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THE AMBIGUITY OF SILENCE
Gender, Writing, and Le Roman de Silence

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> *Texte de plaisir* (text of pleasure): one that contents, fills, gives euphoria; one that comes from the culture, does not break with it, is tied to a *comfortable* practice of reading.
> *Texte de jouissance* (text of sexual enjoyment): one that brings about a state of loss, one that causes discomfort (even a certain annoyance), shakes the historical, cultural, psychological bases of the reader, the consistency of his tastes, his values, his memories, causes a crisis in his relationship with language.[1]

Heldris de Cornüalle's thirteenth-century *Le Roman de Silence* is a *texte de jouissance,* a text that raises questions of sex and language by disconcerting its readers. Relatively new to the medievalist public, it confronts some of the major critical issues currently facing medieval studies. In studying it, we are forced to think about the claims of feminist criticism, the relationship between sexuality and literature, the role (and limitations) of the textual editor, the nature of the medieval "canon" of texts, and the modern reader's relationship with older literature. This paper will attempt to confront these issues through a discussion of the poem: by being forced to admit the inadequacy of our methods of understanding medieval writing, we will see what new possibilities of reading the text can offer us.

Heldris's poem, on the surface, seems unlikely to threaten anyone's notions of what medieval literature is all about. The text was apparently not particularly popular in the Middle Ages, since we have only one manuscript copy and the author is otherwise unknown. Even the modern (1972) edition is out of print,[2] and it is only quite recently that studies of the poem have begun to appear.[3] Furthermore, the text does not appear to challenge our ways of thinking: it does not explicitly call upon the support of such "serious" disciplines as phi-

losophy, theology, or politics. The absence of such "critical" problems is, however, in the eye of the beholder. In fact, the more closely one looks, the more ambiguities one is likely to find. The title, whether in Old French or modern English, is confusing: how can silence provoke a poem, let alone a romance? The manuscript, Mi.LM.6 in the library of the University of Nottingham, contains a number of odd features that seem intimately related to the peculiarities of the text. And Lewis Thorpe's editorial commentary, which seems to present all the help a reader might wish or expect, is in fact riddled with hypotheses and frustrations. These problems do not so much make *Le Roman de Silence* unique as remind us of the special consideration medieval literature asks of us, its modern readers. Our models of reading attempt to elucidate, pin down, and disambiguate medieval texts; *Le Roman de Silence* quietly, stubbornly, refuses to make itself accessible to this kind of approach. We cannot remove the ambiguities from the romance without breaking its silence—without destroying the object we want to study. *Silence,* in fact, refuses to permit itself to be studied as an "object." If we wish to read it, we are obliged instead to make it the *subject* of our study: the text itself—both as a poem and as a manuscript—tells us how to read. It informs us when it will permit its meaning to be elucidated and when it will not.[4] This kind of reading can be frustrating, if we use models through which we attempt to master the text. If, however, we can open ourselves up to the text and accept its ambiguities, the text will free us to understand it better and to take pleasure in our readerly role.

Since *Le Roman de Silence* is relatively unfamiliar, it will be useful to begin this discussion with a summary of the plot.[5] Because of a quarrel between two counts, King Ebain of England decrees that no woman shall inherit property during his reign. Ebain marries one of his retainers, Cador, to the daughter of the Count of Cornwall, Eufemie (whose name recalls that of Ebain's queen, Eufeme). When the Count dies, Cador accedes to his position, and, when the couple gives birth to a daughter, the question of inheritance arises. The parents decide to conceal the child's sex by naming her Silence, reasoning that if she ever realizes that she is female, "Silent*ius*" can always be changed to "Silent*ia*." Silence is brought up as a boy, but when she reaches the age of puberty Nature and Nurture debate over her gender. She runs away from home with a troupe of jongleurs; her father, overcome with grief, kills all jongleurs who come to Cornwall. Silence, meanwhile, has mastered the art of poetry even better

than her masters, who threaten to kill her. She returns to Cornwall and escapes death there because she is recognized as the count's "son." Queen Eufeme, ignorant of Silence's sex, tries to seduce him (her), and, when Silence refuses, claims to have been his (her) victim. King Ebain exiles Silence to France; Eufeme substitutes for Ebain's *laissez-passer* a letter asking the King of France to execute the bearer; the fraud is revealed; and Silence is recalled. Eufeme repeats her accusation, and Ebain assigns Silence the penitential task of finding Merlin—a task only a woman can accomplish. Silence, of course, succeeds, and brings Merlin back to court, where he reveals such secrets as the heroine's true gender and the fact that Eufeme has a lover she disguises as a nun. Eufeme is executed; Silence is established as a woman; and Ebain makes her his queen.

A number of the romance's ambiguities emerge from this summary: the almost identical names of Silence's mother and her predecessor in Ebain's nuptial bed (i.e., the queen); the fact that both these names, unlike that of the heroine, valorize speech; the heroine's gender (and the Latin and French names that are used both to conceal and to reveal it to various "readers"—Silence herself, the king, ourselves); the presence of poets and poetry within the poem itself and their relationship to a poet (Silence) whose name implies the absence of all sound and, hence, poetry. The indeterminacies of this romance are not limited to details of plot, however, and it is best to begin our discussion at the beginning—namely, with an examination of the manuscript and the edition. What we find there will provide a fruitful introduction to the poem itself.

Manuscript as Sign: The Context of Silence

The manuscript that contains the unique copy of *Silence* also contains an interesting miscellancy of other literary works, including Benoît de Sainte Maure's *Roman de Troie,* Raoul de Houdenc's *La Vengeance Radiguel,* and ten fabliaux. It has, as Thorpe puts it, "been roughly used" (p. 1), and, as the binding weakens, the codex is in the process of separating into quires. Indeed, the condition of the manuscript makes it difficult for the reader to know which of the Nottingham University Library's Search Room Regulations to follow: #3, which states, "Whenever possible bound volumes should be read using a bookrest," or #5, "The arrangement of loose papers in a

bundle should not be altered." MS. Mi.LM.6 totters between order and disorder, and the blue cord that ties it can only retard the speed at which this artifact of the Middle Ages obeys the law of entropy. Its content, too, seems in doubt. The case in which the manuscript is kept bears the inscription "'Le Roman de Troie,' etc.—Benoît de Sainte Maure," giving priority to the larger, more widely recognized works with which the manuscript begins; the fabliaux, which bear such intriguing titles as "D[ou] prestre ki perdi les colles" ("The Priest Who Lost His Balls"), are, however, ignored. Yet the large majority of those moderns who have edited the better-known romances were unaware that this copy existed (compare pp. 3–4), whereas the manuscript *has* been consulted by those editing the less canonical, more sexually explicit, fabliaux.

Yet even the fabliaux here are mutilated. "D[ou] prestre ki perdi les colles" is cut short, missing over two hundred of its 314 lines (compare p. 3 n.4). The last text in the manuscript, which is identified as Marie de France's "De la cugnie" (The Axe), stops after fifteen lines. But the strangest example is an anonymous fabliau that has no title in this copy but which is normally called "De la dame escolliée" (The Castrated Lady).[6] In this story a rebellious woman is cut open and two bull's testicles are produced by sleight of hand to show that her insubordination was due to inappropriate masculine characteristics: "Que ce sachiez, par ces grenotes / Sont les femes fieres et sotes" ("Know this: by these seeds / Women become proud and foolish").[7] The moral is that women must be kept in their place and must respect their rightful masters; "Dahet feme qui despit home!" ("Cursed be the woman who despises a man!").[8] This moralizing, however, ignores the fact that the fabliau's violence is completely unjustified: women cannot be "escolliées" because they have no "coilles" (balls). The dictionaries, of course, recognize this fact of physiology: they find no other occurrence of "escolliée" in the feminine. The extraordinary antifeminism of this fabliau is echoed in *Le Roman de Silence*. There Queen Eufeme is executed for expressing her sexual desire—a desire that makes her (like the classic queen of romance, Guenevere) not only an adultress but a traitress, too, since her husband is the head of state. The outspoken woman is replaced by Silence, who gives up the male rôle (the bull's testicles) that had been attributed to her but was never truly hers. The manuscript reveals the violence men perpetrate on women, the source of whose sexual identity the fictions' men seem unable to understand.

The oddities of this manuscript are not limited to the literary

works that form a context for *Le Roman de Silence*. Fourteen illuminations illustrate the story of Silence, but they, too, leave room for doubt. Of those that seem to be illustrations of the text, two now have little gaps: the picture of Merlin has no face,[9] while that of Silence, without her clothes at the point in the story when her true gender is revealed, bears no features that distinguish the body as female.[10] Furthermore, a series of illuminations which continues throughout the manuscript seems to have no relation to any of the stories. These are representations of animals and of mythical, half-human beasts that seem to be present only to remind us that the texts belong to the domain of fantasy.[11] Moreover, all the illuminations replace initials in the text and force the adjacent lines of poetry to be written as two half-lines: image and word thus compete for the reader's attention.

To transform the text from its unruly manuscript state into an accessible, socialized, printed work is the job of the editor. Lewis Thorpe's work on *Silence* covers all the details that one could ask for from an editor of a medieval text: Thorpe provides a summary of the story, historical research, an introduction to the language, running titles, an index of proper names and place names, and a glossary. Despite all these efforts to make *Le Roman de Silence* a comfortable *texte de plaisir,* however, the poem rejects, or, more precisely, undermines the editor's work: it demands our *jouissance* if we wish to read it at all. Thorpe's wrestling with *Silence* illustrates the difficulties any editor must face in attempting to move a medieval text from one medium to another.

Medieval text production accepted many ambiguities which twentieth-century editing does not. Modern conventions about language, for example, require consistency in spelling and permit the use of abbreviations only in a prescribed and limited number of cases. The scribe of MS. Mi.LM.6, on the other hand, represents nasalizing consonants indifferently by a tilde, *m,* or *n*. Thorpe writes that the scribe "hesitates" between these choices (p. 235), but in fact, undisturbed by any need for consistency, the scribe blithely ignores the idea that different spellings matter: it is the editor who hesitates. The modern editor also finds that the text inhibits his (and our) attempts to separate author from scribe. Thorpe's attempts to distinguish *francien* forms from those that are *picard* are preceded by a caveat: "As is true of so many other poems of the French Middle Ages, so here it is only with the greatest difficulty that the language of the poet can be distinguished from that of the scribe" (p. 56). The radical distinction

we moderns make between the inventor and the transmitter of texts is, for this manuscript, not a concern.

There is nothing unique about this conflation of dialects, of course, but—as with so many other features of *Le Roman de Silence*—it seems to echo the romance's refusal to behave according to our expectations, to fit into our categories. Distinctions between history and fiction, proper nouns and common ones, even text and absence are unsure: the editor must assume that a hole in the parchment is to be filled by *ne* (p. 236 n.1333), and the scribe changes "da Norwege" ("from Norway") into the meaningless "danor wege": the place we know as "Norway" was nothing but a linguistic fantasy to the copyist (p. 235 n.146). Moreover, our attempts to relate the characters to anything we recognize as history are fruitless (p. 26). Even the author, Heldris de Cornüalle, is named nowhere but in his poem, and the description Thorpe proposes is shadowy at best:

> If what I have written is accepted, then Heldris is established as a professional lay poet of the second half of the thirteenth century, who lived in all probability near to the present-day frontier between France and Belgium where Nord marches with Hainaut, but who had some connexion yet to be determined either with the Duchy of Cornwall or with Cornuaille or with the hamlet La Cornualle and who at the same time had some reason for featuring Château-Landon and Beaumont-en-Gâtinais in his poem. (p. 17)

Not only are Heldris's relations with the external world multiple and ambiguous, but he, like his poem, exists on the borders, between France and Belgium, between fiction and history.

Not only are we unable to distinguish between author and scribe and between historical characters and fictional ones, but we cannot even learn the history of the text as physical object from the inscriptions we can read in it. These notes, presumably made by the volume's owners, are inconclusive:

> F 244r, which is otherwise blank, has in the left-hand upper corner a scribbled note in what appears to be a northern French hand of the fourteenth century: *le ior de mardi / por donpere*. . . . It is ironic that we know the day in the week when something was to happen at Dompierre-du-Chemin, but not the month or year, or, indeed, what the event was! (p. 11)

By this point it is, no doubt, manifest that any attempt to relate *Le Roman de Silence* to the world outside its fiction is unlikely to succeed. Even our attempts to enter the text on strictly literary terms may be stymied if they try (consciously or not) to simplify the poem. Thus the running titles provided by the editor to guide the reader reduce Silence to a single gender (e.g. "Silence Considers Her Situation," p. 135), whereas the poet reserves the ungrammatical and unnatural but fictionally accurate privilege of calling his hero(ine) "le vallet ki ert meschine" (the youth who was a maiden [line 3704 and passim]).[12] Elsewhere the titles flirt with absurdity, as when they announce "Silence Has Great Success as a Minstrel" (p. 143) or "Cador Prepares to Execute Silence" (p. 153). These signposts are more likely to trip the reader up than to point him or her in the right direction: the poem refuses to be reduced to a single meaning.

Silence as Sign: The Limits of Language

That so much ambiguity should accrete around this text is not, I believe, entirely coincidental. It seems rather that the circumstances under which we meet the poem actually reflect the fundamental cracks and strains present in the romance itself—cracks and strains that affect the very materials out of which this piece of literature is constructed, namely words and gender. For writing about silence is an oxymoron, and the poem exists only because language exists at a second degree from the things it represents: if we had no word that meant "silence," we could not use the lack of a word to name a character. As it is, the titles of MS. Mi.LM.6 strain our means of communication; to add *"Le Roman de _____"* to "[De la dame escolliée]" would be too much—or not enough—for us to understand. Ambiguity promotes paradox, and it is within this gap, between language and meaning, between history and fiction, that this text exists.

Even writing, the means by which the romance is transmitted to us, is called into question on numerous occasions within the poem. The word *cartre* (paper) is used as a homophonic rhyme with *cartre* (prison) (lines 4959–60), and the word *gloze* is twisted in two different directions: rhyming twice with forms of *ozer* (to dare), it seems to mean once "jealous" (a form of *jalos/gelos* not otherwise recorded), and once "to dispute" (an extension of the more common "to crit-

icize," itself an extension of "to gloss"). The greatest perversion of writing in the poem is Queen Eufeme's substitution of letters: for the letter from the king asking that Silence be welcomed at the French court, she exchanges one asking that the bearer be executed.[13] The Queen, however, knows that any definite charge is subject to disproof, so she uses a silent accusation to silence Silence:

> De par roi Ebayn, son segnor,
> Escrist al roi de France un brief
> Qu'il tolle al message le cief
> Qui les letres a lui enporte;
> Que il por rien ne l'en deporte,
> Car il a fait al roi tel honte
> Qu'il ne le violt pas metre en conte.
> (lines 4320–26)

(On behalf of Ebain, her lord, she writes the king of France a letter [saying] that he should cut off the head of the messenger who carries the letter to him; that he not spare him this for any reason, since he has caused such shame to the king that he does not want to recount it.)

[S]he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword, however, and Eufeme's accusation returns to persecute its maker: the count of Clermont advises the French king that he should not punish anyone whose crime he does not know, and eventually, as the plot is untangled, it is Eufeme who is executed—poetic justice for her abuse of writing.

Another key point in the romance's treatment of language is its discussions of the heroine's name, which is more a placeholder for a name than a real proper noun. Within this name, which seems to mean nothing, is contained Silence's whole story: it could be translated as "a-woman-whose-parents-had-to-give-her-a-name-that-doesn't-reveal-her-gender-because-the-king-had-forbidden-women-to-inherit-property-because-etc.-etc." This name, empty of significance but full of meaning, is the subject of much linguistic play. When the child is born, everybody gathers in the palace hall, wanting to know whether it is male or female. The child's aunt, who has been enlisted to keep its gender a secret, announces "Ma dame n'a mestier de noise!'" ("My lady has no need of noise!" [line 1998]). This announcement is a riddle that conceals its own answer, since the opposite of *noise* (in Old French or modern English) is *silence*. The

French name the child's parents choose for her masks with the genderless desinence *-e* the choice they would have been forced to make in Latin: "Silence" is a nominal zero, a placeholder for a name.

"Sel faisons apieler Scilense
El non de Sainte Paciense,
Por cho que silensce tolt anse.[14]
Que Jhesus Cris par sa poissance
Le nos doinst celer et taisir,
Ensi com lui est a plaizir!
Mellor consel trover n'i puis.
Il iert només Scilenscius;
Et s'il avient par aventure
Al descovrir de sa nature
Nos muerons cest -us en -a,
S'avra a non Scilencia.
Se nos li tolons dont cest -us
Nos li donrons natural us,
Car cis -us est contre nature,
Mais l'altres seroit par nature."
(lines 2067–82)

("So let us have her called 'Silence,' in the name of Saint Patience, because silence relieves all anxiety. May Jesus Christ by his power permit us to conceal it and keep it quiet! I can find no better plan. He will be named Silentius; and if it should happen that her nature is discovered, we will change the "-us" into an "-a", so she will have the name Silentia. So if we take this "-us" away from her, we will give her her natural usage, since this "-us" is against nature, but the other one would be natural.")

Silence's gender depends, then, not on nature but on custom or usage *(us)*. When she reaches puberty, Nature and Nurture debate the issue, but reach no resolution; and when Silence escapes with the jongleurs, she takes a pseudonym (Malduit) which, like her real name, reveals the confusion in which she finds herself: "Car il [i.e., Silence] se tient moult por mal duit, / Moult mal apris lonc sa nature" (For he [i.e., Silence] considers himself very badly taught, very badly instructed as to his nature [lines 3178–79]).

Names in this poem are not revealing: they hold back information, rather than expose it. Identity is hidden, or absent, or subject ex-

clusively to the convenience of the text: one character's name, in fact, seems to have been invented simply to form a rhyme.[15] Queen Eufeme, whose name suggests that speech is positive, uses language for treacherous purposes and is finally silenced by death. Silence, too, is named to hide her identity, to conform to King Ebain's privileging of male over female. This submission of identity to convenience is an extreme statement of the "conventionalist" theory of naming, formulated early in Western literary tradition by Plato's character Hermogenes:

> "Whatever anyone calls anything, that is its correct name: and if one changes it for another, and abandons the former name, the new one is no less correct than the old—just as when we change the names of our slaves. For nothing has its name by nature, but only by usage and custom."[16]

The relationship of usage and custom to language is precisely what is at issue in *Silence*. Silence, by means of an evasive name, must try to escape the sentences of death and disinheritance which are laid down for her, but all her efforts to escape from the system only reveal her inability to do so. When she becomes a jongleur, she escapes silence, but nearly becomes the victim of her teachers when she surpasses them. All poets are banned from her native land, but nonetheless she returns. Her femaleness, which her parents attempt to cover up with language, is eventually reimposed on her by stripping away the male appendages (her clothes, the "-us" of her name) she had assumed. This reversion to femininity, however, means a new submission to the king's power—this time not legislative but sexual. King and parents exercise the power of the masters, the Cratylistic power to endow people with names, and to determine their destiny by speech. In fact, King Ebain explicitly exalts the ideal of the Silent Woman (often portrayed, of course, as a woman who has been decapitated):

> "Sens de feme gist en taisir.
> Si m'aït Dex, si com jo pens,
> Uns muials puet conter lor sens,
> Car femes n'ont sens que mais un,
> C'est taisirs."
>
> (lines 6399–6403)

("Woman's sense lies in being silent. So help me God, I think that a mute could recount all their sense, since women have only one sense, namely, being silent.")

Masculine speech is power; feminine speech (symbolized by Queen Eufeme) is ripped apart, condemned to death (lines 6651–57).[17] All the male characters the poem can imagine applaud the death of female speech and the feminization and coronation of Silence:[18]

Nus hom qui fust ne plainst Eufeme.
Silence atornent come feme.
Segnor, que vos diroie plus?
Ains ot a non Scilensiüs:
Ostés est -us, mis i est -a,
Si est només Scilentiä.
(lines 6663–68)

(No man alive lamented Eufeme. They dress Silence up as a woman. Lords, what should I tell you? Before, her name was Silentius: the "-us" is removed, an "-a" attached, and he is named Silentia.)

This removal of *-us* is reminiscent of nothing so much as the fictitious castration of the "[Dame escoilliée]" of the fabliau: neither she nor Silence ever really had any testicles, yet it is essential to the men in their stories to "castrate" them.

That we should find Heldris performing surgery on suffixes is hardly surprising in this text, where a disintegrating manuscript encloses poems without titles and eunuch fabliaux. Confusion about names and genders, however, is only a subset of the most important ambiguity *Le Roman de Silence* confronts—that of language and univalent discourse. Early in the romance the author admits that his efforts towards artistry must at times distance his work from that which he considers "true," but suggests that this distance, while impermissible in Latin, is acceptable in *Romans*.

Comence chi tels aventure
C'ainques n'oïstes tele en livre.
Qu'en latin escrite lizons,
En romans si le vos disons.
Jo ne di pas que n'i ajoigne

Avoic le voir sovent mençoigne
Por le conte miols acesmer:
Mais se jel puis a droit esmer
N'i netrai rien qui m'uevre enpire
Ne del voir nen iert mos a dire
Car la verté ne doi taisir.
(lines 1658–69)[19]

(Here begins an adventure such as you've never heard of in a book. That which we read written in Latin we will tell to you in *Romans*. I do not say that I do not often add lies to the truth in order to adorn the story: but if I can rightly judge, I will not put into it anything that will make my work worse, nor shall there be less of the truth to tell, since I should not keep the truth silent.)

Walter Ong and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have called Latin the "masculine" discourse of the Middle Ages and the vernacular languages the period's "feminine" mode of communication.[20] In this case, however, *Romans* is not so much a feminine language as a language that avoids definitions of gender. Thus the significant distinction between "Silenti*us*" and "Silenti*a*" (which the heroine's parents used to paper over the cracks in their daughter's identity [lines 2067–82] and which is reversed when Silence becomes queen) pertains only to Latin, the language Heldris and his audience *read (lisons);* it is irrelevant to *Romans,* the language they *speak (disons). Romans* does not feminize communication: it simply tolerates certain ambiguities about gender that Latin does not. This is why Heldris uses it in composing his *roman,* a fiction that is all about ambiguity: Latin makes a useful source, but doesn't entertain. This association of the ambiguities of vernacular language with fiction recalls Jean Bodel's statement that "li conte de Bretaigne sont si vain et plaisant" ("the tales of Brittany are so meaningless, so pleasant"),[21] and Dante's "ambages pulcherrime Arturi regis" ("most beautiful ambiguities of Arthur the king").[22]

The ambiguity, the emptiness of the text: in these lacks lies the importance of *Le Roman de Silence*. The gaps in the work are what draw us to it: as Barthes enquires, "L'endroit le plus érotique d'un corps n'est-il pas là où le vêtement bâille?" ("Isn't the most erotic part of a body the place where the clothing parts?").[23] *Silence* is a text that refuses our violence but welcomes our *jouissance*. Its refusal can be

read in various ways—as a characteristic of female writing (writing *about* women, if not *by* them) unwilling to accommodate itself to male readings; as a Marxist text refusing to accept capitalist modes of textual diffusion; as a medieval "other" that will not bow to modern assumptions; as a Freudian polymorphous perversity that our categories of thought about sex and gender cannot encompass, etc., all depending on our critical assumptions. These refusals share a common basis: they insist on the text's right to remain silent, to hold its ambiguity. To remove ambiguity from this text means to tear it, to falsify it, to lose its essence. Yet we can read the poem and enjoy it if we permit it, at the same time, to read *us*—to question the assumptions with which we teachers, students, readers, editors approach medieval literature. This literature cannot be forced to give up its secrets, if only for the reason that so many of these secrets are ambiguities or silences. We cannot recreate the historical context of the poem; all we can find is a Tuesday in a week and a year which can never be known. We cannot effectively summarize, we cannot completely translate. We cannot, in short, make our reading "comfortable"; we cannot subject the text to ourselves. Yet we can, and perhaps must, read and be read, enter into the world of *Romans,* of the *roman,* and see what we can experience of mute *-e* in the gap between *-us* and *-a,* in the ambiguity of silence.

Notes

1. "Texte de plaisir: celui qui contente, emplit, donne de l'euphorie; celui qui vient de la culture, ne rompt pas avec elle, est lié à une pratique *confortable* de la lecture. Texte de jouissance: celui qui met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte (peut-être jusqu'à un certain ennui), fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs, et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage," Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Les Editions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 25–26. This translation and all others in the essay are my own.

2. Paradoxically, however, it is not unavailable: as of this writing the publisher still has a few copies on its shelf: Heldris de Cornüalle, *Le Roman de Silence,* ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., 1972). All references to this edition will be given in the text: those to the romance itself will be given by line numbers, those to the editorial material by page number.

3. Articles on the poem are beginning to appear. See Kate M. Cooper, "Elle and *L:* Sexualized Textuality in *Le Roman de Silence*" and Michèle Perret, "Travesties et

transsexuelles: Ydes, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine," both in *Romance Notes* 25, 3 (Spring, 1985) and R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986). I am indebted to Bloch's article for a number of ideas.

4. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte:* "Le texte est un objet fétiche et ce fétiche me désire" (p. 45). On the text's autonomy, compare also Robert S. Sturges, "Interpretation as Action: the Reader in Late Medieval Narrative," *DAI* 40 (1980): 5856A.

5. This summary is a reduction of that on pages 17–22 of Thorpe's edition.

6. "De la dame escolliée," in Anatole de Montaiglon and Gaston Raynaud, eds., *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles* (1890; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin [n.d.]), vol. 6, pp. 95–116.

7. "De la dame," vv. 602–3.

8. "De la dame," v. 618.

9. University of Nottingham MS. Mi.LM.6, fol. 221.

10. MS. Mi.LM.6, fol. 222v.

11. These figures occur on fols. 14v, 55v, 92v, 158v, 213, 217, 218v, 227, 232v, 239, 269, and 328. Fol. 157 contains the beginning of Gautier d'Arras's *Ille et Galeron* and an illumination of a ram bearing a staff with a cross and a flag. Thorpe suggests that the illuminations of animals are by a different hand from those illustrating the *Roman de Silence* (p. 6).

12. Questions of nature and gender abound in the romance, for the characters as well as for the readers. When Silence rejects Queen Eufeme's advances, the queen infers by this sign that the hero(ine) must be a (male) homosexual: "Certes, gel croi bien a erite / Quant jo li mostrai mes costés, / Que il me dist, 'Por Deu, ostés!' / Ene fu cho moult bone ensaigne / Qu'il despist femes et desdaigne?'" ("I certainly think he is a homosexual, for when I showed him my side, he said to me, 'For God's sake, take it away!' Wasn't this a very good sign that he despises and disdains women?") She uses the word *erites,* which derives its secondary meaning ("homosexual") from its primary meaning ("heretic"). Compare Bloch, "Silence and Holes," and Alain de Lille's *De planctu naturae* for further discussion of "right" religion, grammar, and sexuality. The *Roman de Silence* questions our concepts of sex rôles as much as it questions our concepts of language.

13. This passage is a reminiscence *avant la lettre* of the epistle Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bear in Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays, as well as of the substitution in Poe's "Purloined Letter" and the literary-critical exchange of documents between Derrida, Lacan, and their readers over that short story.

14. Felix Lecoy changes this to "ance": "Corrections, *Le Roman de Silence* d'Heldris de Cornüalle," *Romania* 99 (1978): 117. Though it seems reasonable, I find no corroboration for Thorpe's gloss "anxiety" in either Godefroy or Tobler-Lommatzsch. I am grateful to Professor Michel-André Bossy for the reference to Lecoy's article, which revises Thorpe's edition of the poem thoroughly and should be used in any study of *Silence.*

15. "Ades," v. 583, and note, p. 241.

16. Plato, *Cratylus,* in *The Dialogues of Plato,* trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), 384d.

17. Compare Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillières,* trans. David Le Vay (New York: Avon, 1973): "Unhappy one, men have expelled you from the world of symbols and yet they have given you names, they have called you slave, you unhappy slave. Masters, they have exercised their right to master. They write, of their authority to

accord names, that it goes back so far that the origin of language itself may be considered an act of authority emanating from those who dominate. . . . the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you," as cited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, and Sexuality," *New Literary History* 16 (1985): 517.

18. Gilbert and Gubar (p. 521) cite Xavière Gauthier to similar ends: " 'as long as women remain silent'—that is, as long as women remain linguistically 'female'—'they will be outside the historical process. But if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated' " ("Existe-t-il une écriture de femme?", trans. Marilyn A. August, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron [Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980]).

19. Lecoy removes the period from line 1657, which reads, *"De Cador, de s'engendreüre,"* which, Lecoy states, *"se rapporte à ce qui suit,"* "Corrections," p. 116.

20. "It becomes necessary to speculate that since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries male writers may have thought linguistic culture to be holding linguistic anarchy at bay because they have had to translate the 'high themes' of the classics into what they fear is a low language whose very accessibility might seem to vulgarize their noble subjects" (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 532); compare also Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 37.

21. Jean Bodel, *Les Saisnes*, ed. F. Menzel and E. Stengel (Marburg, 1906), v. 9.

22. Dante, *Convivio*, 4.10.

23. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 19.