2

WHAT COMES UNNATURALLY: UNSPEAKABLE ACTS

The case of 'Johannes Rykener, se Elianoram nominans' was tried in 1395. The verdicts are still being written. It was an unusual case with all the right (or wrong) ingredients for a ripping yarn – sex, money, cross-dressing, nuns – but even for all that, those involved might scarcely have believed the celebrity it would achieve six centuries later. The defendant was caught with one John Britby in Sopers Lane and is accused of committing a crime that the recording clerk, in a suggestively reticent turn of phrase, refers to as 'illud vitium detestibile, nephandum et ignominiosum' (that detestable, unspeakable and ignominious vice).[1] At the time, he was dressed in women's clothes and calling himself Eleanor. Besides the encounter in question, Rykener states that he had sex as a woman with an Essex rector, three Oxford scholars, four Franciscans, one Carmelite, three chaplains and many priests; additionally, as a man, 'with many nuns and […] many women both married and otherwise'.[2] As the case wears on, the need to record the unmentionable sin eventually effects the textual metastasis that yields 'illo vitium antedictum' (the aforementioned [unmentionable] vice). Even in 1932, in an edition of late-fourteenth-century Pleas and Memoranda that specifies names, locations and other particulars for almost every other contemporary case, the entry for 1 February 1395 reads only (but tantalisingly), 'Examination of two men charged with immorality, of whom one implicated several persons, male and female, in religious orders.'[3] Consequently, the case was very little known until the mid-1990s, when it was rediscovered and its tangled language and

1 Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd, 'The Interrogation of of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth Century London', *GLQ* 1.4 (1995), 459–65 (p. 462); Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd, 'Ut Cum Muliere: A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth Century London', in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg, Carla Freccero and Kathy Lavezzo (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 99–116.

2 Karras and Boyd, 'Ut Cum Muliere', pp. 111–12.

3 Roll A34, membrane 2. See *Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda of the City of London, 1381–1412*, ed. A. H. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), p. 228. Although the editor states that he endeavoured to 'include all passages which seem to add in any way to our knowledge of the times', the omission of some 'formal entries and records of small debt actions' was inevitable (p. vii). While the Rykener case does not concern one of Thomas's main projects, struggles between city guilds, the intriguing synopsis suggests that, in the midst of pages and pages of assaults, debts and petty theft, it would make a welcome change, if nothing else.

arresting mix of frankness and ambiguity brought to critical attention by Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd.

The Rykener case has remained a mainstay of medieval, queer and gender studies ever since, and as such I will not dwell on it here;[4] it does, however, introduce some key issues. Firstly, it makes very pointed mention of the unspeakable act or vice and, moreover, the phenomenon of the aforementioned unmentionable act. This is one that Carolyn Dinshaw notes 'neatly exemplifies Foucault's point about sexuality in general as it developed out of premodernity: the sexual act here is defined as unspeakable, yet it is spoken of voluminously'.[5] Referring to something encumbered with the stigma of being 'unspeakable', even to further reinforce its base reputation and add weight to this same stigma, becomes rather a problem, as this case makes abundantly clear. However, the permutations by which the unspeakable may suddenly be progressed to the previously spoken, bypassing the customary intermediate act of *speaking*, are worth investigating.

Secondly, the case is marked by plurality of names and labels that also appear along with this unspeakable act. If the problem of the Rykener case for the Rolls writer is that the offence in question is unnameable, the difficulty for the reader, conversely, lies in the plethora of possible labels that might plausibly be applied to the actions of the defendant. Even a first name, a basic referent, is not to be pinned down – the subject of the case is called both John and Eleanor by the Rolls scribe and, by several critics, 'John/Eleanor', the two names mashed together in a single moniker of uncertain, unfixed or unreadable gender.[6] Karras, revisiting the Rykener record, uses the pronoun 'ze' to draw attention to the complexities of gender identity as well as sexual identity in the case.[7] The surfeit of signifiers attached to a sensitive signified reveals not only a desire to circumlocute or fudge, in the interests of reflecting a perceived popular opinion or a generalised desire, but a reality of speech and language with which Lacan is concerned through his works and which will inform the theoretical framework for this chapter. Although the relation

4 See, for example, Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp. 100–42; Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Queer Relations', *Essays in Medieval Studies: Out of Bounds* 16 (2002), 79–94; Conor McCarthy, *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2004); Ruth Evans, 'The Production of Space in Chaucer's London', in *Chaucer and the City*, ed. Ardis Butterfield (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 41–56. Ruth Karras and Tom Linkinen have also revisited the case as the experience of a transgender individual rather than a transvestite, as the original scholarship had it. Karras and Linkinen, 'John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited', in *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of Jane E. Burns*, ed. Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), pp. 111–21.

5 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p. 105.

6 Most notably Karras and Boyd in 'Ut Cum Muliere', whose convention is usually followed by subsequent critics.

7 See Karras and Linkinen, 'John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited', p. 112, n. 6 (and *passim*).

between words and meaning is the inheritance of the mature subject as he or she enters into language – and into a relation with the other – the problem with language lies precisely in its inability to perfectly represent, through its signifiers, that which it signifies. Even when the goal of speech is to express a concept in its entirety, the nature of language is to convey only in fragments.

Thirdly, the case exemplifies the interconnectedness in medieval thought of those sex acts considered unorthodox and the dissolution of gender norms. The language of the court clerk echoes that of the penitential writers – what is unspeakable? How do we indicate what that is? As Pierre Payer summarises, 'The medieval Christian sexual ethic was straightforward. Sexual intercourse was allowed only between a man and a woman legitimately married to each other, if done in the natural manner.'[8] That is to say, almost all sex acts might be considered unorthodox or unnatural. The collapse of gender binaries and the mutability of gendered roles that the cross-dressing sex worker exploits are part of the discourse that defines the act that precipitated the Rykener case as not only unspeakable, but unnatural.

This chapter is about unspeakable sin, non-heteronormative sexuality and the non-heteronormative experience and performance of gender, addressing a cluster of medieval texts that describe and explain same-sex desire, gender ambiguity and gender fluidity through a sexual grammar that was meant to reflect orthodox and 'natural' custom. These texts draw on the late medieval intellectual and literary inheritance that links the interventions and justifications of Nature and the results for speaking subjects, beginning with Alain de Lille's account of Nature's despair in the face of same-sex eroticism and non-binary gender, and extending to Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower. The ironic proliferation of speech as the response to the imposition of the unspeakability trope is traced in Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale', while the latter half of the chapter is given over to considerations of the role of gender in the dynamics of unspeakability, drawing on Lacan but also the revisions and insubordination of Irigaray that address blind spots in Lacan's pronouncements on women. This section focuses on the (doubly unspeakable and naturally unnatural) women who love women and women who take on masculine roles in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Old French *Roman de Silence*. While Chapter 1 explored how the gendering of bodies may inflect the (un)speakability of confession, this chapter will examine the (non-)articulation and (un)acceptability of sexual acts and the discourse of the natural that shapes understandings of gender – the confluence of norms on which the phenomenon of the unspeakable and unnatural vice is predicated. Since the logic of the natural privileges generation as the proof of orthodoxy, I am interested in what these unspeakable, unnatural acts produce, and what the

[8] Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession, 1150–1300* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2009), p. 1.

implications of figuring sex acts as speech acts, and gendered individuals as gendered words, has for the preservation of Nature and for the suppression of 'vices' and voices.

THE SIN OF SODOM

There is a certain inevitability to the appearance of sodomy in the discussion of the unspeakable in the Middle Ages. In the medieval imagination, the problems of communicating it, confessing it, containing it, ensure that the 'sin against nature' achieves the distinction of becoming *the* unspeakable sin. However, the unspeakable is hardly a simple euphemism – the concepts of the unspeakable and the sodomitical are also elided, exchanged and, in the process, exploited to the point at which they may even function as virtual synonyms. It is thus liable to become confused (purposely or not) with a collection of other terms. It is an accusation that purports to be removed from orality and yet which seems to breed utterances. The 'unspeakable sin' both reflects – acting as the cipher for attitudes and meanings elsewhere attested – and deflects, resisting easy or fixed interpretations, and in this double performance it flags up the unutterable inherent in language itself.

Nor is sodomy the only sin against nature, of course; indeed, all sin should in theory be against nature.[9] The range of acts considered to be unnatural could be extensive. Usury, for example, could be unnatural, as in Gerard of Siena, who wrote that it 'causes a natural thing to transcend its nature [*faciebat rem naturalem supervalere sue nature*] and an artificial thing to transcend the skill that created it'.[10] Pierre D'Ailly, whose 'Radix Malorum Omnium est Cupiditas' echoes the Pardoner's own motto, affirmed that 'simony is against natural and divine law [*contra ius naturale et divinum*], has been shown.'[11] Tyrannicide was declared a form of heresy by the Council of Constance, 1415, since it was against sovereignty and therefore against nature. Poisoning was

[9] John Boswell cites Aquinas in this connection (*Summa Theologiæ*, 1a. 2ae. 94.3 ad 2), commenting that since 'not only are all sexual sins "unnatural," but all sins of any sort are "unnatural"', it seems that '"natural" in this section is in fact simply the "moral"; and it seems circular, to say the least, to argue that homosexual acts are immoral because they are immoral'. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 324.

[10] Lawrin Armstrong, *The Idea of a Moral Economy: Gerard of Siena on Usury, Restitution, Prescription* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), pp. 82–3. See also John Thomas Noonan, *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

[11] '[S]ymonia est contra ius naturale et divinum, ut patet ex dictis.' Pierre D'Ailly, 'Radix Malorum Omnium est Cupiditas', ed. Alan E. Bernstein in Bernstein, *Pierre d'Ailly and the Blanchard Affair: University and Chancellor of Paris at the Beginning of the Great Schism* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 197–236 (p. 209: 29–31; my translation).

also against nature, since men are not naturally venomous.[12] The issue of why some males enjoy having sex with other males is also posed in the Aristotelian *Problemata* (whose late medieval commentaries and responses Joan Cadden has recently investigated), where it is classified as unnatural in a passage that lumps together infanticide and cannibalism alongside such seemingly arbitrary vices as nail biting or eating dirt.[13] Not everything that is unnatural is sodomy, nor is everything that is unnatural unspeakable. Yet species of sexual sin exert a particular imaginative pull in later medieval thought, and same-sex acts even more so. From Jerome onwards, traditional etymology maintained that *Sodom* meant *mute,* reflecting the inhabitants' muteness before God and establishing the unspeakability of the sodomitical sin.[14] The connection between the city of Sodom and male–male or female–female sexual relations was made gradually. At the same time, the view that same-sex desire defied 'natural' gender (as Romans 1.26–7 was held to confirm), ensured that *sodomia* thus became both unnatural and unspeakable, and crystallised the links between the two concepts.

Payer highlights the generative aspect of the 'natural' as a measure for the degree of sexual sin: 'Acts that facilitate or at least do not impede procreation are in accord with nature, are natural. Acts that frustrate or that cannot result in procreation […] are against nature, are unnatural.'[15] As seen in Chapter 1, masturbation was a particularly worrisome vice, condemned as unnatural by Robert Grosseteste, Albertus Magnus and Jean Gerson, among others.[16] The logic behind this categorisation was also subject to variation: Peter of Poitiers deemed masturbation hermaphroditic (since the active and passive roles are performed by and combined in the same person), while Robert of Sorbon saw it as a species of incest (since to whom is one more closely related than oneself?). Should the active become the passive, this is likewise unnatural (thus the unnaturalness of unorthodox sex between a man and a woman is

[12] See Franck Collard, *The Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages*, trans. Deborah Nelson-Campbell (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008).

[13] Joan Cadden, *Nothing Natural is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). As Cadden remarks, the medieval responses to *problema* IV.26 from the *Ethics* demonstrate the capacious flexibility of the category of the unnatural: 'What question did medieval readers think was being posed by Aristotle in *Problemata* IV. 26? […] The commentaries and the margins of the manuscripts mention sodomites and shame; anuses, penises, thighs, and vaginas; habits and birth defects; bodily fluids and planetary conjunctions; boys, adolescents, and men; eunuchs and women' (p. 31).

[14] See Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 106–13; Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 16 and *passim*.

[15] Payer, *Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession*, p. 132.

[16] See Payer, *Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession*, pp. 135–7.

stressed by writers such as Thomas of Chobham, William Peraldus and Alain de Lille). The unnatural may be commuted to heretical; the heretical is not to be enacted and therefore the cautious should not speak of it; the heretical and unnatural are therefore *unspeakable*.

The definitions begin to break down and dissolve together; discovering a characteristic of one of these concepts would, for practical purposes, legitimise the use of any and all the allegations of sodomy, acting against nature, unspeakable behaviour. Such was the pernicious and insidious nature of such a sin, the logic runs, that to mention it was tantamount to performing it. Yet in order to suppress mention of sodomy, it was first necessary to name names – or pseudonyms.

Foucault pithily condenses the stakes in his notorious summary:

> Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance. Consider for example the history of what was once 'the' great sin against nature. The extreme discretion of the texts dealing with sodomy – that utterly confused category – and the nearly universal reticence in talking about it made possible a twofold operation: on the one hand, there was an extreme severity […] and on the other hand, a tolerance that must have been widespread.[17]

As John Boswell has shown, the prohibitions on sodomy did indeed counter a more tolerant attitude that was in evidence before the twelfth century and before the condemnation of sodomy – the unnatural vice – was encoded in the canons of Lateran III.[18] Thereafter, this tolerance was eroded in the wake of suspicion and persecution of anything deemed to be against the Church, and by implication against nature.

While this is not the place for an historical account,[19] even a brief survey gives an indication of the contradictions at work. In the taxonomies

[17] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I*, p. 101.

[18] Canon 11: 'Let all who are found guilty of that unnatural vice for which the wrath of God came down upon the sons of disobedience and destroyed the five cities with fire, if they are clerics be expelled from the clergy or confined in monasteries to do penance; if they are laymen they are to incur excommunication and be completely separated from the society of the faithful', *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), I: 217.

[19] For a more comprehensive history, see Michael Goodich, *The Unmentionable Vice: Homosexuality in the Later Medieval Period* (Oxford: Clio Press, 1978); Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*; Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*; Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom*; William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050–1230* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Goodich surveys the penitential tradition and both he and Boswell in particular argue for a degree of tolerance towards same-sex partnerships in the early medieval period that was steadily eroded. The aim of Jordan's project, meanwhile, is to examine

of sin that make up medieval penitential and moral texts, the attempt to find a coherent definition soon becomes fraught with inconsistencies. Peter Damian's *Liber Gomorrhianus* (1049), for example, refers to four different acts (masturbation, mutual masturbation, interfemoral intercourse and anal intercourse) as sodomy,[20] while Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiæ* (*c.* 1265–73) discusses sodomy as a form of 'vice against nature [*vitium contra naturam*]'. Aquinas classes unnatural vice as that which either conflicts with reason (*repugnat rationi rectæ*) or does not benefit the species (*repugnat ipsi ordini naturali venerei actus qui convenit humanæ speciei*). Accordingly, it may take the form of masturbation or self-abuse (*mollitiem*), bestiality, same-sex relations (he refers to both male and female same-sex relations as *sodomiticum vitium*) and finally intercourse in which 'the natural style [*naturalis modus*]' is not observed.[21]

The practice of enforcing prohibition, of containing sodomy so as to effectively abject it, came to be characterised (and problematised) by the epithet with which it was so frequently saddled: *peccatum nefandum,* the unspeakable sin. Both sodomy and heresy were called *contra naturam*, and called *nefandus*, to the point where 'sodomy' as a category might therefore be extended and attached to almost anything one wished to cast as viciously sinful.[22] It could also be evoked when referring to heretics or to the theologically suspect – the Old French *bougre,* referring to a Bulgarian sect of alleged heretical and sodomitical tendencies, was adopted into English as 'bugger' – as it was understood to be entirely 'against nature', *contra naturam*. That both heresy and sodomy are in like fashion called *nefandus* and unnatural therefore connects them in a way that runs somewhat deeper than the shared

the instabilities that exist within the works of single authors, or even within single texts (rather than attempting to survey the instances or trace an etymology for the term). Burgwinkle focuses on the homoerotic elements of high medieval popular literature and the interconnectedness of the sodomitical and the orthodox in constructed and idealised masculinities.

20 'Four types of this form of criminal wickedness can be distinguished in an effort to show you the totality of the whole matter in and orderly way: some sin with themselves alone; some by the hands of others; others between the thighs; and finally, others commit the complete act against nature.' See Peter Damian, *Book of Gomorrah: An Eleventh Century Treatise Against Clerical Homosexual Practices*, ed. and trans. Pierre J. Payer (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), p. 29.

21 *Summa Theologiæ,* ed. and trans. Thomas Gilby et al., 60 vols (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), XLIII: 2a2æ. 154, 11.

22 William Burgwinkle observes that the term 'ranges from being a simple description of homoerotic relations or attractions to a theological category synonymous with the sinful', while Allen Frantzen examines how this promiscuity of definition had the effect that 'sodomy became a weapon of invective and retribution that could be used against those who were sexually orthodox as well as against those who were not'. See Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law*, p. 3; Frantzen, 'The Disclosure of Sodomy in *Cleanness*', *PMLA* 111.3 (1996), 451–64 (p. 454).

adjective, and as Dinshaw has shown, both accusations came to be used 'for the purposes of power, not for the reform of the true church'.[23]

In a collusive harmony of technical and rhetorical connotations, this single word 'sodomy' is so overused and overdefined that, as Michael Hanrahan remarks, extending as it does to 'potentially […] all unnatural acts and practices, which, in turn, are readily substituted for it', sodomy as a term 'threatens to mean nothing'.[24] On the other hand, although linguistic switches with reference to sodomy can present this possibility for the modern reader, the problem for medieval writers was also that 'sodomy' meant too much. Indeed, it was at once uncompromisingly negative and (for the unfortunate target) wholly compromising. A transgression sometimes characterised as *delictum mixti fori* – a crime that came under both ecclesiastical and secular jurisdiction – the unspeakable, unnatural vice blurred and exceeded boundaries again when its actants were tried, with the result that it became a catch-all accusation, levelled not only at wretched sinners but at powerful orders (most notably the Templars), at high-ranking and even royal figures, when they came under political pressure. (Indeed, Jeremy Goldberg has recently read the Rykener case as a response to Richard II's suspension of the City of London's liberties in 1392, an angry political satire fabricated by clerks, in which Rykener/Richard is brought low and symbolically buggered).[25] When speaking of unspeakable transgressions, all were equals in as much as they were made 'abject'.

Designating a person's behaviour 'unspeakable' thus often owed less to a state of genuine gobsmack than to an intention of guaranteeing sufficient condemnation. In Latin, at least, *nefandus* (from *for,* to speak, comes *fandus*, 'that which should be spoken of') is often defined not as 'unmentionable' but simply as 'wicked', 'iniquitous': one can thus omit the element of 'mentioning' altogether, proceeding instead directly to dreadfulness. The association of sodomy and the unspeakable functions as a result of a comparable subtraction

[23] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p. 68.

[24] Michael Hanrahan, 'Speaking of Sodomy: Gower's Advice to Princes in the *Confessio Amantis*', *Exemplaria* 14 (2002), pp. 423–46 (p. 425).

[25] Jeremy Goldberg, 'John Rykener, Richard II and the Governance of London', *Leeds Studies in English* 45 (2014), 49–70. Hanrahan also discusses the case of Richard II ('Speaking of Sodomy', p. 426). The deposition of Richard in 1399 was in part engineered through the insinuations made about members of his court and his counsellors, a time-honoured method of indirectly criticising the king. Robert Mills, who also discusses the crises of Richard II's reign, makes the point that sodomy's 'flexibility of reference and its associations with unmentionability provided medieval commentators with a means of critiquing power structures obliquely, by way of enigma and allusion, without putting themselves directly in the political firing line'; 'Male–Male Love and Sex in the Middle Ages, 1000–1500', in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*, ed. Matt Cook, H. G. Cocks, Robert Mills and Randolph Turnbach (Oxford, Westport, CT: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), pp. 1–44 (p. 18).

– though sodomy is said to be 'unspeakable', both in the sense of being unworthy of mention and in the sense of being depraved, the basis for this appellation, which might be supplied by *contra naturam*, is missing. In order to expand the formula (sodomy is *nefandus* because…), one would be obliged first to define sodomy and, by extension, to define what is natural.

Mark Jordan argues that this resistance to clear definition is not coincidental, insisting that:

> [C]onfusions and contradictions cannot be removed from the category. They are the stuff from which it was made. That is why 'Sodomy' has had such a long life in oppressive legislation and demagoguery. It is confused and contradicting in just the way that oppressors and demagogues find advantageous.[26]

Like other critics, Jordan follows Foucault in stressing the 'confusion' of the category, though this is not a truth universally acknowledged. Randy Conner, focusing on premodern French texts, proposes that terms like *sodomie* are 'subject to cornucopian interpretation' rather than 'utterly confused' and that in some instances it is, indeed, quite clear what is being referenced, since: 'As early as 1260 CE […] *sodomite* referred primarily to a man accused of engaging in male–male anal eroticism.'[27] Meanwhile, Karma Lochrie provides a rebuttal to the assumptions and shorthand of 'presumptive sodomy', which she argues do the same injury to female same-sex relations that the privileging of heteronormative discourse does to same-sex relations.[28]

While Jordan counsels that more complete understanding of the instability of 'sodomy' and its counterparts begins 'by supposing that the terms have to be learned anew with each author', Conner's post-Foucauldian move cautions against the convenience of finding in a collection of multi-inflected referents only an 'utterly confused category'.[29] While being seduced by the anarchy

[26] Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, p. 9.

[27] Randy Conner, '"*Les Molles et les Chausses*": Mapping the Isle of Hermaphrodites in Premodern France', in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Anna Livia and Kira Hall (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 127–46 (pp. 131, 129–30). Conner's methodology differs significantly from Jordan's: where Conner leads to construct an encyclopaedic vocabulary for same-sex eroticism and transgender, as opposed to 'limit[ing] ourselves to examining the presence, absence, or use in isolation of one or two terms, such as *sodomy*' (p. 141), Jordan's project lies precisely in such an examination; however, he exercises extreme caution in his treatment. Though a word can be matched with a definition, the fixity of 'meaning' is a façade: 'There is no linear progress in the genealogies of Christian moral terms. The terms condense results of contests between opposing tendencies or programs – or else show how the contests had no coherent results' (Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy,* pp. 3–4).

[28] See Karma Lochrie, 'Presumptive Sodomy', *Textual Practice* 13 (1999), 295–310; Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, pp. 180–1.

[29] Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, p. 5. Compare with Goodich, who declares that 'All forms of homoerotic relations were indiscriminately labelled as sodomy' (*Unmentionable Vice*, p. ix).

of Foucault's characterisation is not without its drawbacks, the advantage of persevering with his famous (perhaps by now infamous) description of sodomy is that by scrutinising the discursive fractures, the rules that interrogate behaviour are themselves interrogated and queered. Though irresistibly apt, the notoriety of his remark eclipses, and perhaps masks, the nuanced models for the workings of speech, silence and power in the passage in which it is contained. As Foucault also insists, 'We must not expect the discourses on sex to tell us, above all, what strategy they derive from, or what moral divisions they accompany, or what ideology – dominant or dominated – they represent.'[30] The notion that power is discursive opens up possibilities, as does an insistence that discourse and power are not inseparable. More than acknowledging or understanding something to be 'unspeakable', explicitly stating that something is unutterable channels and destabilises both the reinforcing, proactive weight of discourse, and the insidious, oppressive subjugation of silence. Sodomy may or may not be 'utterly confused', but in its harnessing of the forces that are both proper to and opposed to underlying matrices of power, the unspeakable confuses utterance in very productive fashion.

CONTRADICTING NATURE

While the sin against nature may also be the unspeakable sin, the two need not be the same act. There may exist transgressions against nature that may be spoken of – usury, for example – however, when a thing is called unspeakable there can be little doubt that it is also unnatural. Since the basis of Nature's authority in sexual ethics is the principle of generation, an act against nature is an act that confounds or perverts procreation, and referring to something as unnatural implies this should not be thought in any way productive or generative.[31] Yet Nature as an authority is rarely consistent, either in the ways in which she is presented or in the conditions she endorses. 'Natural' may refer to that which is observed in animals and of nature at large; it may equally (and in the same texts) refer to a set of circumstances in which what is 'natural' often boils down to what is unexceptional.[32] As Daston and Vidal point out, 'Nature's authority works by paradox and obscurity as well as by the clash of clear-cut positions' and the advantage of the allegorical is precisely that 'figurative language and images offer a rich and plastic repertoire for depicting nature's traits, which can be juxtaposed without necessarily being made consistent with one another'.[33] To accurately represent natural authority,

[30] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I*, p. 102.

[31] See Payer, *Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession*, pp. 128–32, for the use of this idea in the high Middle Ages.

[32] On Christian ethics equating the good with the usual, see Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality,* pp. 312–13.

[33] Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, 'Doing What Comes Naturally', in *The Moral*

it seems, is not to risk but to revel in contradiction. Certainly the personification of Nature in the Middle Ages has been repeatedly shown to be protean, incoherent and slippery – who better, then, to enable writers to speak of the unspeakable?

Barbara Newman observes, in her survey of Nature's territory in medieval culture, that ever since Bernard Silvestris made Nature a goddess, 'one of her favorite habitats [has been] ethical discourse about sex and gender, and in text after text she stakes out her position as goddess of the normative'.[34] This position is vividly established in the twelfth century by Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae,* which relates a vision of the goddess Nature descending to earth to bemoan man's vices, especially those that are against nature and which she may take particularly personally. In a lengthy *effictio,* Alain describes Nature's appearance and her magnificent robe, which depicts all creation but is torn by philosophers; she tells him about her role as God's *uicaria* and how, despite her efforts, man perverts her laws. Nature has latterly chosen to dwell in heaven and therefore delegated the work of procreation to Venus, Hymen and Cupid; Venus, however, has entered into an adulterous liaison with Antigenius and the result is the proliferation of unnatural couplings. Nature's complaint ends with the appearance of the Virtues and the composition of a letter to Genius, her priest, who finally excommunicates those who commit offences against Nature. As Jan Ziolkowski has shown, *De Planctu* supplies Nature with the grammatical–moral equivalence of the period and enables her to imbue her complaints with rhetorical force that derives from the link between corruption of grammar and corruptness of sexual acts.[35] An act that is *contra naturam* is therefore not only against Nature's law but against Nature's grammar – correct usage extends to both words and bodies.

The reception and influence of Alain's text is demonstrated emphatically by the authors of the *Roman de la Rose,* the quintessential dream allegory.[36]

Authority of Nature, ed. Daston and Vidal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 1–20 (p. 8). See also R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945); C. S. Lewis, 'Nature', in *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *The Concept of Nature,* ed. John Torrance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

34 Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 53–4.

35 Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex: The Meaning of Grammar to a Twelfth-Century Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1985).

36 On the subject of the *Rose*'s debt to Alain, its allegory, satire and readership, see in particular George Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Noah D. Guynn, *Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages*, The New Middle Ages (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007); Sylvia Huot, *The 'Romance of the Rose' and Its Medieval Readers: Interpretation, Reception, Manuscript Transmission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's 'Cité des dames'* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Amans, the lover, dreams of a garden where he is struck with the God of Love's arrows and becomes obsessed with the Rose he glimpses at the fountain of Narcissus; with the aid (and sometimes hindrance) of a string of helpers, led by Genius, he finally overcomes the guards and storms the castle where he wins his Rose. In this further transformation of the allegory of Nature's authority in sexual matters, as Schibanoff notes, Nature is not entrusted with the analysis of same-sex desire, and the grammatical argument is removed, 'affording Nature no chance to weaken the case against sexual perversity with grammatical metaphors that are so easily challenged'.[37] Her priest Genius rules Venus and co-opts her in his opposition not only to same-sex desire but to all who do not procreate, including those whose desires are heteronormative, but the work emphatically maintains the traditional pro-generative and homophobic position on the 'natural'. Genius concludes with the famous diatribe against 'those who do not write with their styluses', who do not forge with their hammers, or 'despise the straight furrow' and waste their seed plowing the desert instead, and especially followers of Orpheus (who 'did not know how to plow or write or forge in the true forge'), calling for their excommunication and castration: 'May their styluses be taken away from them when they have not wished to write within the precious tablets that were suitable for them!'[38]

This accords with the goddess of *De Planctu,* who condemns Helen for adultery, Parsiphae for bestiality, Myrrha for incest and Narcissus for self-love; the most vehement (and stylistically complex) denunciations, however, are reserved for homoerotic acts. Metre I describes those who deny Nature, men turned women (*femina uir factus*) who blacken the fair name of their sex (*sexus denigrate honorem*);[39] later, men who seek other men:

> Non modo Tindaridem Frigius uenatur adulter
> Sed Paris in Paridem monstra nefanda parit.
>
> (No longer does the Phrygian adulterer [Paris] chase the daughter of Tyndareus but Paris with Paris performs unmentionable and monstrous deeds.)[40]

[37] Susan Schibanoff, 'Sodomy's Mark: Alain de Lille, Jean de Meun, and the Medieval Theory of Authorship', in *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, Medieval Cultures 27 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 28–56 (p. 39).

[38] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971 and subsequent), pp. 323–4; Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy, 3 vols, Societé des Anciens Textes Français (Paris: Firmin-Didot, Champion, 1914–24), vv. 19599–646.

[39] Alain de Lille, *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Nikolaus M. Häring, *Studi Medievali* 19 (1978), 797–879 (806: 17).

[40] *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 808: 51–2; Alain de Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and

The problem has arisen because Nature has delegated the work of matching couples to Venus. Nature calls to the authority of grammar and subverts its usual operation in her transmutation of orthodox sexuality into orthodox language. Prose V details how Nature, 'with secret warnings and mighty, thunderous threats', instructs Venus that in accordance with reason she should 'concentrate exclusively in her connections on the natural union of masculine and feminine gender [*in suis coniunctionibus ratione exigentie naturalem constructionem solummodo masculini feminique generis celebraret*]', since these are the conditions that must obtain for reproduction.[41] Since, in this generative grammar, the masculine corresponds to the active form and to the adjective (which modifies the noun), and the feminine by implication corresponds with the noun and the passive form, masculine and feminine should join naturally and have no recourse to grammatical agreement that would pair masculine and masculine, and feminine and feminine. The active sense and the passive are not to be mixed, the adjective acts upon the noun and nothing else; intransitive constructions (with no direct objects) and reflexives (that refer back to the subject) should not be tolerated; deponents (passive/female in form, active/male in action) should not be adopted.[42] Should the masculine, 'by a certain violence of unreasonable reason [*irrationabilis rationis*]' desire 'a gender entirely similar to itself', this may not be defended 'as any kind of graceful figure but will bear the stain of an outlandish and unpardonable solecism [*inexcusabili soloecismi monstruositate*]'.[43] In *De Planctu*, however, Alain's complex discussion of the manifold grammatical constructions that do not obtain in the grammar of Nature also, of course, makes the point very well that all of these unspeakable constructions are indeed possible in speech, and precisely through the agreement of gender.

De Planctu holds forth on the pitfalls of unnatural behaviour, but it is not without its own internal inconsistencies, which marry persistent invective against 'unnatural' practice with persistent hints that Nature herself is inconsistent and lacks commitment to her work. Her garb features behaviours well-known from the bestiaries – the resurrection of the phoenix, the self-castration of the beaver, the bear whose offspring begin so ill-made they must be literally licked into shape – and throughout the characteristic violence,

trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980), p. 71.

41 *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 846: 47–9; *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, p. 157.

42 *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 846–7: 58–72; *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, pp. 157–9. See *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, n. 12–15, on this 'almost incredible mélange of words'.

43 *De Planctu Naturae*, Häring, 846: 54–7; *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, p. 157. The distance between figures of speech and barbarisms is also a preoccupation for Alain elsewhere. For his discussion of the rejection of figures of speech by grammar, see *Anticlaudianus, or The Good and Perfect Man,* ed. and trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1973), 86: 417–35.

promiscuity and lack of reason that are commonly attributed to animals. Nature's coherence and consistency is repeatedly called into question. The night-owl is so demonstrably imperfect and sullied that it is as if Nature were napping during his manufacture. The parrot feigns human speech 'on the anvil of its throat' (*in sui gutturis incude*),[44] while among the fish there is 'a siren, part fish, but with a man's face'.[45] The elephant's size is attributed to Nature's original credit being multiplied through usury (*fenore duplicabat*).[46] Nature's robe also shows 'natural' instances of otherwise 'unnatural' acts: the bat, for example, is a 'hermaphrodite among birds [*auis hermafroditica*]' and appears to elide two forms and possibly two genders.[47]

Moreover, Nature's philosophy of language is also inconsistent; it vacillates between a Platonic eschewal of false poetry (in prose 4) and a resolve to beautify vice with golden phrases and honeyed words. Her insistence on the importance of measure, pattern and regularity is overthrown by the language that in her indignation against these transgressions exceeds limits and becomes strange and profane (*prophanas [...] nouitates*).[48] Alain's rhetoric amplifies Nature's objections to the sex acts that fall under the category of sodomy, and the gender instabilities that she likewise deplores, but, as several scholars have pointed out, the rhetorical bravura accomplishes this objective by resorting to precisely the type of sophistry that is used as a metaphor for the unnatural behaviour that is the cause of Nature's ire – the very form of *De Planctu* is a hybrid. While the unnatural is opposed to speakability and legibility, implying that Nature may act as the arbiter of access to speech and language, the natural often appears confusing and near unspeakable, too.

The fallout from unnatural acts seems to destabilise Nature herself in turn, but as she admits, these transgressions take place because Nature has delegated the work of matching humans to Venus, Hymen and Cupid, for reasons that, as Sheridan points out, are self-serving and insufficient.[49] This is a Nature who abandons the work with which she is tasked by God because she wishes to be nearer to heaven; who deputises unwisely; who speaks at length of the correct order and the rectitude of male–female pairings and

44 *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 815: 181.

45 *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 817: 212–13.

46 *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 818: 240.

47 *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 816: 192–3; *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, p. 94. The bat was regarded as being like a bird but not quite a bird; possibly a mixture of bird and mouse. Hugh of Fouilloy in *De Bestis et Aliis Rebus* deems the bat 'ignoble [*ignobile*]' (*PL* 177, col. 95C); this is translated by T. H. White as 'a paltry animal'; *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (Madison, WI: Parallel Press, 2002), pp. 140–1. Both texts note its distinction from other birds but do not call it hermaphrodite.

48 *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 836: 95; *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, p. 137.

49 *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, p.147, n. 44.

the orthodoxy of gender roles and the singleness of gender in bodies, but whose robe displays *mixturae* that would have agitated Bernard of Clairvaux and, worse still, creatures who transgress these boundaries. Nature's acts and bodies would seem to be *contra naturam*, and all this without comment from the narrator. Indeed, just as Nature is shown to exhibit the inconsistencies of form, intent and action that she decries in creation, Alain 'exhibitionistically shows himself to be a practitioner of the *falsigraphia* he has Nature cite as the obverse of her orthography'.[50] While Larry Scanlon and William Burgwinkle's readings conclude that Alain revealed more of himself in *De Planctu* than in any other work, and perhaps more than he intended[51] (recalling Foucault's point that we cannot expect discourse on sex to tell us about whether it comes from a dominant or dominated position), David Rollo takes up their observations and takes these ideas further in his analysis of form, reading 'style itself [as] a covert message'.[52]

The *Rose* continues Alain's fascination with linguistic correctness and continues to muse on the relation of language to reality, with gleeful satire exemplified in the notorious passage in which Jean's Reason chooses the example of 'testicles' and 'relics' to point out the arbitrariness of words' relation to what they describe.[53] Though Reason makes light of blasphemy, Jon Whitman contends that the *Rose* 'participate[s] in a larger intellectual controversy that acquires new intensity in the late thirteenth century, the problem of formulating the relation between the created and divine worlds'.[54] Drawing on Aquinas, he sets out the stakes: creation and the Creator cannot be described in the same words with the same sense, yet if words could not describe both creation and Creator, how could we speak of God or acknowledge the connection to the Creator? Reason is no neoplatonist, declaring that one cannot speak too much of God; yet even here the *Rose* is also concerned with the confusion that comes about through prolixity, and Reason must concede

50 David Rollo, *Kiss My Relics: Hermaphroditic Fictions of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 116.

51 Larry Scanlon, 'Speaking the Unspeakable: Sexual Regulation and the Priesthood of Genius', *Romanic Review* 86.2 (1995), 213–42 (p. 226); Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law*, pp. 193–9.

52 Rollo, *Kiss My Relics*, p. 216.

53 Responding to Amant's prim remark that a well-bred maiden should not know the word *testicles* (or *coilles*), Reason declares that 'If, when I put names to things that you dare to criticize thus and blame, I had called testicles relics [*coilles reliques apelasse*] and had declared relics to be testicles, then you, who here criticize me and goad me on account of them, would reply that "relics" was an ugly, base word.' *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dalhberg, p. 135; *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Lecoy, vv. 7079–85.

54 Jon Whitman, 'Dislocations: The Crisis of Allegory in the *Romance of the Rose*', in *Languages of the Unsayable*, ed. Budick and Iser, pp. 259–79 (pp. 269–70).

that, though silence 'remains a small virtue […/ to speak the things to be kept silent [*dire les choses a tere*] is to commit a diabolical deed'.[55]

The scholastic evolution of Alain's theme is very much in evidence when Nature debates whether free will, predestination and divine prescience can co-exist; this discussion occurs during Genius's confession of Nature. Just as Alain's ornate and sophisticated stylings enthusiastically embrace grammatical flexibility, Jean's digression-filled work is fuelled by the pleasures of excess and prolixity. Even Nature, though she claims she does not want to tire herself talking, and that 'It is a good thing to flee prolixity [*bon fet prolixité foïr,* v. 18268]', does not know reason and measure in her speech. Where language is the metaphor for sexuality then Nature's own behaviour does not conform to the ideal.[56] She cannot keep her silence and so confesses not only her own failings but the sins of others, too:

> [S]ince he has done so much against me, I will tell the story of his [man's] fall before God, who gave him to me when he created man in his image. I am a woman and cannot keep silent [*Fame sui, si ne me puis tere*, v. 19188]; from now on I want to reveal everything, for a woman can hide nothing. Man was never better vilified than he will be now. It was an evil hour for him when he wandered so far from me. His vices will be recounted; I shall tell the whole truth.[57]

Jean's Genius (anticipating Derrida, but with an antifeminist slant) insists that no woman – even Nature – is capable of keeping secret anything that should not be said: the only reason a man could have for revealing to a woman anything he does not want subsequently broadcast is that he is drunk or mad (*ivres ou forsenez,* v. 16320). If he does, he has only himself to blame when his secret is spilled. 'But what does the wretch think he can do? He cannot keep his own tongue silent [*sa langue tere*]. Is he going to try now to restrain another's?'[58] Such is the censure of women in the *Rose*, of course, that it inspired the literary debate known as the *querelle de la Rose* or the *querelle des femmes*. Champions of virtuous women, led by Christine de Pizan, objected to the obscene language and satirical philosophy in the *Rose*, Jean's antifeminist rhetoric, which extended to the declaration that women are universally and necessarily whores,[59] and his cynical treatment of love.[60] Noah Guynn argues

[55] *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg, p. 215; *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Lecoy, vv. 7001–13 (7005–6).

[56] *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg, p. 304; *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Lecoy, vv. 18266–8.

[57] *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg, p. 317; *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Lecoy, vv. 19184–94.

[58] *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg, p. 279; *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Lecoy, vv. 16523–5.

[59] *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg, pp. 165–6; *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Lecoy, vv. 9155–65.

[60] See Christine de Pizan, Jean Gerson, Jean de Montreuil, Gontier and Pierre Col, *Le*

that it is precisely the *Rose*'s continual dislocations and authorial disavowals that serve to obscure and enable its antifeminist stance, by seeming to distance its writer from the ideology the romance describes and seemingly deconstructs.[61] While silence and secrecy may be the Foucauldian shelter for power, the deconstruction of ideological discourse and the multitude of voices may thus become equally effective in this regard. In this text, which as Guynn insists 'seeks a shelter for male power in the apparent disruption and demystification, but also the subtle affirmation and perpetuation, of a variety of patriarchal culture codes', there is a preoccupation with the dangers of speaking women.[62]

Where *De Planctu* is often seen as the archetype of high medieval homophobia, and the *Rose* of antifeminism (and both texts are coloured by both prejudices, of course), their biases also skew the representation of Nature. Nature is the authority in sexual ethics, but Nature is confused, open to interpretation and, inevitably (if ironically), bound up in custom as well. She is encompassed in Jean's misogyny just as she is party to the homoerotic preferences Alain decries. Thus Susan Schibanoff, in her brilliant reading of Alain and Jean, analyses the queerness of Nature and Genius and the fecundity of same-sex desire, and Guynn notes that, strictly speaking, *monstra nefanda parit* (in *De Planctu*'s opening verses) may be 'both the doing of monstrous misdeeds and the begetting of monstrous offspring, here through homosexual intercourse and male parturition'.[63] As Jordan remarks, 'Nature's rules seem to spawn their own violations in same-sex fertilities'.[64] She embodies traits that are supposedly shameful and even unspeakable. And yet, just as Nature is the term that makes the obfuscations of the confessional script clear, Nature is also the arbiter of that which is acceptable to speech. In texts about the unnatural, Nature enables the unspeakable to go on speaking.

PIECES OF PILGRIMS (AND WHY THEY MATTER)

The condemnation of the unspeakable is enabled by the conversion of a person into a sign, a word that is gendered. The remainder of this chapter now turns to this process and the speculation that it enables, tracing the unspeakable acts and clamour of voices around three queer protagonists of the late medieval

Débat sur 'Le Roman de la Rose', ed. Eric Hicks (Paris: Editions Honoré Champion, 1977).

61 'Is it possible that the poem's fascination with its own lack of unity, including its dislocation of the author from his signature, may actually serve to *privilege* antifeminist ideologies and shield them from attack, rather than exposing and unsettling the very foundations of medieval patriarchy?' Guynn, *Allegory and Sexual Ethics*, p. 153.

62 Guynn, *Allegory and Sexual Ethics,* p. 140.

63 Guynn, *Allegory and Sexual Ethics*, p. 109.

64 Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, p. 86.

canon. I begin with the figure who is now probably the most notorious (possible) exponent of the unspeakable sin in medieval literature – Chaucer's Pardoner. Among the motley crew of pilgrims on the road to Canterbury, it is arguably the Pardoner who best characterises the multivalence of that other collection of 'Fragments', *The Canterbury Tales*.[65]

The final member of the band that Chaucer describes in the Prologue, the Pardoner, is companion to the Summoner and carries a 'male' stuffed with the fake 'relics' he sells all over England. Though Harry Bailly requests a mirthful antidote to the distressing story of Virginia that the Physician has just told, the general company calls for something more edifying. The Pardoner obliges with a homiletic digression on the evils of greed (as he himself drinks ale and eats cake), followed by a tale of three rioters who, on hearing Death has taken one of their fellow drinkers, attempt to evade him but find instead a heap of gold that leads to their collective demise. Indeed, though unlike its gloomy predecessor in many ways, the 'Pardoner's Tale', like the 'Physician's Tale', calls attention over and over to the disparity between speech and truth, and makes rigorously the link between speaking and sinning. Truth and falsehood, natural and unnatural, are again superimposed. While Virginia is Nature's greatest achievement, a maiden of clear and simple speech with no 'countrefeted termes' (VI. 51), the judge Appius lies shamelessly, and the Pardoner's revellers are 'fals' and 'unkynde' (that is, unnatural, VI. 903).

Unfortunately for the edification of the company, not only does the Pardoner preface his tale by explaining his dodgy dealings with the lay folk who come to him for pardons and relics, he then caps his otherwise moral story by attempting to hawk his wares to the pilgrims. Bailly, in his disgust, silences the Pardoner by threatening to enshrine his 'coillons […] in an hogges toord' (VI. 952–5), and it is left to the Knight – the first among the pilgrims – to make peace between them. The many critical readings of this pilgrim's tale also turn the tables on the *quaestor* and interrogate him for his 'secret', outing him as homosexual, exposing him as a eunuch and claiming him for queer theory.

The sheer volume of Chaucerian study produced in the centuries since Hoccleve declared him the father of English poetry can reveal a stunning array of interpretations on any issue, but even in this context the 'Pardoner's Tale' is remarkable for the range of critical assertions that all take their cue from a select few lines:

> A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
> No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
> As smothe it was as it were late shave.

[65] References to *The Canterbury Tales* will be given from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Subsequent references will be given in the text by fragment and line number.

> I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.
> But of his craft, fro Berwyk into Ware
> Ne was ther switch another pardoner. (I. 688–93)

In large part on account of this first appearance, the Pardoner has been saddled with a plethora of assessments for his condition or identity, whether physical, psychological or psychical, as subsequent readers have tried to figure out who he 'really' is. The Summoner's hyper-masculinity has come in for scrutiny, but it is still the Pardoner who best 'fits' the image – if there can be said to be one – of a queer medieval character.[66] From George Lyman Kittredge onwards, the principal trend among scholars treating the 'Pardoner's Tale' and 'Prologue' has been towards the systematic construction first of his 'personality' and later his sexuality. Though Kittredge did not stray from the former (resolving the disparity of Chaucer's putting 'a beautiful story, wonderfully told […] into the mouth of a vulgar, prating rascal' by examining 'all the available evidence as to the Pardoner's character'),[67] his character assessment spawned other analyses in a similar vein, whose focus gradually narrowed almost exclusively to discussions of the Pardoner's (homo)sexuality or, alternatively, whether or not he is a eunuch.[68] *The Canterbury Tales* are perennial favourites with medievalists studying sexual politics, but critics were 'outing' the Pardoner for decades before the advent of gender and queer theory.

The final section of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, dominated as it is by the Parson's lengthy sermon for the improvement of the general company, famously rails against 'thilke abhomynable synne, of which that no man unnethe oghte speke ne write' (X. 909). For at least some of his travelling

[66] The Summoner is described as 'hoot […] and lecherous' (I. 626) and bears 'a stif burdoun' to the Pardoner as they sing together (I. 673); the Pardoner is taken to be effeminate and therefore potentially sodomitical. This pun on 'stif burdoun' ('strong bass', as the *Riverside* glosses it, but also a staff or stud, with inevitable phallic connotations) provides the basis for speculation as to the Pardoner and Summoner's relationship.

[67] G. L. Kittredge, 'Chaucer's Pardoner', *The Atlantic Monthly* 72 (1893), 829–33 (p. 830).

[68] In 1919, Walter Clyde Curry identified him, from his thinning hair and staring eyes, as a congenital eunuch, a verdict that was thereafter endorsed by critics well into the latter half of the century, and indeed still persists (albeit as a theory that is frequently problematised). Monica McAlpine probes possible implications of the word 'mare', suggesting the Pardoner 'may be seen as a frustrated heterosexual who associates himself with the lecherous Summoner in order to deny his own impotence […] [or who is] ambivalent about disclosing his status, [but] nonetheless becomes suspect through the public display of this ambiguous friendship'. See Walter Clyde Curry, 'The Secret of Chaucer's Pardoner', *JEGP* 18 (1919), 593–606; Beryl Rowland, 'Animal Imagery and the Pardoner's Abnormality', *Neophilologus* 48.1 (1964), 56–60 (p. 58); Monica E. McAlpine, 'The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How it Matters', *PMLA* 95.1 (1980), 8–22 (p. 13); and Gregory W. Gross, 'Trade Secrets: Chaucer, the Pardoner, the Critics', *Modern Language Studies* 25.4 (1995), 1–36, for the development of the Pardoner's critical 'closet'.

companions, however, this is a bit late. The problem with the category of the 'unspeakable', as the Parson's allusion itself points out, is that even in order to impose the necessary censure, or (more charitably) to encourage appropriate confession, one is obliged to 'speak or write' about it. Naturally, in *The Canterbury Tales*, which function in and through an economy of enunciation – I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours – there is little chance of anyone or anything remaining silent. As Jean's Genius says, secrets breed speech.

The Pardoner becomes *The Canterbury Tales*' representative of the unspeakable, since he himself is concerned chiefly with the meaning of fragments and with oral control. In medieval terms, he may be seen as unnatural in several ways – his physical body is construed as unmanly, effeminate; he is spiritually hollow and a purveyor of fakes and blasphemy – but his narrative also exemplifies the unspeakable in that what goes unmentioned is routinely emphasised. He himself acknowledges the rhetorical force of saying what you will not say, telling people what you are not going to tell them. Confronted with a sceptic in his congregation, one of the 'folk that doon us displesances' (VI. 420), he appears to take particular pleasure in cutting this man down to size, but he derives equal satisfaction in doing it without naming names. Though the Pardoner will 'telle noght his propre name', he nevertheless ensures by the use of certain signs that 'Men shal wel knowe that it is the same' (VI. 417–19). Likewise, mention of the sin practised by men and women 'in diverse entente and in diverse manere' (X. 910) might suggest any or none of the pilgrims, but the audience might equally know by the signs who is meant.

Even a plain, bald statement becomes a veiled reference to an unspeakable alternative, when it comes from the Pardoner.[69] Of his double moral standards, he declares, 'I preche agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice' (VI. 427–8). His personal motto, 'Radix malorum est Cupiditas' (VI. 334, 426), casts the original sin as greed, not pride. References to the Pardoner's own fiscal *cupiditas* are abundant; indeed, Walter Scheps argued that the notorious gelding/mare line was actually an indication of an avaricious character (following Gower's model in the *Confessio Amantis*, wherein Avarice is variously depicted as being both male and female and also riding on horseback).[70] It is nevertheless another critical commonplace that this vice is, as McAlpine terms it, a 'screen sin'[71] – the educated guesser might indeed

[69] For a reading of the Pardoner's veils, both physical and metaphorical, see Robert S. Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse*, The New Middle Ages Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 64–80.

[70] Walter Scheps, 'Chaucer's Numismatic Pardoner and the Personification of Avarice', *Acta* 4 (1977), 107–23 (pp. 117, 120).

[71] McAlpine, 'The Pardoner's Homosexuality', p. 14. See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 157; Lee Patterson, 'Chaucerian Confession: Penitential Literature and the Pardoner', *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976), 153–73 (p. 163).

argue that the Pardoner's true vice is the vice of (desiring) the 'same', since 'the shame that attends the naming of the sin even in the confessional seems a clear allusion to homosexuality'.[72]

Despite the Parson's admonitions, matters of which no man should speak or write make other guest appearances through the course of *The Canterbury Tales* regardless; in its silent yet persistent clamour, the unspeakable echoes through certain pilgrims' yarns, an elephant in the room. The flyting and quiting of the Miller and the Reeve early on in the tales indicate that, unspoken though it is, there is little doubt in the pilgrims' minds what is happening when Nicholas is penetrated by Absolom's hot coulter. As Daniel Pigg argues, the Miller is also subjected to 'male violence – male against male. It is a tale of symbolic rape.'[73] Where Nicholas and Absolom are engaged in a homosocial contest via the body of Alisoun, the Reeve's story implicates himself and the Miller in another male–male rivalry, triangulated again by the (unwitting) female body.[74] The 'Reeve's Tale' is thus a speech act equivalent to a performance: 'in "saying" his tale he is not merely talking, but also metaphorically "doing" something quite perverse to his adversary, the Miller'.[75]

The Host threatens to do something equally, if not more, perverse to the Pardoner. Having divulged frankly that the relics he carries around to sell are all forgeries, the Pardoner's subsequent attempts to flog these same goods to the audience of pilgrims do not sit well with Harry Bailly. In response to the Pardoner's behest that he 'kisse the relikes everychon' (VI. 944), Bailly snaps the famous retort:

> Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,
> And swere it were the relyk of a seint,
> Though it were with thy fundament depeint! (VI. 948–50)

The sexual undercurrent detectable in this scene has been thoroughly picked apart by a succession of critics (as will be discussed later in the chapter). In

[72] McAlpine, 'The Pardoner's Homosexuality', p. 15.

[73] Daniel F. Pigg, 'Performing the Perverse: The Abuse of Masculine Power in the *Reeve's Tale*', in *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde,* ed. Peter G. Beidler (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 53–61 (p. 60).

[74] Pigg makes the point that 'Medieval records are all but silent on the issue of homosexual rape, not because it did not happen, but because it was ultimately an attack on the world of male authority […] How much of a threat homosexual rape was will probably remain unclear, but it was certainly inscribed in the cultural mind […] On the symbolic level of the tale, the Reeve has merely substituted the clerk's attack on the two women for his own verbal attack on the Miller' (Pigg, 'Performing the Perverse', p. 60). Given the inherently more 'speakable' nature of heterosexual rape, it is tempting to wonder how much hegemonic capital there was to be gained by telling stories about attacks on females that reinforced the subjugation of the feminine to the masculine.

[75] Pigg, 'Performing the Perverse', p. 54.

an effort to persuade Bailly to buy, the Pardoner bids him 'Unbokele anon thy purs' (VI. 945), 'unbokele' carrying the connotations of both *undoing* and *displaying*, and 'purs' potentially referring to a purse of money, a receptacle for relics or, as the Wife of Bath uses the term in her 'Prologue', the 'nether purs' (III. 44b) or scrotum. Whether the Pardoner's motives are fiscal, sexual or owing to some other impulse, Bailly's reply to his solicitation puts him down firmly; in his own literal interpretation of Reason's relic-testicle aphorism, the Host would have the Pardoner's 'coillons' in his hand, so as to cut them off and make of *them* a relic. The Pardoner in his 'wrath' is left speechless, until the Knight's intervention restores the balance and the two kiss and make up.[76]

As Robert Sturges shows, the Pardoner is a figure who exposes ruptures and inconsistencies in medieval thought about sexual identity and gender identity. In his protean nature, cynical religiosity and fluid gender, the Pardoner riffs on Jean's Faux Semblant. False Seeming, who aids Amans but is eventually dismissed as an ally, declares all the guises in which he passes from town to town – all occupations, clerical and lay, all ages, both sexes. He is not only a trickster but spiritually vacant: no matter whether he disguise himself as monk, clerk, priest, nun or devotee, he cheerfully admits that when it comes to religion, 'I leave the kernel […] and take the husk [*j'en lés le grain et pregn la paille*].'[77] The Pardoner's swagger is likewise built on undisguised disguises; he apes the Physician's medicinal tonics with a cure-all made from water that washed a shoulder-bone 'that was of an hooly Jewes sheep' (VI. 350–65); he likens himself to a serpent, admitting he defames others and uses preaching for the opportunity to 'spitte […] venym under hewe / Of hoolynesse' (VI. 421–2). If his layers of physical, social, psychological and psychical camouflage have fed centuries of modern and postmodern reader controversies, the continuations of the Canterbury narrative contained in the anonymous *Tale of Beryn* and Lydgate's prologue to *The Sege of Thebes* suggest that medieval readers did not seem to know what to make of the Pardoner either. Whereas in the *Tale of Beryn* he gets into a fabliauesque scrape with the comely tapster of a Canterbury inn, attempting to seduce her but ending the night in a dog kennel, Chaucer's near-contemporary Lydgate continues to portray the Pardoner as a beardless wonder with a glassy stare.[78]

[76] On the Pardoner's apoplexy at the jokes on his relics, see also William Chester Jordan, 'The Pardoner's "Holy Jew"', in *Chaucer and the Jews*, ed. Sheila Delany (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 25–42. While the other pilgrims can communicate in jokes and successfully battle with wits, Jordan argues, the Pardoner is speechless before the truth (that his relics fail in their function).

[77] *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg, pp. 196–7; *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Lecoy, vv. 11151–92 (vv. 11185–6).

[78] See *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. John M. Bowers (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992).

If the Pardoner's identity is a many-gendered thing, Sturges demonstrates the value of proliferating and plural interpretations, which may 'challenge all critical attempts to fix the Pardoner's body', and instead 'render it discoherent, to reactivate the contradictions erased by the ideology of unitary discursive truth and its attempts to control meaning'.[79] Implicitly allied with unnatural acts and religious fakery from his first appearance, the Pardoner evokes the emptiness of words, the fragmentation of bodies, the interchangeability of terms and genders, and the conversion of bodies into speech. He is a cipher, fragments of a persona made into different wholes in discourse (or holes in the discourse). Continually rearranging pieces of personas, the Pardoner makes heavy demands on any reader who attempts to pin him down.

Such slipperiness extends both to his speech and his fake relics. While Lee Patterson reconciles the attraction of psychoanalytic theory with its inherent drawbacks, particularly 'the way its seeming persuasiveness can foreclose access to relevant medieval materials and contexts',[80] the impact of theoretical trends from a historicist perspective is half-lamented, half-lampooned in Robyn Malo's essay 'The Pardoner's Relics (And Why They Matter the Most)'.[81] For the theoretically inclined, though, the Pardoner's relics are also crucial. Like a neat label for a lengthy thought process, a relic is a part for an inaccessible whole, connoting lack as well as connection. The similarities between fragments of language and the *materia* of the 'Pardoner's Tale' are crystallised in Carolyn Dinshaw's compelling reading of his relics as 'partial objects' – those items 'used by the subject in the attempt to fill the lack brought into being by the loss of an original ideal, an original wholeness and plenitude'.[82] For this technique of strategic, flawed but ceaseless substitution in the face of glaringly obvious deficiency, Dinshaw coins the name 'eunuch hermeneutics'. The Pardoner's relics become constitutive of his self-image in a manner that recalls the *méconnaissance* of the Lacanian mirror-stage: despite

79 Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory,* p. 36. Sturges is borrowing Jonathan Dollimore's term from *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

80 Lee Patterson, 'Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies', *Speculum* 76.3 (2001), 638–80 (p. 656).

81 Robyn Malo, 'The Pardoner's Relics (And Why They Matter the Most)', *The Chaucer Review* 43.1 (2008), 82–102. Malo responds to McAlpine, 'The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters', and Richard F. Green, 'The Pardoner's Pants (And Why They Matter)', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993), 131–45, by pointing out that in the forty-five lines introducing the Pardoner in the *General Prologue*, the longest segment (I. 686–700) is devoted to his relics.

82 Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics,* p. 165. Dinshaw is adopting Melanie Klein's usage here: in Kleinian object relations theory, in which the infant's early experiences provide the pattern for the individual's expectations of people and situations in later life, these internalised impressions – objects – begin with fragmentary images of the infant's physical relation to the world and others (such as the image of the breast); these, Klein terms as part objects.

knowing the imperfections of his phony patents and relics, the Pardoner 'uses them – aggressively, desperately – in the belief that they can make him whole, somehow part of the body of pilgrims'.[83] This same belief or desire informs the critical wish to settle on a solution to the Pardoner problem – is he a geldyng or a mare? From this partial description, there is no possibility of getting at 'the secret' or 'the truth' without speculating or extrapolating – even faking it. The illusion of the Pardoner's relics, metonymic parts pointing but not equating to an imagined whole, is the illusion of the Pardoner's own appearance in *The Canterbury Tales*, snippets of information that indicate some indefinable, unspeakable *something* the reader can only imagine beyond the limits of the text. This hermeneutic of the partial, Dinshaw posits, reveals 'a truth about language' as well as the Pardoner: namely that it was 'understood to be at best a fragment'.[84]

Critical discourse on the Pardoner, in its plurality of conclusions about him, is likewise composed of fragments that resemble and represent, but cannot express, a truth – a catalogue of scraps all attempting to describe the same persona. In his appearance and behaviours, the Pardoner breeds speech even (or especially) about the unspeakable, and though he may represent a specific unspeakable sin for pilgrims and medievalists, the Pardoner himself is also frequently concerned with the sins of speaking and of the mouth. According to this tale, the unnatural (or 'unkynde') acts with which the pilgrims *should* be concerned are not the usual unmentionable suspects, but the sins of gluttony – the tale includes detailed surveillance of everything that goes in and out of the revellers' mouths, and even goes so far as to cast gluttony as the sin that should not be spoken of[85] – and particularly blasphemy, which is an unnatural betrayal of God. The Pardoner bemoans profane language in one of his most sustained rants (VI. 629–60): oaths are grisly and foul, swearing 'a thyng abhominable' that tears apart Christ's body (VI. 631). While relics might be invoked in legitimate oaths, to swear by God's heart, nails or arms (VI. 651, 654), to speak of the Creator as if he were a creature, was blasphemous.[86] That the merchant of fake relics is preoccupied with swearing and

[83] Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, p. 177.

[84] Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, p. 173. Patterson remarks that, 'Although Dinshaw sounds like Lacan, and explicitly invokes Melanie Klein, this reading depends ultimately on Freud's account of fetishism. For Freud, the fetish is a sexually arousing object that substitutes for the mother's missing penis […] The Lacanian turn to Dinshaw's argument is to include in this economy of castration language itself' (Patterson, 'Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch', p. 658).

[85] It is, he says, a 'foul thyng […] / To seye this word' (though the deed itself is fouler: VI. 524–5).

[86] On medieval oaths and blasphemy, see Jonathan Michael Gray, *Oaths and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 22–30; Edwin D. Craun, '"Inordinata Locutio": Blasphemy in Pastoral Literature, 1200–1500', *Traditio* 39 (1983), 135–62.

blasphemy is another facet of his hypocrisy, but the Pardoner also unwittingly embodies the logic of orthodox swearing. While his body is similarly torn apart by witnesses, critical focus on this mysterious body and its subsequent reduction to discourse shows with great accuracy how very much a creature he is. Readers unmake and remake the Pardoner by participating in the play of semiotic fragmentation he represents, invoking the Pardoner's fragmented body in the analysis of the unspeakable. The ironic prolixity of discourse around the unspeakable both illuminates and obscures the persona of the Pardoner, with the effect that, the more is said of him, the more difficult it is to speak of him. This meta-criticism is admittedly a point that might be made of other pilgrims and indeed other texts; however, it is one that Chaucer's Pardoner demonstrates with particular abundance and with special resonance to an exploration of unspeakable sin, gender and sexuality.

Less a process of selection than of innumerable, simultaneous occurrences and meanings, the many differences of opinion concerning the Pardoner in particular echo the lack of consensus on medieval sodomy in general – that which, as the Parson says, men and women do with diverse intent and in a variety of ways.[87] The fascination with this character and why he represents something unspeakable has, to some extent, served only to make the Pardoner more mysterious, less understandable; he has been so thoroughly 'defined' as to defy description. He remains dissembling and disassembled but creates through his unspeakability a surfeit of speech. The fragments that make up the Pardoner's image – the body parts, the relics and the relics of discourse from which he is composed and decomposed – might therefore be understood not as somehow fitting together, but as representing a collection of pieces whose separateness performs more work than any amalgamation. Surrounded by relics and accoutrements in the tale, surrounded by identifications and speculations that not only reduce him to words but to only five words in particular, the Pardoner reveals – both in relation to the unspeakable sin and to medieval constructions of gender more widely – the vital and generative importance of the partial.

LIKE AN UNNATURAL WOMAN

Sturges concludes his survey of the multiplicity of gender identities open to the Pardoner with a logical extreme – once it is established 'just how "utterly confused" not only sodomy, but all categories of sex, gender, and erotic practice are, especially when brought together in a single figure', it is even possible to see him as 'a lesbian'.[88] As revisionist scholarship on medieval lesbianism indicates, however, this concept in medieval literature and medieval

[87] *Canterbury Tales*, X. 910.

[88] Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory*, pp. 58–9.

studies has suffered less from confusion than from obscurity.[89] Lochrie makes the point that sodomy as a category was by no means exclusively male. Just as the presumptive heteronormativity of medieval discourse does so at the expense of other gendered positions and sexualities, 'presumptive sodomy has the effect of privileging a version of medieval sodomy that excludes women and gender and replicates the very misogyny of the medieval category'.[90]

Robert Mills points out that, just as Alain's narrator asks Nature why she occupies herself so obsessively with the activities of men, or rather, mortals, as opposed to the gods of classical antiquity who indulged in these acts as much if not more, we may ask why he and Nature focus on the activities of men with men and seem to overlook those of women with women. Pointing to the kisses between Nature and the Virtues, Mills suggests that this 'apparent contradiction between the text's allegorical celebration of intense female fellowship and its condemnation of male–male relations elsewhere may thus be symptomatic of the difference gender makes to the interpretation of same-sex bonds'.[91] Jacqueline Murray encapsulates the status of the medieval lesbian and female same-sex relationships when she writes that they are 'twice marginalised and twice invisible'.[92] Though since the 1990s there has been given much more attention to this area of medieval studies, part of the challenge to such studies continues to be the lack of material in the medieval record and the lack of inscription in discourse. Brundage concludes that writers of canon law 'rarely mentioned lesbianism. The few references that do occur indicate that sexual relationships between women were thought more shocking than male homosexual relationships. Despite this, however, canonists apparently did not perceive lesbian practices as a major problem or as a serious threat to the social order.'[93]

Lochrie, on the other hand, emphasises that an evaluation drawn from lack (in this case of evidence in legal records) might be misleading when

89 For an overview of scholarship addressing and redressing this obscurity, see Jacqueline Murray, 'Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages', in *A Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 191–222; Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn, *Same-Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Noreen Giffney, Michelle M. Sauer and Diane Watt (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

90 Lochrie, 'Presumptive Sodomy', p. 296.

91 Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 255. Mills does acknowledge that this may simply indicate that Alain would have expected a male audience.

92 See Murray, 'Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible', pp. 191–222.

93 Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, p. 400. Brundage notes that sixteenth-century prosecutions for sex between women outnumber those of the Middle Ages but still do not amount to many (pp. 570–1).

women were included in the category of sodomy, though paid less attention, and cites Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and evidence from penitentials and *summae* from the seventh century to the thirteenth, as 'all include among the unnatural sexual sins a woman's fornication with another woman'.[94] Though instances of female sodomy crop up much less often than cases of sodomy involving men, Helmut Puff has brought attention to the case of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (tried in Speyer, 1477), which documents the masculine behaviour and cross-dressing of a woman accused of conducting a long-standing sexual relationship with another woman; Judith Bennett and Shannon McSheffrey also note the case of 'Thomasina' (London, 1493), who kept a female *concubina* dressed in male clothing.[95] Joshua Burson, meanwhile, has investigated the case of Hans Hall (from Constance, 1388), in which a female child (Catharina) who self-identified as male (Hans) was married to a woman.[96] The terminology in each case is revealing, as are the conclusions of the investigators. Puff notes that nowhere in the case is Hetzeldorfer's misdeed referred to as *sodomy*, while Bennett and McShaffrey point out the rarity of same-sex desire as a motivation for female cross-dressing.[97] Burson's case is made more complex by the fact that the individual involved, having considered himself a man, later finds herself developing breasts and appears on examination to be intersex, having 'both what a man should have and what a woman should [*baidn umb ain mann, unnd ain frow haben sölln*]'.[98] Hetzeldorfer was drowned and Thomasina's case was dismissed, for reasons not made clear; however, the council of Rotweil ruled that Hans and his wife had a legitimate marriage, despite both having been born women. Murray points out that when female homosexuality became subsumed under the category 'sodomy' or 'unnatural acts', as in Thomas Aquinas, it was thereby 'rendered […] even more invisible, while at the same time it acquired the more serious overtones of sodomy' – the fate of the medieval lesbian, it

[94] Karma Lochrie, 'Between Women', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 70–88 (p. 78).

[95] See Helmut Puff, 'Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (1477)', *JMEMS* 30.1 (2000), 41–61; Judith M. Bennett and Shannon McSheffrey, 'Early, Erotic and Alien: Women Dressed as Men in Medieval London', *History Workshop Journal* 77 (2014), 1–25 (pp. 8–9).

[96] I am grateful to Joshua Burson for sharing his article 'Gender Identity in Late-Medieval Germany: The Strange Case of Hans Hall'.

[97] Cross-dressing might be associated with unnatural behaviour, with carnival traditions, with bids for increased social status, with fugitives from the law or danger, or with attempts to preserve virginity. For a discussion of cross-dressing and social status in the Middle Ages, see Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 45–73.

[98] Translation Burson's.

seems, was to have the worst of both worlds.[99] Not only stigmatised under the charge of sodomy, female homosexuality was also suppressed in discourse in as much as it was not permitted to exist on its own terms, but rather defined by its relation to male sexuality and 'not taken seriously except insofar as it threatened male privilege or the natural hierarchy of the genders'.[100]

Lochrie therefore argues persuasively for the 'complicity of sodomy and "heterosexuality"' in this discourse.[101] Episodes of female same-sex desire are accordingly characterised and driven by cross-dressing and often miraculous transformation,[102] that is, by a heterosexual matrix. A woman who looked or behaved like a man, especially a woman who desired another woman, acted in a man's office, transgressing or ignoring male authority. Foucault notes the condemnation of women having sex with other women, rather than men with other men, since in the former case the masculine role is usurped by a feminine body.[103] A union in which one man adopted a 'feminine' role was bad enough – how much more unnatural must one be that contained no men at all and in which the 'male' agency could only be appropriated by a woman or abandoned altogether?

The latter part of this chapter focuses on narratives that give prominence to cross-dressed female protagonists and female same-sex relationships: Gower's tale of Iphis, as told by Genius in the *Confessio Amantis*, and the *Roman de Silence*. Both tell stories of female children brought up male and the complications this causes for them in maturity in social orders predicated on the authority of Nature, where biology is supposed to be destiny. They question which desires can be said to be natural, how 'natural' gender is decided, and by whom, and find an unspeakable component even in the 'unspeakable sin'.

'NATURE CONSTREIGNETH HEM': THE TALE OF IPHIS AND IANTE

John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, composed in the 1380s and revised significantly in the ensuing decade (following the poet's perceived shift in allegiance from Richard II to Henry of Lancaster), draws again on the sovereignty of Nature and the ministry of Genius, but unlike Alain and Jean, Gower makes his Genius the priest of Venus, not Nature, and his Lover is schooled in confession, not seduction. The 'Tale of Iphis' comes midway through the

[99] Murray, 'Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible', p. 200

[100] Murray, 'Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible', p. 198.

[101] Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, p. 226.

[102] See for example William Robins, 'Three Tales of Female Same-Sex Marriage: Ovid's "Iphis and Ianthe", the Old French *Yde et Olive*, and Antonio Pucci's *Reina d'Oriente*', *Exemplaria* 21.1 (2009), 43–62.

[103] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality III: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 24.

Confessio as an exemplar that demonstrates the need to defeat Sloth in love, and the rewards of overcoming pusillanimity. The story of the king's daughter, cross-dressed and brought up as a boy to avoid detection by a femicidal father, is briefly but densely told. After King Ligdus decrees that no female child of his should be permitted to live and be his heir, Isis takes pity on Ligdus's wife and advises that her baby girl should be disguised and brought up as a boy. This deception is practised to such success that not only does Ligdus believe he has a son but arranges the marriage of 'Iphis' to another girl, Iante. The two fall in love and develop a sexual relationship that is untaught and natural – the two girls practise precisely that to which 'Nature […] / Constreigneth hem' (IV. 484–6). This un/natural situation is once more resolved through the pity and intervention of a god, this time Cupid, who transforms the girl – at this juncture pointedly referred to as 'Iphe' – into a man in order to 'sette kinde above' and to enable Iphis to win 'the kinde love […] / Of lusti yonge Iante his wif' (IV. 490, 502–3). Gower's retelling of the Ovidian tale thus juxtaposes radically not only the heterosexual and same-sex desires it deals in but also the expression of nature, which both moves the pair to the use of 'Thing which to hem was al unknowe' (IV. 477) and then later 'corrects' the situation so that the love between Iphis and Iante might be 'to kinde non offence' (IV. 505), or not against nature.[104] While critics are divided as to Gower's motives for telling this tale and in the way that he does, the emergence of nature as a contradictory, unpredictable, inconstant force is more uniformly observed.

The unspeakable vice is addressed here in a very different manner. While Chaucer is suggestive, the Pardoner and the unspeakable sin allied by implication, Gower's Iph/is and Ianthe are paired quite deliberately in a narrative that does not raise the question of the speakability (or not) of their coupling. C. S. Lewis concluded that the problem with *Confessio Amantis*, finally, is that Gower nearly ends perfectly but does not know when to stop; this is not the case in the 'Tale of Iphis'.[105] The tale serves as an example of how female same-sex desire in medieval writing can be denied or undeclared, both in the text and by its readers. It is presented as both natural and unnatural, as both problematic and unproblematic; it is not punished, but nor is it permitted to go uncorrected.

While the same-sex female couple of Iphis and Iante are not said to engage specifically in unspeakable acts, this union *is* deemed to be untenable by the narrative and by nature (or 'kinde'). For Gower and for Cupid, it is a relation that should not be preserved and cannot be written unproblematically – Gower's Latin gloss here, as elsewhere in the *Confessio,* tells a different story

[104] See Hugh White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness in a Medieval Literary Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 192–3; Lochrie, *Covert Operations,* pp. 214–16; Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp. 10–11.

[105] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 221–2.

from the English in which Iphis is troubled by an inability to fulfil her desire. The two versions signify simultaneously on the page, both written out in words and written out of the vernacular tale. The tale also serves to illustrate an example of that which for Lacan, who infamously claimed that 'there's no such thing as Woman', is uninscribable in the symbolic; for Irigaray too the jouissance of a(nother) woman is inadmissible to a phallic and phallocentric symbolic, but with very different effects and possibilities.

Lacan holds that the unconscious is structured like a language, and that language is made up not of signs but, revising Saussure, signifiers.[106] The corollary to the formula of Lacan's Rome Discourse, that the subject seeks the response of the other in speech, is that man's ultimate desire is always desire for the big Other – God, Nature, Law, Language itself, the unattainable signifier that licenses all other signifiers that stand in for it but cannot encompass it. Reinterpreting Freud's Oedipus complex as the entry of the subject into language, he posits a form of castration anxiety that is therefore experienced by both male and female subjects, and is predicated on their differing (lack of) access to what he calls the symbolic order, the order of the linguistic. Thus 'the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire' is none other than the phallus.[107] Lacan's relation of the signifier to signified is cast as the relation between the symbolic and the order he terms the 'real', in which the former provides incomplete access, or the illusion of access, to the latter (as the image in the mirror enables the subject to 'see' but not 'be' the mirror-image). In this system the word is 'a presence made of absence' and if 'man speaks […] it is because the symbol has made him man'.[108]

This advent of desire and induction into the order of *logos*, because it is predicated on access to the symbolic phallus (that is, the signifier with no signified), happens differently for the two sexes, and in Lacan's schema is intimately bound up in the issue of sexuation; to feminist readers, the challenge is therefore to explain how this entry into knowledge and language, and the jouissance or enjoyment of the Other, is experienced by the female subject as anything other than lack. This challenge is also taken up in part by Lacan in *Seminar XX* – famously the seminar 'on women'.[109] By this time, Lacan's three orders (the real, the imaginary and the symbolic) are firmly established in his work, as is the phallus as the signifier of the desire of the

[106] Lacan, 'Subversion of the Subject', in *Écrits*, pp. 323–60 (pp. 330–1).

[107] Lacan, 'Signification of the Phallus', in *Écrits*, pp. 311–22 (p. 318). Elaborating further, 'The fact that the phallus is a signifier means that it is in the place of the Other that the subject has access to it', pp. 319–20.

[108] Lacan, 'Function and Field', in *Écrits*, pp. 71, 72.

[109] Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX: Encore 1972–1973)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998).

Other. If 'man's' desire is the desire of the Other, what is woman's? Taking the phallus as both the signifier of the Other and of the entry into the symbolic order means that, by this logic, to identify as a woman is to be situated not wholly in the phallic function.[110]

Seminar XX is also on writing, inscription and the lack of inscription, writing that gets unwritten. The inadequacy of speech, the fragmentation of language, are felt again in the written word, which does not and cannot encompass the 'real'. Accordingly, the big Other of desire, which because not marked by lack is therefore illusory, can only be adequately expressed for Lacan when it is barred or struck through – *l'Autre* becomes ~~A~~.[111] Because *la femme* cannot exist as a tangible entity either, woman (or, rather, Woman) can likewise 'only be written with a bar through it. There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital *W* indicating the universal. There's no such thing as Woman because, in her essence […] she is not-whole.'[112] By extension, then, '~~Woman~~ cannot be said' and, because a third party, the Other, is always standing between the sexes, the sexual relationship 'doesn't stop not being written'.[113]

For Irigaray, Lacan's formula for this lack of inscription is also the inscription of lack. The 'discourse on truth', she writes, is 'a *phallic* one'.[114] Though Irigaray follows Lacan's interpretation of the understanding of the body as being imaginary and culturally influenced, in her essay 'Cosí Fan Tutte', her response to *Seminar XX*, she rejects the supposed ahistoricity of the Lacanian symbolic and the claim that the phallus, relation with which guarantees the subject's entry into the symbolic and thus into language, is unconnected to the male body. In as much as a woman is supposed to represent the desire of the Other – desire of the phallus – and all this without wholly existing in the phallic function, Irigaray concludes that:

> Psychoanalytic theory thus utters the truth about the status of female sexuality, and about the sexual relation. But it stops there. Refusing to interpret the historical determinants of its discourse […] and in particular what is implied by the up to now exclusively masculine sexualization of the application of its laws, it remains caught up in phallocentrism, which it claims to make into a universal and eternal value.[115]

[110] Lacan, *Seminar XX,* p. 72.

[111] Lacan's algebra first appears in 1955; see *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II: 1954–1955)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991).

[112] Lacan, *Seminar XX*, pp. 72–3. It is important to note that in the French Lacan bars ~~*la*~~ as the demonstrative, not the word *femme*.

[113] Lacan, *Seminar XX,* pp. 81, 144.

[114] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 86 (original emphasis). Quotations from the French from Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977).

[115] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* pp. 102–3.

While the separation of sexuality and sexuation from biological materialism is echoed in Irigaray, the Lacanian phallus is rejected as encouraging a one-sex model in which man 'seeks her [Woman] out, since he has inscribed her in his discourse, but only as lack, as fault or flaw'.[116]

Since Iphis is disguised as to appear to be the possessor of a physical phallus so that she may be the object of Iante's desire (also, significantly, so that she may be the object of her father's desire), the transformation seems to valorise the phallocentric discourse and access a missing phallus that will make the relationship intelligible. However, the omission of Iphis's lament in the adaptation from Ovid to Gower is telling here: this is a female subject who does not see the need for any intervention.[117] 'Iphis' is a test case for Gower's (a)morality; in this framework, the *Confessio* is particularly interested in 'transgressive' gendered identities, and not simply as negative exemplars.[118] Taking a cue from Genius, however, some readers still make a point of stepping around this issue. Thus Peter Nicholson writes of 'Iphis' that it reveals 'an optimistic view, both of the power of love and of its benevolence',[119] while Matthew McCabe suggests that, while Watt views the transformations of Iphis as transvestism and transgendering, 'if we compare "Iphis" to its analogues in the fourteenth-century moralised Ovids, it is unlikely the tale would have seemed quite so heterodox to Gower's contemporaries'.[120] These readings of Ovid interpret Iph/is as an evil person while female who must be made male to symbolise her becoming virtuous, allowing for the possibility of an 'unironic Christian reading' of Gower.[121] On the other hand, this reading still cannot

[116] Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One,* p. 89.

[117] The Latin here reads 'Set cum Yphis debitum sue coniugi unde soluere non habuit, deos in sui adiutorium interpellabat' (But when Yphis did not possess the wherewithal to render her debt to her bride, she called upon the gods for help; taken from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway, 3 vols, 2nd edn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013, vol. 2). Watt notes that Iphis's lament that her desire is unnatural does not make it from Ovid to Gower. Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 74.

[118] Watt, *Amoral Gower*, p. 64. Watt here diverges from Lochrie's reading of the *Confessio Amantis*, which concludes that Gower's text is 'not finally subversive'; Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, p. 224.

[119] Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower's* Confessio Amantis (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 216.

[120] T. Matthew N. McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue: Ovid, Lay Religion, and English Poetry in the* Confessio Amantis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), p. 181. Watt does in fact note that 'according to certain theories of medicine, the one-sex model, the transformation from female to male was not in itself contrary to nature. Indeed, because women were perceived to be inferior to men, such a transformation could only be seen as an improvement, a change from an imperfect state to a perfect one'; Watt, *Amoral Gower*, p. 75.

[121] McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue,* p. 182.

completely get around the fact that Gower's version does not 'circumvent the question of homosexuality' as decisively as the moralised Ovids, nor can it be said that he 'neutralizes' the homoerotic content in the way that they do.[122] The issue of Iphis and Iante's age – ten years, in Gower – might likewise be noted, since it could be interpreted as precluding them from adult responsibility.[123] While the age of legal accountability (for girls) was generally twelve years, Iphis is said to be married when (s)he is 'of a ten yer age' (IV. 475) and the two young spouses are 'of on age' (IV. 480). The age at which a marriage was considered binding was also twelve for girls (fourteen for boys). On the other hand, Shulamith Shahar notes that age seven was generally the *annis discretionis,* the age at which children were held to be capable of distinguishing good from evil, but also that some canonists increased this to ten years.[124] Gower does evade to some extent the issue of whether or not to condemn the lovers, but it is equally significant that his Iphis does not lament her lack in the fulfilment of the marriage debt.

Indeed, Cupid's pity is inspired by his own attachment to 'kinde' rather than a self-reproaching plea from either of the lovers. Lacan concludes that a woman 'can but be excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words',[125] and Iphis is indeed excluded by 'Nature' – from the relationship on which she is embarking, to be reimagined and reshaped as something that will be 'to kinde non offence' (IV. 505). Irigaray's verdict on the impossibility of a system of phallic signification allowing for another logic that evades or challenges its own, echoes the regendering of Iphis as the only means of legitimating the female–female sexual relationship (into which two women cannot be written without reinscription). Iphis's transformation thwarts the possibility of same-sex desire in the name of Nature, but also introduces (or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, highlights) a sense of confusion and instability; as White puts it, 'something morally anarchic at the bottom of the totality one calls Nature'.[126] Nature's authority is called into question even as it is seemingly restored, and not least because the deity who effects the

[122] McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue,* p. 181.

[123] See Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 24–6. Bracton put the age of criminal responsibility at 12 and 14 for girls and boys respectively. On the subject of age, see also Watt, *Amoral Gower*, p. 75. Watt notes the reduction in age for the betrothed pair, from thirteen in Ovid, but also that children would be expected to distinguish good from evil at age seven.

[124] Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages,* p. 24.

[125] Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 73.

[126] White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness,* p. 193. On the ambiguities of Gower's Nature, see R. F. Yeager, 'Learning to Read in Tongues: Writing Poetry for a Trilingual Culture', in *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1991), pp. 115–29; Kurt Olsson, 'Natural Law and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', in *Gower's* Confessio Amantis: *A Critical Anthology*, ed. Peter Nicholson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 181–213. Yeager examines the

transformation is not Nature, but Cupid. As Genius narrates, no longer priest of Nature but priest of Venus, Nature's work is done by he who, according to Alain, 'change[s] the shape of all mankind' *per antifrasim*, the rhetorical figure in which words are used to imply their opposite sense.[127] The boy who makes trouble for the Nature of *De Planctu* acts in the name of orthodoxy here in the *Confessio*, but he does so by a formal inversion of Nature's work.

'SILENCE, YOU TALK TOO MUCH': THE STRUGGLE OF NATURE

Cupid here changes the game, unwriting and rewriting bodies and sexual relationships, in a way that recalls the contest between Nature and Nurture in another tale of doubled gender – the *Roman de Silence*. Another story of a young girl disguised from birth as a boy, *Silence* extends Alain's treatment of grammar as analogous with sexual and gender orthodoxy. Heldris of Cornuälle's romance aligns so provocatively with 'modern' studies of gender that, as Simon Gaunt observes, it obliges us to rethink our notions both of gender and of modernity.[128] Its author has been the subject of readerly speculation concerning his or her gender – is this a text written by a man or a woman?[129] The text was itself silent for centuries after it was committed to parchment, languishing in a collection of papers marked 'of little value' until it was rediscovered in the twentieth century and edited by Lewis Thorpe. Even into the 1980s, little was written on the text, but as medieval studies took up the critical turn to gender and queer theory, so too did *Silence* become increasingly prominent. Just as in the Iphis myth, the protagonist is gendered first male and then female, in grammatical nomenclature and in physical appearance. In similar fashion, echoing and revising Alain, whose Nature in *Anticlaudianus* finds she is unable to make the perfect man without the aid of God, *Silence* sees Nature likewise setting out to create the perfect woman, only to find her efforts are open to interpretation from others and even correction by God.

To circumvent a decree that no female shall be permitted to inherit, the protagonist of *Silence*, identified by Nature as female, is raised by her parents

distinction between 'nature' and 'kinde' whereas Olsson argues that *Confessio* is an examination of *jus naturae* from its lowest forms to the highest.

127 *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 842: 21; *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, p. 150.

128 Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 20.

129 See Kathleen C. Brahney, 'When Silence Was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*', in *The Spirit of the Court: Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 52–61; Lorraine Kochanske Stock, 'The Importance of Being Gender "Stable": Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana* 7.2 (1997), 7–34 (pp. 28–9).

a male known as Silentius, or, more often, simply Silence. Though her parents, Eufemie and Cador, view the situation as an open-ended arrangement, observing that their son's name may be grammatically altered if the child should have cause to revert to the feminine gender, Silence's upbringing becomes the occasion for a debate between the personifications of Nature and Nurture, both determined that their work shall be the decisive factor in the gendering of the child. Silence's adventures see him become a minstrel, then a knight, but his secret is threatened when Eufeme, wife of King Ebain, falls in love with the youth. Angered by Silence's resistance to her attempted seduction, Eufeme fakes her own rape and (when her husband prefers to pass over the accusation in silence and avoid making scandal) engineers Silence's banishment, doctoring a letter calling for the King of France to execute Silence. When Ebain's ally writes back to verify his intention, Ebain is mortified by the mistake and Silence is recalled to fight against the Count of Chester's uprising. Eufeme once more attempts to seduce Silence, is again rebuffed, and this time tries to procure Silence's permanent exclusion from court by having him sent on an impossible quest to find Merlin. The magician said he would only be captured by a woman's trick; for a man to bring him back should be impossible, but Silence, naturally, succeeds. Returning to court, Merlin reveals that Silence is a woman. Eufeme, whom Merlin exposes as having kept a lover at court dressed as a nun, is banished; women's right to inherit is restored; Silence is married to Ebain.

In the *Rose,* Jean's Genius declares that women by nature (even Nature) cannot keep secrets. Silence both appears to confirm this and at the same time defy Nature. By name, Silence appears to be neither male nor female, yet physically – with a female biological form but conforming in all other respects to the appearance and behaviours of a man – might be considered either male *or* female or perhaps both male *and* female. The narrative both suggests that gender identity may be subject to change or external influence and insists that silence is an integral part of this possibility. Is this a disenfranchising repression, or does *Silence* exploit a truth about language and its relation to the material and the lived body?

The pragmatism of this plot to conceal the child's native sex is shown in the passage explaining the two names Cador proposes, which compresses the romance's interlinking of naturalness, gender and grammar:

> 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'altres seroit par nature.

> 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 removed this *-us* from her
> we will give her more natural custom [*-us*],
> for this *-us* is against nature,
> but the other would be according to nature.[130]

The particle *-us* denotes not only the masculine gender of the name and its bearer, but the notion of 'custom' as well. As Peter Allen summarises, 'Silence's gender depends, then, not on nature but on custom or usage (*us*).'[131] *Silence* again links the deviation from nature with grammatical deviation, but unlike Alain does so in a vernacular context, with the result that the protagonist possesses three versions of the same name (in addition to a selection of pragmatic aliases) – the Latin Silentius and Silentia, and the French Silence. This last is the most frequently used and, indeed, is most 'silent' with regards to gender.[132] Indeed, Jane Bliss notes that 'the name Silence is effectively non-existent…';[133] Allen characterises it as more 'a placeholder for a name' than a real proper noun.[134]

Both male and female pronouns are used in the narrative for its protagonist, with her parents assigning male pronouns in order to maintain their deception; later, Silence himself appears to self-identify as male, while also acknowledging the native physical limitations of a woman's body. When Silence is inevitably uncovered as a woman, signalling the end of the romance, the change of name is, on the surface, as simple as Cador and Eufemie predicted: 'Silence atornent come feme. / […] Ostés est -us, mis i est -a /Si est només Scilentiä' (They dressed Silence as a woman […] the *-us* was removed and *-a* put in its place, and she was named Silentia, vv. 6664–8). The word

[130] *Le Roman de Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse-Romance by Heldris de Cornuälle*, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1972), and Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence*, trans. Regina Psaki, Garland Library of Medieval Literature 63 (New York and London: Garland, 1991), vv. 2074–82. Subsequent quotations will be cited in parentheses.

[131] Peter L. Allen, 'The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing and *Le Roman de Silence*' in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Langauge in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), pp. 98–112 (p. 106).

[132] See Allen, 'The Ambiguity of Silence', p. 100; Erin F. Labbie, 'The Specular Image of the Gender-Neutral Name: Naming Silence in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana* 7.2 (1997), 63–77 (p. 65).

[133] Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), p. 134 (on *Silence,* see pp. 134–54).

[134] Allen, 'The Ambiguity of Silence', p. 106.

Silence is 'dressed' as a woman with the exchange of suffix, just as the female child became a boy with a change of clothing; when her body is finally dressed in women's clothes, Silence is thereafter designated 'she' for the remainder of the narrative. It is as if grammatical gender is enough to change the form of the body.

On the other hand, earlier in the romance, in the double reading stressed by several critics, Silentius himself has already concluded that to be stripped of this name is to be uncovered – literally, *nus*, nude – and a nobody:

> 'Donques sui jo Scilentius,
> Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus.'
> Dont se porpense en lui meïsme
> Que Nature li fait sofime:
> Por cho que l'-us est encontre us
> N'a pas a non Scilentius.
>
> 'So I *am* Silentius,
> It seems to me, or I am no one.'
> He thought to himself
> that Nature was speaking in sophistries;
> because the *-us* was against natural law,
> his name was not Silentius. (vv. 2537–42)

Do clothes make the man? As Jane Burns puts it, 'The female body is here shown to be a nobody, a nonperson, and further an unknowing body. Perhaps better put: as a woman, Silence is reduced to body alone, to being just a body.'[135] Allen elaborates on the text's ambiguities and its challenges to readers to let themselves be read. To resolve *Silence*'s doublings and uncertainties would be objectifying the text, 'breaking its silence': the only option is to make the text 'the *subject* of our study: the text itself – both as a poem and as a manuscript – tells us how to read'.[136] These verses epitomise this textual challenge, compacting paradox (nobody, and yet all about a body) and social comment (either a named man, or exposed as a nameless woman) into a single charged syllable, whose formal excess is as arresting as Alain's, but in which form and message are shown in cohesion and collaboration, rather than in productive but deeply ironic contradiction.

Silentius is also concerned here that Nature 'li fait sofime' – that she speaks in sophistries (still her weakness, as it was for Alain's Nature) when she insists that the child she made was female, and not male (v. 2540). However, a few lines later, and despite his 'cuer diviers' – his divided heart (v. 2681) – he

[135] Jane L. Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 243–5 (p. 243); see also Kate Mason Cooper, '*Elle* and *L*: Sexualised Textuality in *Le Roman de Silence*', *Romance Notes* 25 (1985), 341–60.

[136] Allen, 'The Ambiguity of Silence', p. 99 (original emphasis).

decides that, all things considered (particularly the role he might have to adopt in bed), 'miols valt li us d'ome / Que l'us de feme' (a man's life is better / than a woman's, vv. 2637–8). The bedroom is the one arena in which Silence doubts his ability to perform in the role in which he identifies, and when the queen's eye falls on him the romance does not pass up the opportunity to use the suggestion of a same-sex encounter for provocative as well as narrative ends. The possibility that *Silence* also features covert but conscious same-sex desire (as opposed to simply a mistaken or unwitting same-sex attraction) has been raised by Kathleen Blumreich, who argues that Eufeme may be read as a woman who desires women, albeit one whose would-be female lover is dressed as a man and whose male lover is disguised as a woman. Eufeme's dominant erotic role, her desire for masculine power and her 'unnatural', quasi-heretical behaviour, are all concordant with the medieval understanding of a 'covert lesbian attraction'.[137] This unorthodox, unnatural desire becomes a further and even final proof of her depravity, and something she must keep quiet at all costs.

Even if Eufeme is to be read as straight, the text keeps her more silent than Silence. The romance frequently plays with and plays out the possibilities of the unspoken, silent and unspeakable, a fascination that the episode of the false message Eufeme sends to the French king, ordering Silence's execution, shows most clearly:

> Cho me dist ceste letreüre
> Que il a fait al roi tel honte
> Que il ne violt pas metre en conte.
>
> This letter tells me
> that he did such wrong to the king
> that Ebain does not want to narrate it. (vv. 4442–4)

Here again – as in her acidic, ironic put-down, 'Silence, you talk too much' – Eufeme tells more truth than she knows, more truth than she is given credit for. In writing to the French king of Silence's unspeakable crime, so terrible that 'Ebain' does not wish to name it, she is describing the scenario in a manner firstly congruent with the terminology of the day, if she knew it was an encounter between two women that she envisaged; secondly, in the terms that Ebain encourages when he refuses to confront a suspected rapist in his court (he urges silence on the matter instead); and thirdly, in ontologically correct terms since it is indeed impossible to speak of 'Silence's crime' when he committed none.

The silencing of women and undoing of women's deeds even extends to Nature herself. *Silence* is what Howard Bloch has called, in a Foucauldian turn,

[137] Kathleen M. Blumreich, 'Lesbian Desire in the Old French *Roman de Silence*', *Arthuriana* 7.2 (1997), 47–62 (p. 58)

a 'biopolitical drama'.[138] This drama is as much Nature's as Silence's. During an argument over who will determine Silence's gender, Nurture crows to Nature that she has indeed triumphed in her actions and transformed Silence to the point that Nature may as well retire. 'I have completely denatured [*desnaturee*] her', Nurture declares (v. 2595), taunting Nature that her continued presence only serves to prove the point, and concluding:

> Jo te desferai tolt ton conte.
> Nature, envoiés o sa honte.
>
> I will undo all your speech.
> Nature, begone, and take the child's shame away with you. (vv. 2603–4)

Nurture frames her work as speaking away Nature, undoing her *conte* – her reckoning or tale – and rewriting Silence's person. The line even has the ring of corporeal rewriting in that it contains the protean particle *con*, which as Bloch points out is almost always open to interpretation.[139] If Nurture also means to pun on *con* and boast of 'undoing' Nature's cunt, it is only one in a series of methods that Heldris uses to revise Alain's transformation of bodies into discourse.

The role of Nurture is also scrutinised: in *Silence* as in the story of Iphis, gender is decided for the child by a parent and reinforced by the child's later behavioural patterns and, most strikingly in the case of Silence, their decisions. The matter of Iphis's gender is directed by her mother, Isis, and later Cupid. In Silence's case, the arbiters of her gender are, in order: Nature (who forges the beautiful female child), her father (who persuades Eufemie to bring up their child as a male), Silence himself (who decides that a man's lot is preferable to a woman's), Merlin (who exposes Silence as having been born female) and, finally, the king (who wishes to marry Silence). When Cador introduces his plan to Eufemie, he recounts and inverts the creation of Eve from Adam, justifying the change he proposes for their child by reminding his wife that there is 'grant commune' (great community) between men and women (v. 1711).[140] Yet Nature is opposed to this exegetical interpretation of gender difference, lamenting angrily that the actions of Cador and Euphemie alter her work, and setting out with grim determination to 'correct' these alterations.[141]

[138] R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 195.

[139] R. Howard Bloch, *Scandal of the Fabliaux (*Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 106–9.

[140] See Julie Orlemanski, 'A Silence in the Family Tree: The Genealogical Subject in Heldris of Cornwall's *Silence*', in *Individualism: The Cultural Logic of Modernity*, ed. Zubin Meer (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 33–46

[141] *Silence*, vv. 6669–73.

This contest between the will of God and the will of Nature reaches a crisis point when Silence prays to God while endeavouring to withstand the attack of the Count of Chester:

> 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.'
>
> Silence said, 'Fair God, for pity's sake,
> who have delivered me from great trouble,
> give me strength against this man!
> That which Nature makes weak in me,
> may Your providence strengthen. (vv. 5604–8)

Silence defeats the Count, indicating that God grants his prayer and appears to supply the deficiency of Nature of which Silence despairs. The miraculousness of Silence's victory seems on the one hand to be predicated on the naturalness and normality of a female body being less robust than a male body, but on the other hand, Silence is also asking God to 'correct' Nature.

Keeping one's gender a secret, illegible and therefore unspeakable for onlookers, refusing to be read, seems itself to be deemed unnatural. Yet, though it appears that 'natural' gender will out in the end, Nature's influence also seems utterly subordinate to parental control, the efforts of Nurture, and even the will of God. If God corrects Nature, does this amount to an endorsement of Nurture, of Silence's determination that biology should not be destiny? For certain, doing the right thing – here, subduing the insurrection of the king's rebellious subject – comes 'unnaturally' for Silence. However, here and throughout the narrative, the text does not imply that Silence's unnatural behaviour should be condemned.

WRITTEN OUT AND WRITTEN OUT: ONE TO(O) MANY

On the recognising or neutralising of women's pleasure (or jouissance), Irigaray's sceptical reading of Lacan focuses especially on his claim that 'women […] don't know what they're saying'.[142] Lacan's 'woman' is not a universal category and a woman's jouissance is not that which is designated by the phallic function. For precisely this reason, however, Lacan also claims that 'she has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance […] there is something more (*en plus*)'.[143] The trouble with this 'jouissance beyond the phallus' for she who may experience

[142] See Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 73.
[143] Lacan, *Seminar XX*, pp. 73–4.

it, is that it is a relation of which 'woman knows nothing'; indeed, if women complain they are excluded from the nature of words, 'they don't know what they are saying'.[144] Irigaray argues that this reveals, rather, the belief that 'Women are not worth listening to, especially when they speak of their own pleasure' and muses that:

> The question whether, in his logic, they can articulate anything at all, whether they can be heard, is not even raised. For raising it would mean granting that there may be some other logic, and one that upsets his own. That is, a logic that challenges mastery.[145]

Since the symbolic of Lacanian discourse leaves for women 'only lacks, deficiencies […] their negative(s) [*leur(s) négatif(s)*]', and by 'speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history',[146] Irigaray in her more poetic moments calls instead for multivalency, for fluidity, a model of language that incorporates the mechanics of fluids, rather than signifiers and lack.

By Irigaray's reimagining of Lacan it is untrue to say that Gower's Iphis and Iante approach a jouissance that does not know itself – rather that they do not know what this jouissance of one another means in the (masculine) discourse they inhabit (and yet do not). Woman cannot be said? 'And yet that woman-thing [*la femme*] speaks'![147]

Gower's Genius bookends his tale by moralising on how the god of love valorises 'hem that ben of a love stable' (IV. 444) and rewards those whose pursuit of love is 'continuende' (IV. 508), while insisting that instability and transformation is essential in the exemplar he chooses. Material and corporeal stability is apparently not the aim here, but what is? The stability and continuity of emotion, of virtue? In a text and a discourse that insists that women do not have the same access to virtue as men? We might paraphrase Irigaray and wonder, whose stability are we talking about here?[148] Silence, likewise, has to change form by the end of the narrative, in order to suit a prospective partner and make possible the conditions for marriage; it is significant that although in theory Silence should not have to physically change, Nature is obliged to work hard. However, it also is the irony of both tales that, whosever it is, 'natural' continuance comes only at the price that 'Every "body" is transformed by it.'[149]

[144] Lacan, *Seminar XX*, pp. 73–5.
[145] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 90.
[146] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, pp. 207, 205.
[147] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* p. 111.
[148] Irigaray's response to Lacan's suggestion that, to understand the jouissance about which women know nothing, one should go and view Bernini's statue of St Theresa in Rome: 'What pleasure are we talking about? Whose pleasure?' *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 91.
[149] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 88.

Taking apart the Lacanian mirror-stage, Irigaray critiques the strangely sexed and sexless net result of one and other, a distinction 'henceforth undecidable between which would truly be the one, which the other, which would be the double of whom'.[150] The sex of which she writes is not 'one', but nor is it a split mirror image, a mirage that reproduces one in the other. While it may be a stretch too far to claim Gower for a camp that constructs 'some other logic', in his natural coupling of 'sche and sche', Iphis and Ianthe are portrayed sympathetically and are united by narrative (whereas the Pardoner is systematically fragmented by Chaucer, other pilgrims and then the critics). It is a 'solein' tale (IV. 448), not only singular but strange and lonely.[151]

Women are also written as one from two in the *Roman de Silence*. Eufeme is in some ways as significant an indicator of the parameters of gender and its performativity as Silence, and so she is again in the events that lead to Silence's exposure. Merlin has said, to Eufeme's knowledge, that he will only be captured by a woman's trick. Yet the trick that Silence executes is not his own: it is conceived in every particular by the old man, not the young knight – Silence does not even have to fetch the meat and drink by which the wizard will be tempted and incapacitated, only prepare it in the way the old man specifies. Perhaps cooking might be called a woman's art,[152] but it seems imprecise to conclude that Silence tricked Merlin when the means and method were provided by someone else. Yet there *is* a woman's trick behind Merlin's capture, but it is the work of Eufeme, who is once more silenced. Merlin hides the agency and authority of one woman even as he unveils the agency of another – the unveiling of Silence as the woman who caught him in fact veils the role of Eufeme in the whole enterprise. Like Iphe and Iante's relationship, female agency in *Silence* comes to be written out, even as it is written out. Silentius thus becomes Silentia, but not through Silence's own trick – it is through Eufeme's. Indeed, Eufeme succeeds in driving *Silentius* out of the kingdom but the narrative also needed to be rid of Silentius, in order to restore Nature's authority. Thus the two-natured person is made into one of orthodox and singular gender, and Merlin's exposure also means there cannot be two women in Ebain's life – the one who has lost (masculine) agency remains.

As Lacan insists, 'This "There's such a thing as One" is not simple – that's the word for it […] it is announced by the fact that Eros is defined as the

[150] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 118.

[151] Macaulay has 'strange' at I. lvii, followed by 'alone, lonely' at I. 503, which Russell Peck follows; see John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway, 3 vols, 2nd edn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013). *MED* offers 'different', which may certainly apply as well.

[152] On Silence's movement from one set of gendered behaviours to another, see Stock, 'The Importance of Being Gender "Stable"', p. 25.

fusion that makes one from two.'[153] Irigaray, too, finds this 'One' problematic; when she speaks of the mother and daughter relationship, she wonders:

> Really, two? Doesn't that make you laugh? An odd sort of two. And yet not one. Especially not one. Let's leave *one* to them […] And the strange way they divide up their couples, with the other as the image of the one.[154]

Whereas *Silence* silences its queer woman, for Gower's text to effect this strange way of dividing its couple, the beguiling simplicity of the middle part of the tale undergoes a marked change.

From the simultaneously doubled and unitary 'sche and sche, / Whiche of on age bothe be' (IV. 479–80), the scene becomes strikingly confused and confusing when Cupid – God is 'the third party in this business of human love' – intervenes.[155] Cupid's reasons are that:

> love hateth nothing more
> Than thing which stant ayein the lore
> Of that nature in kinde hath sett. (IV. 493–5)

As in Alain, where erotic love is evoked in a dizzying series of oxymoronic phrases, a tumult in which 'Pax odio fraudique fides, spes iuncta timori / Est amor et mixtus cum ratione furor' (Love is peace joined to hatred, loyalty to treachery, hope to fear and madness blended with reason),[156] the results of Desire/Cupid's intervention defy description and can only be expressed in what de Certeau called the realm of the metasememe and the deictic, where two-part paradox and opposition are used in place of the adequate third term.[157] Just as the Pardoner exceeds a single body to become many possibilities through two signifiers, in a mass of equivocal discourse, so from this singular tale, with its beautifully matched pair of protagonists, is made a confusion in which 'love hateth', Nature vies with Kind,[158] and Cupid can see (IV. 493, 499).[159] Thus confusion is introduced, not by the spectre of sodomy or

[153] Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 67.

[154] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 207 (original emphasis).

[155] Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 70.

[156] *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring 842: 1–2 (translation from *The Plaint of Nature*, ed. and trans. Sheridan, p. 149).

[157] Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, trans.* Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 143.

[158] On this point, see Yeager, who proposes that the two must be understood as representing different parts of the same function; however, since this is one in which Nature, despite being Gower's referent for '*Natura*, God's vicar', that is 'a different force, pre-existent to "kinde" and, for that reason (as well as others) superior' (Yeager, 'Learning to Read in Tongues', pp. 121, 124), will nevertheless 'step aside for "kinde"' in the cause of procreation (p. 125), it is hardly less confusing.

[159] Although Amans laments that 'love is blind and may noght se' (I. 47), Peck suggests at I. 138–41 that Cupid's 'yhen wrothe' indicate that Gower does not present Cupid as blind;

the questioning of gender, but with the imposition of the heterosexual matrix. Love stands opposed to the 'lore' of that which Nature has set 'in kinde'. This is generally translated as the 'teaching' of nature, but of course it also means loss. Here, teaching is the same as loss, and only one is 'permitted' to continue being a woman. 'Sche and sche' cannot simply remain, 'continuende': they must through Cupid (or Eros) conform to the fusion that makes one from two. Not simply the two that may procreate, but one woman from two. If the tale is to be resolved in the same schema in which it began, it only needs one woman. As multiple as their identities become, 'Iphis' and *Silence* both do and do not show how there may be more – *en plus* – for women.

KISSING AND TELLING

To end with an ending, I return to the kiss between the Pardoner and the Host. The Knight's insistence that the two make peace crystallises the chaotic spectacle of the unspeakable in a striking image, described by Glenn Burger as 'a "speaking picture" in which a variety of voices – and no voice – is heard'.[160] A kiss that stills time, brings peace to the pilgrims, makes war among critics and restores the balance of masculine paradigms even as it threatens to subvert them, there is a cacophony of noise surrounding this image, and yet, in itself, it is one of silence, effected by closed lips and shut mouths. Kisses represent turning points in all three texts, and are unspeakable precisely because one cannot speak a kiss. The restoration of order in Gower's 'Iphis' also takes place mid-kiss – when the lovers are not looking, Cupid removes, reinscribes, redraws their 'speaking picture', makes it say something else. Normative sexual grammar seems to obtain in these kisses, where conventional male authority acts on a problematic feminine or feminised body (Cupid on Iphe, Ebain on Silence, the Knight on the Pardoner). Yet even as Cupid does the work of Nature, he (or Gower) has a significantly unorthodox moment – while it is true that Gower's 'Iphe' (as opposed to Iphis) doesn't even appear until she is about to disappear, it is a kiss that shows Iphe precisely as a woman for the first and only time in the text. Kissing is a particularly vexed activity in *Silence*. Does Silence's refusal to kiss the queen in the way Eufeme would like indicate that Silence is obeying Nature? Or is this social conformity, as to do otherwise would be to commit treason against the king? A female–female kiss

see *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 1, ed. Peck. When Cupid casts the fiery dart into Amans' heart, however, he has previously turned his face 'aweiward fro [him]' (I. 141–5) and does not appear to watch the flight of the arrow. Theresa Tinkle notes the variety of characteristics displayed by both Venus and Cupid in the poetic tradition and suggests that, in the case of Gower's Cupid, his blindness is at some points transferred to Venus and at others a species of 'psychological sightlessness'; see Theresa Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 178–97 (p. 193).

[160] Glenn Burger, 'Kissing the Pardoner', *PMLA* 107.5 (1992), 1143–56 (p. 1147).

disguised as a male–female kiss (between Silence and Eupheme) results in a death sentence; an outwardly male–male but actually male–female kiss results in exoneration (the sign of peace between Silence and the king of France that precludes Silence's execution).[161] When the bodies are the same, the consequences are more sinister than when the bodies are different.

Though these are texts that could – and do – occupy far more space, I want to conclude with the notion of the unspeakable as a manoeuvre responsible on the one hand for shutting down in narrative, but also, on the other hand, for opening up and productivity. This chapter has explored the unspeakability of acts both in the sense of the acts that are not spoken of and the actions accomplished by the unspeakable. We have seen in Alain how bodies are not only affected but *effected* by Nature. The unspeakable queers Nature, the cases of female sodomy perhaps even more so than male, and the effects of the trope here go beyond the implications of the morally or sexually transgressive. As in the Parson's imprecise definition of the unspeakable sin, the onus is on the reader or listener to compose their own coherent interpretation from the 'diverse' pieces of information with which they are provided. The Pardoner, descendent of False Seeming, reveals truths about language, and how language transforms bodies – how the physical is sought in place of the metaphysical. The substitution of words for bodies, meanwhile, is shown most clearly in *Silence*, where Alain's model allows bodies to be recast with grammatical substitutions and to perform their gender.[162] Where women come into the equation, the unspeakable act becomes even more unspeakable, and the conversion of bodies into discourse is even more pronounced in its ramifications, since the alteration or 'correction' of gender in the narratives and the gendering of the nouns is so prominent and is presented as naturalising and necessary to the completion of the story. Having been multiple and non-heteronormative, female–female relations involve a change of form (whether physical or cosmetic) in order to finish the story. Lacan's difficult 'One' is shown by Irigaray to be especially difficult for women. Though Irigaray speaks of twoness, Iphe and Iante are made one flesh in marriage only by being made one woman, from two; Silence is made one female person from being a person of two possible genders, in order that Ebain's potential partners may be reduced from two to one as well.[163]

The role of language and unspeakability comes to hinge on the precepts of Nature. In sexual matters, the unnatural is consistently understood as that which prohibits procreation, but the unnatural is also aligned with grammatical

[161] 'Li baiziers senefie pais. / Nel puis deffaire ne lasscier' (The kiss signifies peace. / I certainly cannot abandon him or put him to death; vv. 4488–9).

[162] On Butlerian readings of *Silence,* see Peggy McCracken, '"The Boy Who Was a Girl": Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*', *Romanic Review* 85.4 (1994), 517–36.

[163] The political implications of a double identity or a hybrid body will be investigated in Chapter 3.

constructions that obtain in language but not in procreative 'nature'. Though these naturalising effects serve the purposes of a procreative impulse, in the allegorical narratives of which they are part they bring generation to an end, sterilising and smothering the story. (Nor are these 'natural' endings necessarily the work of Nature.) Yet in the logic of substitution of speech for sexual acts, same-sex relations are clearly not those that do not generate speech. As Schibanoff remarks of the ending of the *Romance of the Rose*, 'Genius's wish to castrate perverse writers like Orpheus – "may their styluses be taken away from them" […] – not only recalls but empowers Ovid's bard by reminding us that homosexual Orpheus made a lasting mark indeed.'[164] The stories of queer women are not memorable for their conclusions but for their challenges and confrontations.[165] The twoness and plurality of 'Iphis' is foreclosed by the imposition of a 'natural' state, but Gower's multi-lingual text still says what it does not say. The final legibility of Silence's 'restored' feminine body is hardly an aid to reading the text as a whole. The point here is not that same-sex desire would be any more 'natural' in generative terms to a conventional medieval schema than usury (which bears fruit from matter that should be non-productive). Rather, it is to show the generative possibility of the same, of the unspeakable, of the unnatural, which disrupts the logic of non-generative: therefore should not be done: therefore should not be mentioned.

Ultimately, one does not declare something unutterable as a means procuring only silence. It is precisely through the unspeakability topos that the 'unnatural vice' results in generation: the proliferation of discourse. Moreover, this generative possibility stems from the insistence that only one kind of relation and understanding of gender identity and sexual difference can be generatively orthodox. The unspeakable is a figure that shows the queerness of nature. In attempting to undermine the 'unnatural', advocates of 'nature' who transform bodies into speech – the extended metaphor that is supposed to valorise only one set of relations – instead participate in a rhetoric that enables the fecundity it is meant to prove cannot exist, and which is the basis for justifying the strategic use of this unspeakability topos in the first place. When power is articulated by suppression, then to discuss what has been labelled unmentionable may indeed thwart this power, yoking vocal exposure of its flaws to the exposure of the secret places over which it has no dominion. There is a lot to be gained from the unspeakable – but only if you speak about it.

[164] Schibanoff, 'Sodomy's Mark', p. 47.

[165] As Allen puts it, 'To remove ambiguity from this text means to tear it, to falsify it, to lose its essence' ('The Ambiguity of Silence', p. 110). On this point, see also *Silence*, trans. Psaki (pp. xxxi–ii).