# CHAPTER 2
# Passing for True

## Gender as Performance in *Le Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable*

In book nine of the *Metamorphoses,* Ovid's narrator tells the tale of a cross-dressed child, Iphis. Before Iphis's birth, the child's father, Ligdus, informs his pregnant wife, Telethusa, that due to their limited means the infant she bears must be a boy. If she should happen to give birth to a girl, the infant will have to die. Telethusa begs her husband to change his mind, but his resolve remains firm. Near the end of Telethusa's term, she has a dream vision in which the goddess Isis speaks to her, advising her not to heed her husband's order and to raise the child, whether girl or boy. On the day of the child's birth, Telethusa hides the infant's biological sex from Ligdus:

> Her labor pains grew more intense, and soon
> she'd given easy birth: a girl was born.
> Now, to deceive her husband, Telethusa
> gave orders to the nurse (for she alone
> knew of this guile) to feed the newborn child
> and to tell everyone it was a son. (IX, 317–8)[1]

Ligdus names the child after his own father, Iphis, which greatly pleases his wife because the name could refer to either a boy or a girl. The beautiful, cross-dressed Iphis, with her ambiguous name, grows up as a boy and receives a boy's education. By her thirteenth birthday, her father finds her a bride: the charming, golden-haired Ianthe. Iphis and Ianthe quickly fall in love with one another, but while Ianthe longs for their wedding day, Iphis laments her "monstrous pangs" (319). Several times, Telethusa manages to postpone the impending marriage, but finally she sees no other recourse than to pray to Isis for help. Only moments before the wedding, Isis miraculously transforms Iphis into a young man, thereby realigning Iphis's sex with her gender performance. Ianthe and Iphis wed as bride and groom.

Ovid's tale contains within it the founding kernel of both the thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence,* by Heldris de Cornuälle,[2] and the contemporary novel *L'Enfant de sable,* by

Tahar Ben Jelloun.[3] The *Roman de Silence* is a 6,700-line Arthurian verse-romance from the second half of the thirteenth century, written in Old French, in the Picard dialect. It is the only known text by Heldris and survives in one manuscript (MS.Mi.LM.6, now located in the University of Nottingham) which was not rediscovered until the early twentieth century (1911). The contemporary Francophone Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun has written numerous essays, short stories, plays and novels, and has written and edited several collections of poems. *L'Enfant de sable* is his sixth novel. In 1987 he won the *Prix Goncourt* for *La Nuit sacrée,* a continuation of *L'Enfant de sable*. Ben Jelloun ostensibly wrote *La Nuit sacrée* in response to an outcry from his readers following the publication of *L'Enfant de sable,* begging him to clarify some of the ambiguities left unresolved in that novel.

In the *Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable,* as in the tale of Iphis, the father tells his pregnant wife that due to the laws governing inheritance, she must give birth to a boy. All three tales quickly establish the importance of male birth in strict patrilineal societies. In the *Roman de Silence* and in *L'Enfant de sable,* however, the mother does not conceal the infant's sex from the father; rather, each father independently conceives of the idea of raising a girl child as a boy. To an even greater extent than in the story of Iphis, the *Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable* testify to the central role of the father, of patriarchal regimes of power and discourse, in the construction of gender within these two cultures.

As in the story of Iphis, no one, other than the parents and the nurse or caretakers,[4] knows of the child's cross-dressed status. And, like Iphis, the two children, Silence and Ahmed, receive a boy's education and excel at the masculine pursuits of their culture. Their cross-dressed performances are entirely convincing within the narrative frame of the two works. Similarly also, adolescence brings to Silence and to Ahmed an awareness of their confused gender identity. Iphis's crisis revolves around the hopelessness and unnaturalness of her monstrous love for Ianthe:

> Cows don't love cows, and mares do not love mares;
> but sheep desire rams, and does are drawn
> by stags. And birds, too, follow the same norm;
> among the animals, no female wants
> a female! Would I could annul myself! (319)

For Silence and Ahmed, neither of whom falls in love within their two tales, adolescence brings crises of conscience that force them to reevaluate their commitment to their secret performances. Silence begins to feel torn by conflicting thoughts, alternately deciding to stop this behavior,[5] only to resolve again to pursue it.[6] The narrator notes that navigating between these opposing perspectives is not an easy task:

> Et qui oeuvre contre voloir
> Soventes fois l'estuet doloir.
> Silences ot le cuer diviers. (2679–81)

Silence's "divided" heart attests to the disconsonance between his/her will and his/her actions. Ahmed, in turn, attempts to elude the "unspeakable truth" by avoiding mirrors which would otherwise force an encounter with his/her false image: "Alors, j'évite les miroirs. Je n'ai pas toujours le courage de me trahir, c'est a dire de descendre les marches que mon destin a tracées et qui me mènent au fond de moi-même dans l'intimité—insoutenable—de la vérité qui ne peut être dite" (44). For Silence and for Ahmed, adolescence compels a confrontation with his/her duplicitous performance; each responds by accepting his/her dual nature for the masculine advantages that it provides.

Unlike the story of Iphis, however, at the conclusions of the *Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable* we find no miraculous last-minute bodily transformation or gender realignment. Silence and Ahmed do each assume the female gender, yet the specificity of this gender remains ambiguous. In Ovid's text, with its focus on the endless transformations of the physical world and the psychological results of this universal turbulence, the narrator highlights the transitions from one state of being to another. The *Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable,* on the other hand, call into question the very notion of a unified subject or single state of being. Both works feature a debate between Nature and Nurture, or Culture, (explicit in the *Roman de Silence,* implied in *L'Enfant de sable*)[7] concerning the relative strength of each in determining the *true* gender of the child—a debate that reflects and echoes Silence's and Ahmed's own struggles regarding their gender identity. Nevertheless, in spite of these debates, from birth through young adulthood neither Silence nor Ahmed is ever uniquely one gender or the other. Both texts stress their hybridism linguistically as well as thematically. In the *Roman de Silence,* for example, the narrator repeatedly refers to Silence as the boy-maiden, "li vallés mescine," or as the boy who is a maiden, "li vallés qui est mescine"[8] and juxtaposes masculine and feminine gendered pronouns and nouns, as in this description of Silence's successful jousting match:

> Moult *le* fist bien ens en l'arainne
> Entre ii. rens a la quintainne.
> Ainc *feme* ne fu mains *laniere*
> De contoier en tel maniere. (5145–8, my emphasis)

Similarly, in *L'Enfant de sable,* shortly before her death, Fatima, Ahmed's wife, succinctly summarizes their complicated gender relations by opposing gendered nouns and adjectives: "Je m'en vais… Je suis ta femme et tu es mon *épouse*… Tu seras *veuf* et moi…, disons que je fus une erreur" (80, my emphasis). In both works, the attention to Silence's and Ahmed's double status reveals two hero(ine)s[9] whose power resides in their hybridism.[10] Each embodies a fundamental indeterminacy that appears dangerously seductive. Within the two narratives and in numerous instances, other characters are so attracted to Silence and to Ahmed that the hero(ine)s are put in positions of real or potential peril.

In this study I will compare the manner in which the *Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable* foreground indeterminacy both through the thematics of the cross-dresser and through their narratives. I will situate my analysis within the critical framework of a social constructivist theory of gender in order to highlight the constructedness of gender

at play within these two works and as a tool to deconstruct the essentialism of the binary opposition man/woman. From this perspective, I will then consider the extent to which social constructivism is itself an essentializing construct that operates "by essentializing essentialism" (Schor 43), whereas the *Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable* move beyond such polarized feminist critical stances to begin to imagine a third space.[11] In neither text does this third space, this hybrid identity, emerge as trouble-free—it is no utopian liberation from the "prisonhouse" of the gender binary—but indicates an attempt to explore the limits of the traditional sex-gender categories and boundaries.[12]

Based on my analysis of cross-dressing in medieval and modern French narrative I will propose that the prevalence of transvestite and other hybrid figures, coupled with the extensive linguistic and narrative ambiguities in these texts, highlights the constant tension at play in this literature, as well as in the larger culture, revealed in our simultaneous attraction and resistance to binary categorization. In none of these works do we arrive at a tidy resolution, a simple, final Truth, either "in favor" or "opposed to" traditional binarism. Rather than viewing our fascination with cross-dressers and with other hybrid figures whose very existence indicates a transgression of binary categories as simply representing our awareness of the need to deconstruct traditional binary thinking, or, alternately, suggesting that the compulsive trangression of binary categories serves to confirm the intransigence of those categories in "our" psyches, I see a continuous push and pull between the two.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* takes as her subject the distinction between sex and gender, and the formulation of gender as a culturally constructed, performative act. She identifies drag and certain homosexual gender practices as among those that most dramatically exhibit the parodic and performative construction of gender (*Gender Trouble* viii).[13] Looking back to Foucault and Nietzsche, Butler proposes a genealogical investigation of the price that we incur by positing the sex-gender binary as "natural, original and inevitable" (viii). Such an investigation must, she says, focus on "the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (viii–ix, italics original). Butler undertakes an examination of "compulsory heterosexuality" and of "phallogocentrism" as "regimes of power/ discourse," investigating the points of convergence and of breakage between heterosexuality and phallogocentric culture, and asking how language itself produces the ("fictive") construction of sex, which in turn maintains and upholds these very regimes of power (viii). She examines, then, the way in which cultural institutions and their language create the categories of identity that are necessary to support these institutions.

Butler's reading of gender as a "discursively constrained performative act" elucidates in a particularly clear and revealing fashion the construction of gender of the hero(ine)s in the *Roman de Silence* and in *L'Enfant de sable*. Both texts highlight the critical role of regimes of power/discourse in the choice of the child's gender, as the laws of patrilineal succession consciously and explicitly motivate each father's decision to raise his child as

a male. Butler's study considers the way in which the adoption of a gender has become accepted, naturalized, in Western society; in these two texts, the "naturalness" (or not) of gender becomes one of the dominant questions driving the elaboration of the plot. Butler's work also stresses that the realization of the constructedness of gender must inevitably lead to a reevaluation of the degree to which scientific and medical discourses have defined the notion of biological "sex" itself.[14] Far from being a prediscursive, "natural" fact, Butler argues that sex is "as culturally constructed as gender" (7). The essays on the *Roman de Silence* by Elizabeth Waters and Erin F. Labbie also draw heavily on the work of Butler. In "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternate Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*," Waters incorporates Butler's theory of the performativity of gender to apply queer theory to her reading of the romance. In "The Specular Image of the Gender-Neutral Name: Naming Silence in *Le Roman de Silence*," Labbie combines psychoanalytic theories with Butler's work on naming and identity formation from *Bodies That Matter* to propose that Silence's inner self, like his/her flexible Old French name, evades binary gender categorization and "becomes a representative of her own process of becoming" (74).

One advantage to a comparative study such as in this study is that the chronological and geographical distance between the *Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable* offers insights into the variable construction of sex and gender within differing cultures and at different historical moments. That the cultural values of sex and gender do vary further affirms their constructedness. At the same time, since gender is not constituted coherently or consistently in these different historical contexts, and since gender intersects with other modalities of discursively constituted identities, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is produced and maintained (*Gender Trouble* 3).

The history of cross-dressing, and of the study of cross-dressing and transvestism, demonstrates that whereas cross-dressing has existed throughout time, attitudes toward this behavior have not remained constant. In the classical era, cross-dressing and cross-gender behavior were relatively widespread (Bullough, "Cross Dressing" 224). Bullough notes that Greek and Roman mythology and literature is "full of cross dressing of both men and women, while male individuals from Aeneas to Hercules are said to have lived part of their lives disguised as girls or women" ("Cross Dressing" 224). Cross-dressing also held an important role in the religious ceremonies of many of the early pagan cults of Aphrodite ("Cross Dressing" 224), but Christianity, following the Jewish scriptural tradition, prohibits wearing clothes of the opposite sex:

> The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God. (Deuteronomy 22:5)

In *A Critical and Exegetical Comment on Deuteronomy,* S.R.Driver analyzes this prohibition as a reaction by early Jews against rival pagan ceremonies in which the goddess Atargatis was worshipped by cross-dressed men and women, rather than as a response to the sexual aspect of transvestism (250–51). Bullough finds, however, that during this period there was also some apprehension regarding the "sexual overtones" of cross-dressing: "Men were enjoined from using cosmetics, from wearing brightly colored

garments, from donning jewelry or ornaments associated with women, and from shaving the hair on the hidden parts of their bodies. Women were to keep their hair long and men were to keep their hair short" (*Sexual Variance* 80).

In spite of the Judeo-Christian prohibition, female cross-dressing was tolerated and even, when successful, admired, during the Middle Ages "because it was assumed that such women were striving to become more male-like and therefore better persons" (Bullough, "Cross Dressing" 225). St. Jerome indicates that the celibate, religious woman *becomes a man* by virtue of her holy behavior: "[As] long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man" (567; Cited in "Cross Dressing" 227). For St. Jerome, a woman's 'becoming a man' through holy behavior is clearly a positive and admirable change.

Annie Woodhouse, a sociologist whose *Fantastic Women: Sex, Gender, and Transvestism* undertakes a feminist study of the social construction of gender, points to the Age of Reason as the moment when the view emerged of cross-dressing as irrational, immoral and deserving of punishment (22). However, other cultural historians have found documents describing the condemnation and persecution of male cross-dressers in the Middle Ages and earlier. Bullough cites hostility toward men who cross-dressed in the writings of St. Cyprian who was particularly "concerned about effeminacy among Christian men" ("Cross Dressing" 227).[15] Kathleen Blumreich also notes the difference in medieval attitudes toward male and female cross-dressers, stemming from a perception of the superior role of the dominant man:

> Whereas female transvestism was often tolerated because the woman was viewed as attempting to reach a more perfect (i.e., male) state, male transvestism was, even from classical times, derided and condemned. To dress in women's clothing was seen as evidence of a man's lack of virility, of his desire to play the effeminate partner. ("Lesbian Desire" 58)

Bullough states that historical female transvestism was relatively common during the Middle Ages. As evidence, Bullough cites the Church Council held at Gangra, before 341, which "condemned pious women who disguised themselves as men in order to join ascetic and monastic communities" ("Cross Dressing" 228). He adds that whereas the action was censured, the women were not punished: "Throughout the medieval period female cross dressers, with the major exception of Joan of Arc, were never prosecuted or penalized. Both the attempts of women to cross dress and the male toleration of it are strong evidence for the dominance of the male gender role in medieval Christianity" ("Cross Dressing" 228). The dominance of the male gender role created an environment in which female aspirations toward this role were understandable and even acceptable.

Blumreich adds that as male cross-dressing became increasingly associated with witchcraft in the later Middle Ages, male cross-dressers, like homosexuals, were considered "heretics" (58). Peter Allen explains that the use of the Old French "erite" or "herites"—the term that Queen Eufeme applies to Silence when he/she shuns her sexual advances (3935)—"derives its secondary meaning ('homosexual') from its primary meaning ('heretic')" (111, n. 12). Blumreich clarifies that "since Augustine and Aquinas had declared that 'unnatural sex acts' constituted 'injury to God' because they 'violated

the natural order prescribed by God' (Richards 142), homosexuals, like those engaging in bestiality or practicing nonorthodox forms of worship, were viewed as heretics" (56).[16]

A body of contemporary scholarship on cross-dressing has sought to reclaim the historical and literary cross-dresser as an intriguing, radical, free-spirited revolutionary rather than as the sexual pervert of much of the earlier literature.[17] Some scholars have looked back to ancient Greece to examine transvestism and sex changes in Greek myths, and transvestism as a historical rite of passage. Bernard Sergent's *Homosexuality in Greek Myth* examines the "political undercurrent" of rereading the Greek myths. Approaching homosexuality not as a "monstrous innovation" but as a practice "institutionalized among Greek and other Indo-European peoples" (269), Sergent emphasizes the notion of "social gender" (54). In *Greek Homosexuality,* Kenneth Dover documents the sexual practices of upper-class Greek men. He supplements his study of literature with an extensive examination of vase painting and of legal documents. Scholars who advocate a social constructionist perspective of human sexuality often cite Dover's work, but he does not champion any one theoretical approach. P.M.C. Forbes Irving's *Metamophoses in Greek Myth* includes consideration of "sex changes" and of the "shape shifters" in Greek mythology. Irving notes that for Augustine and for early scholars of Greek mythology, stories of metamorphosis presented theological problems: "These changes could not have been worked by a god, and yet devils have no power to change or create physical substance. Transformations are therefore illusions caused by devils," they reasoned (1). Irving does not find a radically different approach to stories of metamorphosis until the second half of the nineteenth century when anthropology and the comparative study of "primitive societies" give rise to a new perspective. Marie Delcourt's classic work, *Hermaphrodite: Mythes et rites de la bisexualité dans l'Antiquité classique,* catalogues Greek myths according to the sexuality of the principal characters. Delcourt identifies transvestism as a common rite of passage, for example in the initiation of youths and as a premarriage ritual.

Other scholars have sought to map out a historical overview of cross-dressing or to analyze cross-dressing as a sociocultural phenomenon. In addition to Garber's book *Vested Interests* (1992), which presents a study of historical and literary cross-dressers from Shakespeare to contemporary pop stars, Peter Ackroyd's *Dressing Up. Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession* (1972) is particularly noteworthy, examining much of the same material as Garber from a different perspective. Bullough's *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (1976) comprises a broad historical overview of sexual practice and attitudes, including Sumerian law codes, early Talmudic writings, Islamic beliefs concerning sexual behavior, and sexual theory in ancient China, as well as medieval and modern European perspectives. He incorporates material on cross-dressing in each section. Among early medieval female cross-dressers, Bullough discusses the story of saint Pelagia/Pelagius, whom he terms the "archetype for the female transvestite saints," other cross-dressing saints, such as saint Marina/Marinus, and the legendary Pope Joan (366–369). There are also case histories of European female-to-male transvestite soldiers and sailors (599–600), which he identifies as a fairly common phenomenon.[18] Julie Wheelwright's *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness* and Jessica Amanda Salmonson's *The Encyclopedia of Amazons: Women Warriors from Antiquity to the Modern Era* both also provide surveys of historical and literary fighting women, most of whom cross-

dressed, while Michele Perret states in her article, "Travesties et transsexuelles" that in French medieval narrative literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, transvestism occurs fairly often: "Les textes où un homme se déguise en femme, ou bien une femme en homme ne sont pas rares" (328).[19] Additionally, Rudolf M.Dekker and Lotte C.van de Pol present in *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* an investigation into female cross-dressing, mostly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The authors refer to their own research as "not very systematic" and "far-from-exhaustive," but it is well documented as well as highly readable. They argue that "such women should not be categorized as incidental human curiosities, but that their cross-dressing was part of a deeply rooted tradition" (1). Woodhouse stresses that transvestites have existed throughout much of western history: "Transvestism was found in ancient Greece, among the Roman emperors (notably Nero), the friends of Samuel Pepys and the French aristocracy of the eighteenth century" (22). Garber's investigations highlight several French cross-dressers, including the eighteenth-century aristocrat, the Chevalier d'Eon, also known as Mademoiselle de Beaumont; Théophile Gautier's "sexually enigmatic" hero(ine), Theodore de Serannes, in *Mademoiselle de Maupin;* La Zambinella, the cross-dressed (castrato) opera singer in Balzac's *Sarrasine;* and Rrose Sélavy, Michel Duchamp's "female alter ego," as well as historical, literary and cinematic cross-dressers of many other national origins (*Vested Interests* 73 and 161). Anthropological research has found that cross-dressing also constitutes an important ritual or rite of passage in many non-western societies.[20]

Without a doubt, cross-dressing is a current hot topic in both academic and popular literature. Yet, in spite of the contemporary fascination with cross-dressing, scholars and experts do not agree on the definition of the phenomenon. Annie Woodhouse follows her explanation of the term "transvestism" ("Quite simply, transvestism means cross-dressing—from the Latin 'trans' cross, 'vestire' to dress" [ix–x]) with a further distinction that defines the transvestite as a kind of cross-dresser with a purpose:

> Not all cross-dressers are transvestites. There are drag queens, professional female impersonators, transsexuals and cross-dressed prostitutes, but the transvestite cross-dresses not for money, entertainment, politics, nor because he is convinced that he really is a woman. He does it from perceived need, often expressed as compulsion, and because he enjoys it. Transvestism represents a wholesale transgression of the 'rules' of gender in a manner which is both direct and extraordinary. (x)

Woodhouse attempts to pinpoint satire as the key element that separates cross-dressing from transvestism. According to Woodhouse, cross-dressed performers may enact parodies of feminine behavior, whereas transvestites make "no attempt at satire" (18), but she notes the difficulty in maintaining a rigid distinction between the two (19). Garber, on the other hand, abdicates to the preferences of the transvestite-transsexual (TV-TS) community, for whom, she says "transvestite" is a more clinical term (it "seems to imply a compulsive disorder"), whereas "cross-dresser" implies greater agency (it "suggests a choice of lifestyle") (4).

Woodhouse further refines her definition of transvestism by restricting application of this term to men, noting that it often includes sexual fetishes (which, presumably, women do not have) and has as its ultimate goal the ability to "pass" as a woman. On the other hand, when women dress as men, according to Woodhouse, they do so because it is fashionable: "She is simply following a trend" (x–xi). In contrast, Garber devotes an entire chapter of her book to female-to-male transvestites, emphatically debunking the myth that restricts fetishistic transvestism to males ("Cross-dress for Success," *Vested Interests* 41–66). The existence of practical "how-to" guides, such as *Information for the Female-to-Male Crossdresser and Transsexual*[21] also belies Woodhouse's restriction.

Unlike the other hybrid figures mentioned in my introductory chapter—werewolves, wild men and serpent-women—real cross-dressers live in the real world, as well as in that of literature and film, which considerably extends the range of their relevance. From medical and scientific studies that seek to understand the psychological and biological foundations of the condition, or report on the relative successes of treatments and cures,[22] to popular biographies and testimonials from transvestites themselves,[23] contemporary interest in cross-dressing runs from the highly technical to the highly sensational. Much of the work on cross-dressing "straddles" spheres of interest so that even the research on the topic defies easy categorization. For example, Garber, who is the William R.Kenan, Jr. Professor of English and the Director of the Humanities Center at Harvard University, published her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* in 1992.[24] Shortly after the publication of this "erudite"[25] book, Garber appeared on Geraldo Rivera's television talk show[26] as a "sexpert" for a program on "Women Who Dress as Men," in which Geraldo interviewed five panelists regarding intimate aspects of their personal lives and their motivations for cross-dressing.

Garber herself identifies the contemporary fascination with cross-dressing with an epistemological crisis, "an undertheorized recognition of the necessary critique of binary thinking" (*Vested Interests* 10–11). She analyzes our attraction to cross-dressing as an awareness of the need to deconstruct long-accepted divisions and categories which cross-dressing, in its challenge to gender binarism, makes readily—sometimes spectacularly—apparent. She acknowledges the appeal of cross-dressing to contemporary literary and cultural critics as a "sign of the constructedness of gender categories" but warns against looking "through" rather than "at" the cross-dresser, appropriating him or her for particular critical aims, or assimilating the cross-dresser to one pole or another of the gender binarism (*Vested Interests* 9–10). The power of this "third sex," she stresses, lies in the cross-dresser's resistance to either/or thinking: "The 'third' is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crises…. [It] is *not* a term. Much less is it a *sex*…. The 'third' is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility" (*Vested Interests* 11). For Garber, then, the cross-dresser represents the potential for constituting an alternative gender that defies assimilation.

The sexologist Magnus Hirschfield was the first to employ the term "transvestite" in a medical context in 1910[27] (Bullough, "Cross Dressing" 223). From the early endocrinological work of Hirschfield and, later, Harry Benjamin, scientific approaches to cross-dressing have expanded to include the medico-psychiatric and the sociopsychological, in which the researcher may begin to consider not only the causes of and treatment for cross-dressing, but also the assumptions about gender that have formed the basis of earlier research models: the "politics of diagnosis."[28]

At the foundation of these assumptions about gender lies an unreflective acceptance of gender as biologically determined. According to this model, sex-gender identity originates in the body itself, and thus any deviation from the standard, heterosexual sex-gender orientation must be due to a biological, hormonal or chromosomal abnormality. In the act of cross-dressing, however, the transvestite disrupts the theoretical primacy of the body as the locus of identity, and indicates the possibility of an eventual noncorrespondence between sex and gender. That is, in the adoption of a gender that does not correspond to his or her biological sex, the cross-dresser forces us to examine the extent to which gender is socially constructed and to interrogate the prevailing ideologies that underlie this construction.[29] Judith Butler summarizes the radical potential of the realization of this sex-gender distinction or split:

> The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (*Gender Trouble* 6, emphasis original)

As the cross-dresser destabilizes the binary gender system, he/she facilitates a critique of the structures that engender within a given culture—structures that, of course, develop variously in different historical contexts.

## THE LAW OF THE FATHER

In the *Roman de Silence,* due to a prior controversy surrounding a female inheritance claim, King Ebain has ruled that women can no longer inherit in his kingdom. Because of this ruling, Silence's father determines, before his wife has given birth, to raise their child as a boy regardless of the child's sex. Historically, there is some precedent in medieval England for the abolition of cognatic succession. Although a daughter or daughters generally could inherit if there were no sons, Helen Jewell notes in *Women in Medieval England* that the specifics of such inheritance were highly contradictory and controversial:

> In feudal inheritance whereas an eldest son was heir to the main body of the estate even if he had younger brothers or sisters, by *c.* 1135 the eldest daughter was totally ousted as an heiress as soon as she had a brother, and if there was no brother, her inheritance was still diminished with the arrival of each younger sister, who became another coheiress. (22)[30]

In medieval France, according to Shulamith Shahar in *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages,* although laws barred women from holding any public office not held as a fief, or from participating in government institutions, there was no such

restriction against inheritance: women did inherit fiefs and thus occasionally even ruled over territories (11–12). Georges Duby, however, in *Le Chevalier, la Femme et le Prêtre* traces a change in attitudes toward marriage from the tenth and early eleventh centuries, when warriors and kings may have abducted their brides as often as they arranged to marry them, to the thirteenth century, when marriage had become a sacrament. According to Duby, these changes in attitudes toward marriage had a strong influence on inheritance as well. Duby identifies the institution of the marriage system as paralleling the construction of hierarchical political, ecclesiastical and economic systems. As knights became increasingly concerned with preserving their seigneurial properties, they began to prevent the division of inheritance by limiting the marriages of their sons and by restricting the dowries and marriages of their daughters.

Within the narrative frame of the *Roman de Silence,* the royal restriction against female inheritance creates a socioeconomic necessity that motivates the need to disguise an infant's sex, to raise a girl as a boy. Before Silence's birth, the narrator tells us that Nature has used a special set of molds to create the most beautiful and perfect girl possible. She (Nature) attends to every detail and inscribes Silence's features on her face:

> Les orelles li fait petites
> Nature, ki les a escrites,
> Les sorcils brun et bien seöir,
> Nul hom ne puet si bials veöir. (1917–20)[31]

The narrator establishes for Silence an unambiguous genesis and originary (female) body/sex prior to its cultural inscription. In *The Creation of the First Arthurian Romance,* Claude Luttrell explains that the figure of Nature as creator of beauty and perfection, a familiar topos in Old French poetry and in the works of the Latin poets of the twelfth century, had become common also in vernacular literature by the time of Chrétien de Troyes (2).[32] R.Howard Bloch asserts, furthermore, that Heldris must have been directly familiar with Alain de Lille's *De planctu Naturae* because of the striking similarities between the two texts in the linking of creation and textual production, rhetoric and social deviance (Bloch, "Silence and Holes" 84–5).

At the moment of Silence's birth, her father sees and acknowledges her sex and is "greatly pleased" with her beauty:

> Li cuens s'en a forment vanté,
> Qu'il ne donroit mie une tille
> Desolte a un fil de sa fille,
> Car ainc ne vit si biele cose. (2028–31)

According to the narrator, in no way did Cador feel disappointed by Silence's sex; he would not have preferred to have had a real son, in spite of his intention to make of this child a "boy."

In *L'Enfant de sable,* a Moroccan father of seven girls, awaiting the birth of an eighth child, decides that this one *will* be a boy. The father, Hadj Ahmed, is himself the oldest and wealthiest of his siblings. The narrator explains that within the Islamic religion, girls can inherit only one-third of their father's wealth and possessions. If there is no male progenitor, the remainder of the inheritance passes to the father's brothers: "Notre religion est impitoyable pour l'homme sans héritier; elle le dépossède ou presque en faveur des frères. Quant aux filles, elles reçoivent seulement le tiers de l'héritage. Donc les frères attendaient la mort de l'aîné pour se partager une grande partie de sa fortune" (18). Nikki R.Keddie discusses in her introduction to *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* the Quran's legalization of female inheritance (half that of a male heir), which had been unknown in the pre-Islamic Middle East.[33] The inheritance rules, however, tend to be interpreted "in a more patriarchal way by Islamic law," according to Keddie (5). This "more patriarchal way" translates into that which most benefits the men involved: "In general, the Quran was followed when it was not too inconvenient to men or to the patriarchal family to do so, and not followed when it was" (5). David S.Powers notes in his book, *Studies in Qur'an and Hadith: The Formation of the Islamic Law of Inheritance,* that difficulties in modernizing the original Quranic verses further complicated interpretation of inheritance law.[34] Powers demonstrates that when later theologians and jurists chose one of several possible readings as the authoritative version, they often opted for interpretations in accordance with the cultural climate of their own time, rather than the connotations that the same passage would have had when first written, during the early Muslim period.

Ahmed's father's decision to raise his child as a son is, thus, in part an effort to retain his fortune within his immediate family. At the same time, there is a strong sense of the necessity to have a son to prove the father's masculinity. The narrator states that the father considers his wife "sterile" since she has not yet given him a son, and that he cultivates toward his daughters, "non pas de la haine, mais de l'indifférence" (17). His wife, too, views the birth of each daughter as a defeat and a cause for self-chastisement. The narrator describes her sense of disappointment and resentment at each birth: "Mais à chaque naissance toute la joie retombait brutalement. Elle se mettait elle aussi à se désintéresser de ses filles. Elle leur en voulait d'être là, se détestait et se frappait le ventre pour se punir" (19). When Ahmed is born, her mother, seeing her sex, begins to cry. The child's father, however, denies her anatomy. Holding the naked infant in his arms, he attempts to console his wife, praising the infant's masculinity: "Pourquoi ces larmes? J'espère que tu pleures de joie! Regarde, regarde bien c'est un garçon! Plus besoin de te cacher le visage. Tu dois être fière…. Tu viens après quinze ans de mariage de me donner un enfant, c'est mon premier enfant, regarde comme il est beau, touche ses petits testicules, touche son penis, c'est déjà un homme" (26–27). For the father there is no conflict between Ahmed's sex and his assumption of the male gender because, in the father's own mind, he has already constructed his masculinity. The narrator questions the father's seeming self-deception, wondering whether he has forgotten that he himself engineered the birth of a "son," or whether he is pretending: "Il avait bien vu une fille, mais il croyait fermement que c'était un garçon" (27).

In both the *Romance de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable,* the economic and social settings provide a rationalization for Silence's and Ahmed's cross-dressing. To an extent, Silence and Ahmed appear as victims—innocent victims of the social conditions into

which they were born, and victims of their fathers' unconventional solutions. Their cross-dressing is normalized; it is part of a "progress narrative," a narrative that explains an individual's cross-dressing as the result of the benefits or progress that it brings.[35] In each text, the birth daughter inherits cross-dressing as a strategy that will enable *her* to inherit *her* father's wealth. In no way does Silence or Ahmed's cross-dressing imply a "lifestyle choice" or any kind of "alternative" sexual desire. Michele Perret notes that in general, in French medieval narrative fiction of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the cause of transvestism differs for women and for men: Men usually cross-dress in order to have access to the woman they desire, whereas women do so in order to benefit from masculine privilege, such as inheritance, or to be able to travel alone.[36] Perret emphasizes that asexual transvestism typifies female-to-male cross-dressing in this literature (329).[37] Perret has also identified the instrumental role of the father in the transvestism of all four of the medieval, female-to-male transvestites that she studies: Silence, Grisandole *(L'Estoire de Merlin),* Yde (Huon de Bordeaux's *Yde et Olive*), and Blanchandine *(Tristan de Nanteuil)* (331–2).[38]

Garber interprets the normalization of cross-dressing that results from explicitly framing it within a socioeconomic register as a means of "explaining away" the cross-dresser, of dismissing the behavior as a kind of "cultural symptom" "rather than an erotic pleasure and play space" (69–70). In the *Roman de Silence* and *L'Enfant de sable,* however, whereas each work goes to some length initially to normalize cross-dressing as a necessary strategy for dealing with an unjust patriarchal economic system, much of the focus of the remainder of the stories revolves around the way in which this performance plays out.

## INSCRIPTION: NAMING AND CLOTHING

Although Silence's father declares at her birth that she is a beautiful girl, he has her baptized as a boy. The baptism is a delicate process in itself that entails inventing a story that the infant is gravely ill so that the priest will baptize him/her quickly, without removing his/her wrappings. Silence's father chooses the Latin name of Scilentius, reasoning that if his/her "true nature" is ever discovered, they will change the unnatural final -us to an -a in her Latin name[39] and Scilentia will assume her natural female gender:

> Se nos le tolons dont cest -us
> Nos li donrons natural us,
> Car cis -us est contre nature,
> Mais l'altres [Scilentia] seroit par nature. (2079–82)

In a literal manner, the naming of Scilentia thus discursively constructs or genders his/her body. Her "true nature" appears as a blank slate, a passive surface, on which the naming acts (genders), but which it does not ultimately change—for she can quickly and easily assume (resume) her "natural" female gender if need be.

Noting that the suffix *-us* not only marks the ending of a Latin nominative but signifies also "custom" or "tradition," Kate Mason Cooper refers to Silence's Latin name, Scilentius, as "a form of hiding or disguise" (347): the *-us* suffix conceals her feminine nature, replacing it with masculine customs. Perret develops this line of thinking by reading a deeper level of meaning into the feminine *-a,* as well as the masculine *-us,* that parallels the division between Nature and Nurture: "Si l'on a bien repéré dans ces quatre vers que le suffixe *-us* représente l'usage, la culture *(Noreture),* on n'a pas toujours vu que *-a,* troisième personne du verbe avoir, représente ce que la fillette possède réellement de par Nature: son identité sexuelle" (335). R.Howard Bloch, however, disagrees with this straightforward association of the Latin gendered suffixes with Nature and Nurture. He points out that in later passages Silence describes the *-us* as against *both* custom ("Por cho que l'us est encontre us" [2541]) and nature ("Car cis us n'est pas natureus" [2554]) (Bloch 86). Nonetheless, as Peter Allen emphasizes, Silence's parents do not actually call him/her by either of the gendered Latin variants. They use instead the French version of the name which designates no gender at all: "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" (105–6). But whereas Allen sees an absence in Silence's genderless name, which he relates to the theme of the lack of language or speech, I would assert a presence. The name 'Silence' incorporates *both* genders; it successfully negotiates the need to choose one or the other.

For Ahmed, as for Silence, the public construction of a masculine gender begins with his naming. Ahmed's father, however, builds in no concessions for an eventual return to a female form. He names "him" Mohamed Ahmed. The narrator in *L'Enfant de sable,* speaking to the "audience" listening to his tale, maintains that the specific name is, in fact, unimportant: "Tu dis qu'il faut l'appeler Khémaïss? Non, qu'importe le nom. Bon, je continue…" (17).[40] Yet, certainly the name *is* important. Ahmed, who carries his father's name, carries on the family line, wealth and tradition. "A," the first letter of the Roman alphabet, is especially symbolic since Ahmed's father feels that after the birth of seven daughters Ahmed is his first born child. The name Ahmed increases in symbolic weight when, later in the story, Ahmed takes the female name Zahra. "A" and "Z," the first and last letters, lie on "opposite" ends of the alphabet, yet Ahmed comes to embody them both.[41] Frequently in the course of his/her own tale, Ahmed will comment on his/her hybrid identity: "Je vis des deux côtés du miroir," he/she says (57).

As in the *Roman de Silence,* the ritualization of this interpellation poses problems in *L'Enfant de sable* concerning the infant's anatomy. Just as Silence's father must devise a scheme to have him/her baptized without anyone seeing his/her body, Ahmed's father must arrange for Ahmed's circumcision. In this case, Ahmed's father has his own finger "circumcised" in place of his son's/daughter's penis, by slipping it discreetly between the infant's spread legs:

> Figurez-vous qu'il a présenté au coiffeur-circonciseur son fils, les jambes écartées, et que quelque chose a été effectivement coupé, que le sang a coulé, éclaboussant les cuisses de l'enfant et le visage du coiffeur. L'enfant a même pleuré et fut comblé de cadeaux apportés par toute la famille. Rares furent ceux qui remarquèrent que le père avait un pansement autour de l'index de la main droite. (32)

That no one notices this "sleight of hand" attests to the power of the law of the father in the construction of Ahmed's gender.

Once Silence and Ahmed are baptized or "circumcised," their parents hide their bodies underneath boys' clothes and have each educated as a boy. Their clothing, like their naming, thus constitutes their gender in a seemingly straightforward manner. Again, in the *Roman de Silence*, the gendering worked by clothes and education is social and superficial. The narrator of *Silence* describes this process, specifying that they clothed Silence in men's clothes (appropriately sized) in order to deny her nature:

> Quant le enfes pot dras user,
> Por se nature refuser
> L'ont tres bien vestu a fuer d'ome
> A sa mesure, c'est la some. (2359–2362)

But the narrator claims that Silence's boyish clothes leave intact the body underneath:

> El a en tine que ferine:
> Il est desos les dras mescine. (2479–80)

Perret notes that the narrator of the *Roman de Silence* creates a distinction between exterior and interior appearance. She states that Silence's assumption of the male gender also transforms his/her skin or complexion, but not the interior reality. Perret cites seven occurrences of the rhyme "halle/malle" (suntan/male) within the text that underscore this transformation and the association of masculinity with his/her exterior appearance (Perret 332). Silence's suntanned skin is particularly distressing to Nature since she had prided herself on her creation in Silence of the perfect complexion—a delicate mixture of red and white. However, other than these references to Silence's more tanned or ruddy complexion, both the narrator and Silence him/herself maintain that Silence's body remains unchanged by *her* assumed gender. Silence's conscience speaks to him/her at night, reminding Silence that his/her appearance and physical body do not correspond:

> Ti drap qu'as vestut, et li halles,
> Font croire as gens que tu iés malles.
> Mais el a sos la vesteüre
> Ki de tolt cho n'a mie cure. (2827–30)

The lack of correspondence between his/her body and gender performance will later underscore for Silence the duplicitous nature of his/her endeavor and give him/her cause for concern.

Ahmed's caretakers, like Silence's, dress him/her as a boy. As puberty approaches, however, Ahmed writes in his/her journal that his/her mother takes additional

vestimentary precautions against the development of breasts, by binding his/her chest tightly with white linen: "Elle s'inquiétait pour ma poitrine qu'elle pansait avec du lin blanc; elle serrait très fort les bandes de tissu fin au risque de ne plus pouvoir respirer. Il fallait absolument empêcher l'apparition des seins" (36). Apparently this method works for Ahmed as he/she never does develop breasts, and in fact imagines that his/her breasts are growing inward, pointing inside his/her chest, even impeding his/her respiration: "Ma poitrine était toujours empêchée de poindre. J'imaginais des seins qui poussaient a l'intérieur, rendant ma respiration difficile. Cependant, je n'eus pas de seins…. C'était un problème en moins" (48). The narrator's adherence to an interior/exterior contrast in the *Roman de Silence* is more problematic in *L'Enfant de sable*. Both texts establish an inner/outer opposition that parallels the oppositions between sex and gender, and nature and nurture. Both texts further present these binary oppositions as originary and prediscursive, but whereas Silence's *true* interior nature remains distinct from and unaffected by his/her ruddy complexion and masculine behavior, Ahmed's inwardly pointing, interior (virtual?) breasts insinuate a transgression of his/her performance into the interior.

Judith Butler highlights the parallels between precisely these binary distinctions (*Gender Trouble* 129). Briefly tracing the opposing figures of body/mind, nature/culture, and sex/gender through Christian and Cartesian thought,[42] she undertakes an examination of the means by which society marks the boundaries of the body to create of it the naturalized, passive surface upon which culture inscribes its values:

> 'Inner' and 'outer' make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability. And this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject. Hence, 'inner' and 'outer' constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the 'inner world' no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity, becomes similarly suspect. (134)

Butler also questions the social and discursive rewards of such a construction: "From what strategic position in public discourse," she asks, "and for what reasons has the trope of interiority and the disjunctive binary of inner/outer taken hold?" (134). As Silence and Ahmed approach adolescence, the "internal fixity" of their selves comes onto shaky ground as they question the "internal locale" of their gender identity. We may not yet be able to pinpoint the "strategic position" or the reasons for this trope of interiority, but the characters' acute distress as they come increasingly to realize the *lack* of correspondence inherent in their performative hybridism reveals to the reader the high cultural stakes involved in upholding these binary oppositions.

## ADOLESCENCE: THE CHALLENGE TO A DUAL GENDER IDENTITY

In the *Roman de Silence,* the onset of puberty inspires a heated debate about the location of sexual difference. In the text, Nature and Nurture each challenge the other's right to determine Silence's gender identity. After Silence's twelfth birthday, Nature comes to him/her with strong criticism for the manner in which Silence has wronged her (Nature), wasting the great beauty that Nature had bestowed on Silence. Nature controverts the truth-value of Silence's outward appearance and behavior and attempts to persuade Silence to give up this masculine performance and resume her "natural" female gender (2500–29). Nature concludes her harsh speech by denying Silence's masculine identity:

> Tu nen es pas Scilentius! (2530)

Initially, Silence reacts in defense of this identity, interpreting his/her name, Scilentius, as equivalent to his/her identity:

> Tel n'oï onques!
> Silencius! qui sui jo donques?
> Silencius ai non, jo cui,
> U jo sui altres que ne fui. (2531–4)

Silence concludes in a straightforward and logical manner that he/she cannot be anyone other than who he/she knows, so he/she *must* be Scilentius, or else he/she is no one:

> Mais cho sai jo bien, par ma destre,
> Que je ne puis pas altres estre!
> Donques sui jo Scilentius,
> Cho m'est avis, u jo suis nus.[43] (2535–8)

Silence's conviction of his/her identity here stresses the direct correspondence of name to identity. Yet, although Silence analyzes Nature's statement as a rhetorical trick, his/her certainty and self-defense soon give way to doubt. Silence convinces him/herself that Nature's argument is plausible, saying:

> Por cho che l'-us est encontre us
> N'a pas a non Scilentius.
> Aler en violt a la costure

> Si com li a rové Nature,
> Car por fief, ne por iretage,
> Ne doit mener us si salvage. (2541–46)

The adolescent Silence, apprised of his/her conflicted gender identity, now concurs with Nature's analysis that the masculine suffix *-us* opposes traditional gendered behavior and is therefore barbarous. Nothing, Silence concludes, could be worth such falsity and deception, not even his/her father's inheritance. Persuaded, Silence agrees to give up his/her masculine ways and to resume *her* "natural" identity, even returning to her sewing—the proper, domestic activity for medieval women.

Nurture soon enters the debate and chastises Nature for attempting to convince Silence to give up his/her masculine ways. Nurture repudiates Nature's influence over Silence, and claims to have completely denatured Silence. Nurture further asserts that culture easily overpowers nature in influencing human behavior, saying to Nature:

> Jo l'ai tolte desnaturee.
> N'avra ja voir a vus duree
> Se ne lassciés icest anter
> Bien vos porés al loig vanter
> Se jo ne fac par noreture
> .m. gens ovrer contre nature. (2595–2600)

Nurture argues that Silence's gender performance is itself the locus of her gender identity, and seems to claim additionally that this cultural construct has completely replaced, or transformed, any kind of original essence or nature ("Je l'ai *tolte* desnaturee," [2595, my emphasis]). Nurture makes no mention of any past or potential conflict between Silence's physical body and her gender performance. Silence's biological sex does not stand in the way of his/her masculine behavior. It would seem that for Nurture, the physical body is *immaterial*—it has no bearing on Silence's identity or nature.

The stances of Nature and of Nurture in this debate put Silence in an understandably awkward position: while Nature proposes a strict essentialist view of gender identity that underscores Silence's essential femininity, Nurture presents a social constructivist perspective that identifies Silence's gender as masculine because Silence has been constructed as male. As each allegorical figure attempts to argue for a fixed definition of gender identity, Silence fluctuates alternately from one perspective to the other. Nature and Nurture strive to force Silence into a single gender identity, but Silence resists easy categorization. Much like Garber's *bad readers* who "erase" or "look through" the cross-dresser, resisting the power of "blurred gender" (*Vested Interest* 6), Nature and Nurture work to reposition Silence away from his/her hybrid third space. Ultimately, Reason, a third allegorical figure, persuades Silence that the advantages of her masculine performance merit his/her perseverance.

Counseled by Reason, Silence chooses to persist in his/her masculine performance for the material advantages of a male identity. He/she sees the folly of relinquishing his/her superior position now that he/she is *on top:*

> Et poise dont en son corage
> Tolt l'us de feme a son usage,
> Et voit que miols valt li us d'ome
> Que l'us de feme, c'est la some.
> 'Voire, fait il, a la male eure
> Irai desos, quant sui deseure.' (2635–40)

Significantly, it is Silence's remembrance of "the games that people play in private" ("Des jus c'on siolt es cambres faire" [2633]) that most directly prompts this realization of his/her superior position in the male role. The threat of intimate relations also leads Silence to detail his/her physical inadequacies as a woman and to state that he/she does not want to be "beaten" at these private games or to lose his/her honor. By Silence's own admission, he/she knows nothing of the ways of women, nor does he/she have a feminine appearance or (exterior) physique. Silence self-identifies as a male:

> Trop dure bouche ai por baisier,
> Et trop rois bras por acoler.
> On me poroit tost afoler
> Al giu c'on fait desos gordine
> Car vallés sui et nient mescine.
> Ne voel perdre ma grant honor
> Ne la voel cangier a menor. (2646–52)

In spite of Silence's own female sex, Silence here states that he/she would be shamed if he/she tried to adopt a female gender:

> Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.
> Nel sui, par foi, ains sui honis
> Quant as femes voel estre onis. (2642–44)

Silence's lack of familiarity with the appropriate behavior for women would lead to his/her disgrace. For Silence, his/her male gender is now considerably more significant than his/her female sex in the construction of his/her identity.

Although the advantageous position that his/her masculine role provides finally does sway Silence, the narrator stresses that Silence's resolve is not free of tension. Praising

Silence's perseverance while acknowledging "his" moments of hesitation and inner conflict, the narrator states:

> Jo ne di pas qu'il ne pe[n]sast
> Diversement, et ne tenast
> Diverse cogitation
> *Com* enfant de tel natiön,
> Meësmement enfant si tendre
> Ki doit a tel usage entendre. (2661–6)[44]

The narrator's description of Silence's conflicting reflections and inner turmoil implies that in spite of Silence's resolve, he/she suffered from the dissonance between his/her "interior" and "exterior" self, sex and gender, body and mind, which underscores in turn the difficulties that such discord poses within this cultural context. Butler, discussing interior/exterior discord in Western culture in general, states: "It is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized" (*Gender Trouble* 136).

In *L'Enfant de sable,* Ahmed's adolescence further confuses his/her easy assignment to one or another binary gender category. Sarah Skrainka points out that the narrative underscores this increased difficulty in categorization as it refers to the chapter on Ahmed's adolescence as leading *nowhere:*

> Il est intéressant de noter que le chapitre 4, qui traite de l'adolescence de Ahmed-Zahra, porte le titre 'la porte de samedi.' Celle-ci représente une porte 'percée dans le mur' qui 'ne mène nulle part' (41). Or, l'adolescence doit marquer, normalement, une transition entre l'enfance et l'âge adulte, et surtout elle se caractérise par la différenciation physique et sociale des sexes. C'est-à-dire, fille ou garçon, l'adolescent acquiert le rôle que la société reserve aux êtres de son sexe. Cependant ici il s'agit d'un voyage qui ne mène nulle part. (4)

Although Ahmed never develops (exterior) breasts, he/she does begin to menstruate. Initially, Ahmed attempts to deny the existence of his/her menses, to pretend it is a dream, a vision: "Ce n'était peut-être pas du sang, mais une veine enflée, une varice coloriée par la nuit, une vision juste avant la lumière du matin" (46). However, he/she must acknowledge the physical reality of this blood. Ahmed's first menses seems to challenge *his* image and to betray the falsity of *his* performance: "Et le sang un matin a touché mes draps. Empreintes d'un état de fait de mon corps enroulé dans un linge blanc, pour ébranler la petite certitude, ou pour démentir l'architecture de l'apparence" (46). This menstrual blood, which originates in Ahmed's "interior" body and traverses the boundary of the body to the "exterior," disrupts the coherence of Ahmed's male performance and draws into question Ahmed's internalization of his/her male gender identity.

For Ahmed, the suggestion that his/her construction may be nothing more than a façade is a profoundly disturbing one. Ahmed's choice of an architectural metaphor is

significant. In the immediately preceding passage, he/she has also borrowed an architectural metaphor to emphasize the difficulty of his/her hybrid existence: "O mon Dieu, que cette vérité me pèse! dure exigence! dure la rigueur. Je suis l'architecte et la demeure; l'arbre et la sève; moi et un autre; moi et une autre" (46). In Ahmed's turmoil, he/she feels torn between a series of opposing pairs, as he/she alternately identifies with both the architect and the edifice, both the designer and the design, both the tree and the sap, and with both a masculine and a feminine Other who inhabit him/her. As Ahmed struggles to situate him/herself in one or another of these opposing positions, the imprecision and unruliness of his/her dual condition trouble him/her deeply.

For Ahmed, the first menses also serves as a reminder of lost opportunities, of the life that he/she could have led: "C'était bien du sang: resistance du corps au nom; éclaboussure d'une circoncision tardive. C'était un rappel, une grimace d'un souvenir enfoui, le souvenir d'une vie que je n'avais pas connue et qui aurait pu être la mienne" (46). This blood represents to Ahmed a kind of physical rebellion, a female circumcision—evidence of his/her body's resistance to its name. Much like Cixous's "sorties,"[45] the menstrual blood's exit from Ahmed's body seems to signify both an escape of Ahmed's female sex from or through the body, and an attack on the body.

In silence and secrecy, Ahmed helps him/herself to the supply of rags, piled in a cupboard that he/she had seen his/her mother and sisters use. Ahmed thus publicly maintains appearances, while suffering privately this betrayal of his/her own body. Once Ahmed's cycle has ended, having expelled this blood, this abject Other, he/she returns to himself: "Après l'avènement du sang, je fus ramené a moi-même et je repris les lignes de la main telles que le destin les avait destinées" (48). As Julia Kristeva has demonstrated in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur,* the designation as "abject" of expelled substances and the concomitant delineation of bodily boundaries constitute critical steps in subject formation. Butler states, after Kristeva: "The boundary of the body as well as the disjunction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness" (*Gender Trouble* 133). With Ahmed's rejection of this blood, he/she clearly attempts to draw bodily boundaries that correspond with his male-gendered performance.

Although Ahmed begins to menstruate, he/she also develops a deep, masculine voice and grows a beard. Neither Ahmed nor the narrator mentions any surprise at this facial hair, but Ahmed does wonder about the origin of this voice—whether it is his/her own voice, or the voice of his/her father: "Je suis et ne suis pas cette voix qui s'accomode et prend le pli de mon corps, mon visage enroulé dans le voile de cette voix, est-elle de moi ou estce celle du père qui l'aurait insufflée…?" (45). Ahmed acknowledges the critical role of his/her father in the construction of his/her masculine gender, yet he/she also questions the role of his/her own agency in this construction. John D.Erickson finds in Ahmed's discomfort with his/her speaking voice a reflection of the postcolonial writer's troubled use of an imposed colonial language: "La voix, qui est la voix parlante du sujet, se détache de la personne qui parle de façon que les mots n'ont plus de source, d'origine, et que de ce 'lieu sans lieu' sorte une série d'oppositions dont le sujet (n')est (pas) compose" ("Femme voilée, récit voilé" 289). As an example, Erickson cites the statement by Ahmed already mentioned above: "Je suis l'architecte et la demeure; l'arbre et la sève; moi et un autre; moi et une autre" (46).

Ahmed's adolescent struggle revolves to a great extent, as does Silence's, around the deception inherent in his/her masculine performance: "La vérité s'exile; il suffit que je parle pour que la vérité s'éloigne, pour qu'on oublie et j'en deviens le fossoyeur et le déterreur, le maître et l'esclave" (45). The dramatic tension evident in this statement of the power of Ahmed's voice to create its own truth reveals the inner conflict that arises as he/she strains to situate his/her own identity in his/her body, even as his/her body exceeds his/her performance. Ahmed becomes simultaneously master and slave of his/her own materiality.

Once the trauma of Ahmed's first menses has passed, the narrator emphasizes Ahmed's determination and independence from his/her father in the continuation of this role: "Il [Ahmed] comprit que sa vie tenait a present au maintien de l'apparence. Il n'est plus une volonté du père. Il va devenir sa propre volonté" (48). When Ahmed decides, shortly thereafter, to marry his/her epileptic, deformed, cousin Fatima, Ahmed confronts his/her father with the artificiality of his/her gender, all the while upholding his/her intention and desire to continue his/her performance: "Ni toi ni moi ne sommes dupes," Ahmed says to his/her father. "Ma condition, non seulement je l'accepte et je la vis, mais je l'aime. Elle m'intéresse. Elle me permet d'avoir les privilèges que je n'aurais jamais pu connaître" (50). As for Silence, masculine privileges help to convince Ahmed to continue this role. However, Ahmed goes on to say that even as his/her male gender opens doors for him/her, it simultaneously imprisons him/her: "Elle m'ouvre des portes et j'aime cela, même si elle m'enferme ensuite dans une cage de vitres" (50). For both Silence and Ahmed, adolescence leads to a recommitment to their performances and to an assertion of their masculine identity, yet both continue to resist the ambiguities and dissonances of their blurred identities.

## PASSING

Within the narrative of the *Roman de Silence,* Silence consistently performs as a boy in an authentic and convincing manner. He/she masters the appearance and behavior typical of a medieval boy of his/her standing. Butler notes that such appearance and behavior creates the illusion of a corresponding inner essence: "In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as cause" (*Gender Trouble* 136, emphasis original). The other characters in the romance accept this superficial identity; they believe him/her to be male—Silence passes.

Silence excels in his/her scholastic and athletic pursuits, outperforms the two minstrels who initiate him/her into that art, and, as a knight and warrior, is without peer. The narrator remarks that Silence's masculine performance and exterior appearance are nearly perfect even as a young child:

> Il a us d'ome tant use
> Et cel de feme refuse
> Que poi en falt que li n'est malles;

Quanque on en voit est trestolt malles. (2475–8)

The irony in the narrator's comment lies, of course, in the fact that the "little" that Silence lacks in order to be a boy is a small but critical anatomical detail (Psaki, *Silence* xxiv).

Later, Silence's excellent jousting technique prompts the narrator not only to laud his/her performance but also to call attention to Nurture's domination over Nature:

Ainc feme nu fu mains laniere
De contoier en tel maniere.
Kil veïst joster sans mantel
Et l'escu porter en cantiel
Et faire donques l'ademise,
La lance sor le faltre mise,
Dire peüst que Noreture
Puet moult ovrer contre Nature,
Quant ele aprent si et escole
A tel us feme et tendre et mole. (5147–56)

Carrying the shield on his/her left arm, lance poised on the lance-rest, Silence readies for the attack. The narrator notes that Silence is not at all reluctant to engage in combat, and stresses Nurture's great power over Nature to make of a *feme et tendre et mole* such a successful warrior. He proffers, furthermore, that were one of the defeated opponents to learn the truth of Silence's sex, the knight would feel "great shame" that a tender woman had beaten him:

Tels chevaliers…
…grant honte en peüst avoir
Que feme tendre, fainte et malle,
Ki rien n'a d'ome fors le halle,
Et fors les dras et contenance,
L'eüst abatu de sa lance. (5157/5160–4)

In spite of Silence's success as a knight and his/her masculine tanned complexion, dress, and appearance, for the narrator Silence remains a woman. In the immediately preceding lines the narrator has described Silence's aggressive (masculine) jousting technique that betrays no hint of femininity, yet Silence's convincing performance and exterior do not alter her female nature in the narrator's mind. Thus, were a defeated knight to learn the truth of "her" identity, the knight would be deeply ashamed to have been vanquished by a woman.

The narrator's reaffirmation of biological essentialism underscores Silence's extraordinary, indeed, wondrous achievements as a knight, given her biological sex. But although Silence's sex remains for the narrator unalterable, we can read in his "Ki rien n'a d'ome fors" the validation of the radical extent to which Silence has been regendered. Silence passes so thoroughly and so persuasively that the "little" that she lacks becomes all but meaningless in the context of the romance: the truth of his/her identity is that which passes for true. King Ebain himself, near the close of the romance and after having revealed Silence's female anatomy, also highlights Silence's successful performance as a male. Ebain praises Silence for having been the best and most valiant knight, saying:

> Silence, moult as esté prols,
> Bials chevaliers vallans et buens. (6579–80)[46]

In spite of the traditional ending to the romance in which Silence assumes the female gender and marries the king, Silence's triumph as a male has opened a space for the possibility of heroic female achievement. Simon Gaunt affirms the empowering, feminist aspect of this message which he sees as contrasting with the poet's misogynistic subtext: "But if the patriarchal aphorism that 'sex is destiny' is ultimately endorsed, Silence's success as a knight serves to articulate precisely what the poet ostensibly seeks to repress, that is, that women may indeed have the ability to take on the cultural role of men, or…that Noreture may in fact have a good deal of power to subvert Nature" (203). Whereas I disagree with Gaunt's reading of Heldris's underlying misogynistic perspective, his declaration that Silence's achievements highlight women's potential to succeed in the male arena is nonetheless significant. Psaki underscores more emphatically the "radical premises" of the text, which she terms "protofeminist" (xxx).

However, at the same time that Silence's successes within the romance, as a biological female in a male role, affirm the seemingly unlimited potential of women to succeed in traditionally masculine pursuits, the reader does not view Silence simply as a successful female (or as a successful male). The narrator's repeated reminders, his juxtaposing of masculine and feminine pronouns, nouns and adjectives, and Silence's own comments, as well as the ongoing debate between Nature and Nurture, make the reader constantly aware of Silence's *dual* condition. The reader may, like the narrator, find Silence's success as a knight quite extraordinary given her biological sex, yet we see his/her complex, multiple identity as just that—complex and multiple. And although Silence may at times strain to self-identify as a male, or may suffer remorse for the deceptive aspect of this performance, the reader does not view him/her as either uniquely masculine or feminine. From this vantage point, the reader perceives the irony of Silence's situation and of the other characters' reactions to her performance. Moreover, it is only from this perspective that the reader can appreciate much of the humor and tension involved in the plot, as, for example, in the threat of homosexual relations when Queen Eupheme attempts to seduce Silence.

Like Silence, Ahmed, too, passes as a male. Exceeding even his/her father, Ahmed rules the household like a tyrant: "A la maison il se faisait servir par ses soeurs ses déjeuners et ses dîners…. A l'atelier il avait déjà commence a prendre les affaires en main. Efficace, moderne, cynique, il était un excellent négociateur. Son père était

dépassé…. Il n'avait pas d'amis. Secret et redoutable, il était craint. Il trônait dans sa chambre" (51). Ahmed writes in his/her journal that this harshness and severity provide a sense of strength, as well as protection: "Ma dureté, ma riguer m'ouvrent des portes. Je n'en demande pas tant! J'aime le temps que j'encadre. En dehors je suis un peu perdu. Alors je deviens severe" (58). Indeed, Ahmed becomes so authoritarian and so perversely determined that his/her own mother refers to him/her as "un monstre" (52).

Following the death of his/her father, Ahmed assumes the official role of patriarch. He/she convokes his/her seven sisters to notify them of the change of command:

> 'A partir de ce jour, je ne suis plus votre frère; je ne suis pas votre père non plus, mais votre tuteur. J'ai le devoir et le droit de veiller sur vous. Vous me devez obéissance et respect. Enfin, inutile de vous rappeler que, si la femme chez nous est inférieure a l'homme, ce n'est pas parce que Dieu l'a voulu ou que le Prophète l'a decide, mais parce qu'elle accepte ce sort. Alors subissez et vivez dans le silence!' (65–66)

Ahmed's harsh words to his/her sisters reveal much about the traditional, subordinate role of women in Islamic society, while also relegating his/her sisters to that position. In a sense, the "voice of patriarchy" is speaking here not only to but through Ahmed. Ahmed then contacts the notaries, calls for his/her uncles and oversees the transfer of the inheritance. "L'ordre régnait," the narrator states (66). This period of order, however, is brief. The instability that characterizes the entire world of this novel soon "reigns" again.

## STAGING REPRESENTATION

In the *Roman de Silence,* Silence's adolescent resolve to maintain his/her gender performance leads him/her to join two traveling minstrels who visit his/her father's castle. The narrator describes one of these minstrels as the best "jongleur" in the world; the other is a harpist. Before arriving at the castle belonging to Silence's father, the two minstrels had traveled through England and acquired great wealth. Silence's heart advises him/her to follow them, reasoning that by learning the art of the minstrels, he/she will have a skill to fall back on if he/she does not succeed in chivalry.[47] Silence thinks to him/herself:

> Avoec ces jogleörs iras.
> Por cho que biel les serviras,
> Et que tu painne i voelles rendre,
> Poras des estrumens aprendre.
> Se lens iés en chevalerie
> Si te valra la joglerie. (2859–64)

Silence not only anticipates the possibility of failing at chivalry, but foresees the necessity for a contingency plan if King Ebain were to die:

Et s'il avaient que li rois muire,
Es cambres t'en poras deduire.
Ta harpe et ta viële avras
En liu de cho que ne savras
Orfrois ne fresials manoier.
Si te porra mains anoier
Se tu iés en un bastonage
Ke tu aiés vials *el en* grage. (2865–72)[48]

Presumably, if King Ebain dies, women will be able to receive their inheritances and thus Silence would assume the female gender ("Sil avenoit del roi Ebayn/Que morust hui u demain,/Feme raroit son iretage" [2831–3]). But Silence has already emphasized that he/she lacks training in women's ways and activities ("Et tu iés ore si salvage/Ne sai a us de feme entendre" [2834–5]); he/she now reasons that choosing to serve as a minstrel would be less onerous than attempting to occupy the unfamiliar space of women.

Silence even adopts a new masculine name in this new role as jongleur: "Malduit," or ill-taught, misguided. As Perret notes, this name adds yet another layer to the bodily and linguistic transformations of the text: "La jeune fille changera bientôt ce nom neutre de *Silence* au nom masculin de *Malduit,* masquage supplémentaire et alteration plus perverse du signe" (332). Gaunt, on the other hand, sees in Silence's choice of name an acknowledgement of her true gender: "Silence recognizes her femininity by assuming the name Malduit 'badly instructed' when she runs away to become a *jongleur* (3175–9)" (208). Stock, who translates 'Malduit' instead as "badly brought up" (23), states that this new name reveals Silence's inner turmoil, "her misgivings about being a sexual hybrid" (24). Stock points out moreover that Silence's success as a troubadour creates a professional and figurative break with his/her past name: "Her stint as a minstrel allows her to subvert the suppression of speech necessary to her impersonation and symbolized in her old name" (24).

Silence's rationale for choosing to serve as a minstrel is thus in keeping with previous decisions made by Silence or on his/her behalf. Silence chooses to follow the minstrels for the advantage that the knowledge of their art would bring, not for personal expression or artistic outlet. Examined in this light, Bloch's statement that Silence is "inexplicably attracted to poetry, more specifically, to a troupe of itinerant jongleurs with whom she escapes" (82) seems contrived. As throughout the romance, reason operates forcefully to influence Silence's behavior and choices.

The association of domestic space with women's space resides in the forefront of Nature's earlier description of proper femininity. When trying to convince Silence to assume her natural female gender, Nature commands Silence to remain indoors, sewing:

Va en la cambre a la costure,
Cho violt de nature li us. (2528–9)

Clearly, in contrast to the limited space and activity of the medieval lady, the minstrel would occupy a very privileged position—a position with tremendous freedom of movement that would have been virtually unknown for a lady in feudal society. The medieval jongleur traveled freely from castles to public squares to outdoor festivals and gatherings. He diffused literary works as he enjoyed great public popularity, and occasionally great wealth. Drawing parallels between Silence's role as a jongleur and similar roles played by other medieval protagonists, Labbie emphasizes the freedom brought by this disguise, locating it outside both the private and public spaces:

> Disguised as a jongleur, her face stained with nettle juice, Silence dons an additional mask and enters an intermediate realm between the private, domestic 'feminine' space and the public, wordly 'masculine' space, while disavowing her noble status. Here she is able to express her complex self, unrestricted by the cultural regulations of the public and private realms. Like her textual peers Tristan and Nicolette, Silence finds liberation in the open role of the traveling, apparently rootless jongleur. (70)

However, the minstrel's position of power and relative wealth was by no means free of risks or dangers. In the *Roman de Silence,* Silence's fellow jongleurs and original teachers become so jealous of his/her success in their art that they begin to plot secretly against him/her. In general, itinerant artists often struggled to secure regular employment and frequently lived a marginal and difficult existence, as Xavier Darcos, Jean-Pierre Robert and Bernard Tartyre explain in *Le Moyen Age et le XVIe siècle en littérature:*

> On sait la vie aventureuse et précaire que menaient les artistes itinérants. Rares étaient ceux qui parvenaient a trouver une sécurité matérielle durable en s'attachant au service de riches aristocrates dont ils devenaient les 'ménestrels'. Pour la plupart, ils étaient livrés aux caprices d'un public toujours changeant et aux incertitudes de leur incessant vagabondange de village au château. Entre deux spectacles, on les retrouvait aussi dans les tavernes les moins recommandables où ils s'étaient forge une solide reputation de joueurs, buveurs et tricheurs. (141)

Silence's initially seemingly easy solution to his/her problematic gender identity appears less simple and straightforward in light of this dangerous and unsavory atmosphere. Instead of exchanging a risky gender performance for a proper profession, Silence's decision to join the *jongleurs* exchanges one kind of marginal existence for another. Furthermore, the artificial or deceitful aspect of Silence's gender performance finds its own parallel in the explicit staging of alternative realities that lies at the heart of minstrelsy, storytelling and theatrical performance.

The term *jonglerie* originates from the Latin *ioculari* which is defined in medieval French as "'playing tricks,' 'joking,' or 'singing songs'" (Cooper 349). Cooper also notes that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, *jonglerie* frequently occurred interchangeably with *jenglois,* which derives from the Latin *iactare* and means "idle or empty speech" (349). "In either case," Cooper states, "playing tricks, joking and empty speech all have

one thing in common—the use of signs or symbols to point to that which is not there, to indicate absence" (349). For Cooper, Silence as jongleur embodies the poetic ideal: "that perfect emptiness which poetic language approaches (the unseen female body, the unheard female voice)…. In *jonglerie,* Silence represents the maximum: self-contained, self-generated, she is harmony and consonance, the perfect union of desire and the expression of desire—all that is impossible to be said" (350). Thus, whereas Cooper introduces the term *jonglerie* with references to its association with trick-playing, joking and frivolous speech, she ultimately abandons such images in favor of a more idealized reading of Silence's role as a jongleur as a representation of poetic harmony and union.

Similarly, Bloch also emphasizes the commonalities between minstrelsy and poetry, between the troubadour and the poet. For Bloch, the troubadour or trouvère, like the lover, and like the poet himself, expresses the tension between the seduction of the unnamed or unspoken and the desire for proper naming. Referring to Cador's courtship of Euphemie, Bloch states: "It is silence or that which is not said that nourishes passion…. The chiasmically impossible effects of speech withheld make the lover analogous to the poet.

The desire of the lover is a desire to speak, to avow, just as the desire of the poet is to break silence—and to speak of Silence" (89–90). Likewise, the troubadour desires to speak, "to fill the silences or 'trous' in speech" although Bloch stresses that rather than being motivated by sexual desire, the troubadour's interests are largely financial: "If the trouvère is the one whose invention fills holes, it is the holes in his own pocket that he would like to fill. 'Trouver'—'to find,' 'to invent'—also means 'to earn.' There is literally no profit in silence…" (90–1). Bloch concludes by stating that poetry and money both also represent the possibility of an independent or autonomous invention, "the possibility of self-creating, purely specular and speculative value whose very lack of origin signals the impossibility of reproduction or genealogical succession" (92). Silence too, of course, creates or engenders him/herself in a literal manner within the romance, as Bloch notes: "Like the counterfeiter, she engenders herself, becomes, in the final account of her adventures, the author of her own tale" (93). This unattached, unnatural and unreproducible act of self-creation constitutes, then, for Bloch, the essence of the analogy between money, poetic invention and Silence's own engendering.

Surely, however, Silence's role as a jongleur further underscores the performative aspect of his/her transvestism as it incorporates the themes of essence and construction, reality and fantasy. Labbie highlights this parallel: "In a textual move that further foregrounds the performative nature of gender categories Heldris narrates Silence's decision to become a jongleur—literally to make the self into a performing object…" (70).[49] As the cross-dresser enacts his/her gender, he/she constructs his/her identity. Similarly, as the minstrel or performing artist stages his or her own visions, he or she creates new realities through this very performance.

The intersection between the concepts of performativity and performance, or theatrical practices, has a long and rich philosophical history.[50] Since the publication in 1962 of the collected seminars on performativity by the British philosopher J.L.Austin, *How to Do Things with Words,* the implications of these intersecting terms has been of considerable interest to critical thinkers.[51] Although Austin limited his own work to nontheatrical performativity, separating ordinary speech-act performances from the actor's citational practices, Derrida has emphasized the "general citationality" common to both:

"Both…[are] structured by a generalized iterability, a pervasive theatricality common to stage and world alike" (Parker and Sedgwick 4).[52] The degree of agency of the speaker may vary considerably, as may the space of reception or gaze on the receiving end of the act, depending on whether the speaker is an actor on stage or an "ordinary" person making an ordinary speech-act, yet the performativity of the act does not necessarily vary. In both instances, performative utterances or acts do something as they are spoken or enacted. Furthermore, this performativity raises larger epistemological questions.

Butler notes that the performative aspect of gender identity challenges the idea of a prediscursive, interior essence or "reality." Speaking of the acts and behaviors that constitute a given gender identity, Butler states:

> Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (136, emphasis original)

This lack of ontological status in turn poses questions regarding whether there is an essential truth or identity. For Butler, the answer is a resounding negative. The performativity of gender roles creates the illusion of an interior essence, yet this illusion is "an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse,…an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (*Gender Trouble* 136). Butler sees in this illusion of an interior essence an effective mechanism by which the "political regulations and disciplinary practices" that govern and produce obligatory heterosexuality are displaced from view (136).

Within the narrative of the *Roman de Silence,* the explicit performativity of Silence's gender role enables the reader to see through these traditionally displaced regulatory practices and view the self-conscious construction of gender within this culture. The transparency of this construction elucidates the illusory quality of the myth of interiority, and forces the reader to question the underlying assumptions regarding essence and an inner self or core. Silence's performance as a jongleur further foregrounds the themes of performativity and autoconstruction, and presents the possibility of a multiplicity of identities through a multiplicity of narratives. At the same time, the persis-tent anxiety that runs through the romance in Silence's own reactions to his/her indeterminacy and in Nature and Nurture's ongoing debate reveals that such openendedness and instability threaten the stability of the dominant culture.

In *L'Enfant de sable,* Ahmed too becomes a performer, but his/her introduction into this new role occurs in a substantially less intentional manner than does Silence's. One hot evening, while sitting alone on the terrace of the only café in an unnamed city, a mysterious old woman, Oum Abbas, approaches Ahmed: "Elle me dit: 'Un des compagnons du Prophète m'a mis sur tes pas. Cela fait longtemps que je suis a ta recherche. Ne dis rien. Laissemoi deviner ta parole'" (117). She interrogates Ahmed as to his/her true identity and then leads him/her to the *cirque forain* located beyond the city limits. The old woman invites Ahmed to perform in this traveling circus troupe which she

and her son own and operate. At this point, Ahmed begins to perform as a drag queen in the circus, replacing the star actor in the troupe who must retire because his wife is jealous of the amount of time that he has been putting into his shows. Thus Ahmed, who takes the stage name of Zahra Amirat Lhob, "princesse d'amour," retains his/her public male gender but now begins to perform as a man impersonating a woman.

Abbas, the son of Oum Abbas and the proprietor and director of the circus, perceives Ahmed as a biological female. He creates a new act that he envisions as particularly successful and titillating, as he explains to Ahmed:

> Tu te déguises en homme a la première partie du spectacle, tu disparaîtras cinq minutes pour réapparaître en femme fatale… Il y a de quoi rendre fou tous les hommes de l'assistance. Ça va être excitant…, je vois ça d'ici…, un vrai spectacle avec une mise en scène, du suspens et même un peu de nu, pas beaucoup, mais une jambe, une cuisse…, c'est dommage, tu n'as pas de gros seins. (121, ellipses original)

In contrast with the cross-dressed performance that Ahmed has lived throughout his/her childhood and young adulthood in which passing was the ultimate goal, the circus act exploits the tension between the real and the costume or appearance without ever attempting to persuade or deceive the audience. Watching the retiring drag queen, Malika, perform his show, Ahmed notes, "Tout baigne dans la dérision, sans réelle ambiguïté" (120). Ahmed is also struck by the audience's good-natured willingness to participate in the ruse: "Une complicité unissait tout ce monde dans la bonne humeur et le rire" (120). Abbas, too, comments on the open deception of all of the circus performances and on the public's eagerness to play along: "Tout est faux, et c'est ça notre truc, on ne le cache pas; les gens viennent pour ça…; seul l'âne qui fume et fait le mort est vrai…" (120). For the circus audience, as for the audience listening to the story of Ahmed's life within *L'Enfant de sable* and the reader reading the novel, this ironic perspective creates much of the appeal of the performance.

Ahmed says that he/she assumed the role of Lalla Zahra without apprehension, but rather with jubilant happiness, in the hope that he/she would be able to learn more about him/herself, to answer the question that has plagued him/her since adolescence, 'Qui suis-je?': "Je jouais et suivais les ordres; ma curiosité me poussait à aller encore plus loin. Je ne saurais peut-être rien de cette 'famille d'artistes' mais j'espérais beaucoup en savoir plus sur moimême" (123). Whereas Silence chooses to perform with the minstrels as a sort of hedge or insurance against possible future occurrences, Ahmed's first reaction is more personal, more subjective—he/she welcomes the adventure with inquisitiveness, eager to embark on a new journey of self-discovery, to break with the past, and to search for a more authentic identity.

Nevertheless, the narrator notes that Ahmed's break with the past does not transpire without difficulties and that this requires some spontaneous improvisation on his/her part: "La rupture avec le passé n'était pas facile. Alors elle inventait ces espaces blancs où d'une main elle lançait des images folles et de l'autre les habillait du goût de la vie, celle dont elle rêvait" (127). As Ahmed creates a new "reality" from these dream images, the theme of auto-construction becomes ever more explicit. The role of performing artist and the possibility that this offers in terms of self-creation and exploration parallels Ahmed's

search for a new identity. Jean Déjeux, who emphasizes the violence of the original "injury" to Ahmed's identity in *his* father's choice of gender, sees in the drag queen circus role a further continuation of the themes of simulation and illusion: "Ahmed joue les simulacres et les illusions…. La violence des origines va être pour Ahmed une violence permanente dans ce jeu sans fin de dissimuler et de subir" ("Les Romans de Tahar Ben Jelloun" 279). Again, the performative and the theatrical performance combine to interrogate the notions of essence and truth, imitation and falsehood.

During this period, Ahmed seems to enjoy an almost blissful moment of self-creation and exploration in reverie and solitary writing. The narrator comments again on his/her happiness during this period, while stressing that although Ahmed is able to distance his/her difficult past, it continues to come back to haunt him/her:

> Docile et soumise, Lalla Zahra purgeait ainsi une longue saison pour l'oubli. Elle ne contrariait jamais la vieille et gardait précieusement pour la nuit ses pensées. Elle écrivait en cachette, pendant le sommeil des autres, notait tout sur ses cahiers d'écolier. Elle parvenait a éloigner son passé mais non à l'effacer. Quelques images fortes se maintenaient vives et cruelles dans son esprit: le père autoritaire; la mère folle; l'épouse épileptique. (128)

Removed from dominant society, in the protected, isolated environment of the circus, Ahmed is free to verbalize privately his/her own thoughts and feelings for the first time.

The nightmare visions that repeatedly disrupt Ahmed's harmonious existence, however, underscore the extent to which this happy, indeterminate state contradicts the strict rigidity of the Law of the Father. Ahmed has an ongoing sensation that the fierce and cruel voice of his/her dead father pursues him/her, expounding on the worthlessness of females within Arabic tradition: "Avant l'Islam," says this disembodied voice to Ahmed, "les pères arabes jetaient une naissance femelle dans un trou et la recouvraient de terre jusqu'à la mort. Ils avaient raison. Ils se débarassaient ainsi du malheur" (129). This voice goes on, rationalizing his own inability to bury similarly his wife's daughters and telling Ahmed that *he* had been the father's one hope. The father's voice berates and torments Ahmed for having chosen to give expression to the female gender, and threatens him with death for this betrayal:

> J'ai toujours été fasciné par le courage de ces pères; un courage que je n'ai jamais eu. Toutes les filles que ta mère a déposées méritaient ce sort. Je ne les ai pas enterrées parce qu'elles n'existaient pas pour moi. Toi, ce fut different. Toi, ce fut un défi. Mais tu as trahi. Je te poursuivrai jusqu'à la mort… Ahmed, mon fils, l'homme que j'ai formé, est mort, et toi tu n'es qu'une usurpatrice. Tu voles la vie de cet homme; tu mourras de ce vol. (129–30)

The violence of the father's binary thinking is startling not only in its blindness to the worth and power of women, but in its inability to conceive of Ahmed as embodying both genders. Ahmed's life as a male represented a personal victory for the father; as a female, Ahmed does not deserve to live. In contrast to the verbal aggression of the father,

Ahmed's vision of his mother remains ever-silent and unhearing. In death as in life, she has removed herself from her husband's cruelty by enclosing herself in a protective space of deafness and mutism. Her powerlessness is as striking as is her husband's violence.

Even within the scenes in which Ahmed happily investigates his/her inner self, his/her search for a more authentic identity runs into conflict with the narrator's emphasis on the illusory quality of Ahmed's theatrical performance. Here, the narrator underscores the transitory aspect not only of Ahmed's performance, but of all storytelling and history:

> Amis! Le temps est ce rideau qui tout a l'heure tombera sur le spectacle et enveloppera notre personnage sous un linceul.
>
> Compagnons! La scène est en papier! L'histoire que je vous conte est un vieux papier d'emballage. Il suffirait d'une allumette, une torche, pour tout renvoyer au néant, a la veille de notre première rencontre. Le même feu brûlerait les portes et les jours. (126)

The curtain that will fall on Ahmed's performance is not only the stage curtain but the curtain of time, the curtain that represents the ephemeral and unstable characteristics of all that is written or told. The narrator here maintains that Ahmed alone will be spared the destruction of this fire, and alone will survive to continue his story. Yet, Ahmed's survival seems to lie not in his/her own storytelling, but in his/her silence: "Seul notre personnage serait sauf! Lui seul saurait trouver dans le tas de cendres un abri, un refuge et la suite de notre histoire. Il parle dans son livre d'une île. C'est peut-être sa nouvelle demeure, l'arrière-pays, l'arrière-histoire, l'étendue ultérieure, l'infinie blancheur du silence" (126). As in the *Roman de Silence*, we find a persistent tension between the drive to narrate, to tell a story, and the transient and illusory nature of life that resists the limitations and restrictions of any single perspective or narrative.