotations' of the Patristic period. Heldris's romance is not a *speculum scripturae* but rather a mirror of vernacular literature in which he/she suggests that mirrors do not work, that ideal female beauty does not (necessarily) inspire better behavior. By mirroring, by reflecting the *femme–miroir* and the hero in one body, Heldris uses Silence to look through the mirror to reveal an essential, and pessimistic, vacuity of the literary tradition which created him/her.

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-KANSAS CITY

Kathy M. Krause is Assistant Professor of French at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. She is the editor of *Reassessing the Heroine in Old French Literature*, (University Press of Florida, 2001). She is finishing a book on the female protagonist in early thirteenth-century Old French narrative.

NOTES

1 Quotations and translations are from Roche-Mahdi (1992).
2 On the various genres of the 'speculum' in the Middle Ages see Bradley (1954) and Grabes (1982).
3 On the iconography of vanity as portrayed by a woman holding a mirror see Katzenellenbogen (1939, 1977).
4 Quotations from *Erec et Enide* are from the Roques (1981) edition. Translation is from Staines (1990).
5 Nightingale's discussion (1995) is heavily indebted to Matter (1990).
6 I would argue that Enide's 'parole' to Erec, which goads Erec into leaving his narcissistic absorption with Enide, gives her a more active role than the bride/mirror, one more like that of Scripture itself.
7 The actual meaning of St. Paul's 'per speculum in aenigmate' has occasioned an immense and somewhat contradictory commentary. For a brief summary see the introduction to Nolan (1990) and the references he cites in note 1.