Images of Romance: The Miniatures of *Le Roman de Silence*

MICHELLE BOLDUC

If the manuscript illuminations of chivalric romance are typically active and courtly, those of the *Roman de Silence* visually highlight the romance's preoccupation with language and gender.(MB)

Although the *Roman de Silence* is a demonstrably unusual Arthurian romance, it shares many features with more 'classic' romances. Both *Silence* and Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*, for example, highlight an Arthurian court and chivalric *aventure* and both involve uncommonly active heroines. However, the *Roman de Silence* exhibits a heightened interest in problems of language as well as of gender.

The miniatures that accompany courtly romances illuminate a close relationship between the text and the image. Functioning both as visual and textual structural devices, the miniatures graphically mark the important events of the narrative. The images interact dynamically with their textual environment; they not only reflect but visually establish its major narrative concerns, providing meanings that expand those of the narrative alone. In one manuscript of *Erec et Enide* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS f. fr. 24403), which I will use to represent Arthurian romance illustration, the images focus on chivalric activities and deeds. The miniatures portray lively and active scenes of life outside the castle walls. The miniatures of the single manuscript of the *Roman de Silence* (Nottingham MS Middleton LM.6), by contrast, mostly depict verbal interactions, highlighting the important dialogues which determine the outcome of the narrative. The miniatures that accompany the text of *Silence* thus exemplify this romance's fascination with language. In this essay I explore the ways in which the miniatures' narrative depictions simultaneously frame and fashion the ideological concerns expressed in the text.

THE TEXTS

Erec et Enide, although in some ways unusual, contains the more typical features of romance. An Arthurian knight in search of adventure, Erec battles

groups of knights and giants and finally wins the adventure known as 'la joie de la cour.' This romance is notable for its attention to Enide, Erec's wife, who not only reminds Erec of his knightly duties but accompanies him on his adventures, and so figures as a quite active romance heroine. Chrétien's emphasis on Enide's experiences—as a lady of court, as a participant in the adventures—confirms the romance's interest in reconciling the demands of courtly life with married love.

Metamorphoses and the ambiguous use of language are present in *Erec et Enide*, if to a lesser degree than in *Silence*.[1] For the first 1979 lines of *Erec et Enide*, for instance, Enide is the beautiful but unnamed daughter of the *vavassour*. Only when she has entered into a sanctioned heterosexual union—in keeping with the text's focus on married love—does Enide gain a fixed identity and do we as readers learn her name.

While, as Joan Tasker Grimbert notes, 'Enide's use of language and silence lies at the very heart of Chrétien's first romance,' the figure of Silence is totally enmeshed in the semantic web of the *littera* (64). Silence's identity is never certain; her name itself acts as a part of a complex semantic game. The name 'Silentius' is not only inherently androgynous, but intrinsically based on semantics and the variability of language. 'Silence' also contradicts the common function of language, as Simon Gaunt points out (202).

The narrative's focus on paradox, ambiguity, and language extends beyond Silence's name to her body. Nature creates Silence by writing those parts of her body that are destined to be vehicles of language: her ears and mouth.

> Les orelles li fait petites
> Nature, ki les a *escrites,*
> [...] La bouce *escrist,...* (1917–18; 1931; italics mine)
>
> [Nature made her ears small,
> Nature who has inscribed them,
> (...) she inscribed the mouth,...][2]

Because Silence's body is always already inscribed, it figures as a literal part of the signifying process. If, as Judith Butler contends, 'the process of signification is always material,' we may, with Kate Cooper, see Silence's body as a text (Butler 1993, 68; Cooper 346). Moreover, as Erin Labbie notes, this inscription of Silence's body places her between not only Nature and Nurture but also the essential and the constructed (74). Nature's creation of Silence through writing indicates that Silence figures as more than the object of the narrative: as a site of signification, Silence paradoxically occupies the subject position of this literary narrative.[3]

Problems of and about language, its signification and its absence, clearly dominate the *Roman de Silence*. Silence's name reveals the gaps inherent in language: Allen sees writing about silence as an oxymoron intrinsically tied to the disparity between language and its referents (104). Furthermore, the ambiguity of Silence accords well with the nature of the romance genre itself: 'Silence embodies the pluralistic possibilities of fiction whose multiple functions she assumes' (Bloch 1986, 86). That Silence can move effortlessly from female to male and back again, from *jongleur* to knight to queen, coincides with a Bakhtinian view of romance as indeterminate and semantically open-ended (Bakhtin 1–13).

The *Roman de Silence* is not merely a play of language, but of languages: the poet's project is putatively one of translation from Latin (1660–2). The use of the vernacular is, however, fitting in this gender-bending romance. As Allen notes, '*Romans* does not feminize communication: it simply tolerates certain ambiguities about gender that Latin does not' (109). Although Silence's given name in Latin, with its variable endings, encodes her with the possibility of a doubled gender identification, throughout the narrative his/her name is simplified to the vernacular, androgynous, and (as Labbie points out) stable 'Silence' (75).

The poet's claim to recount rather than to invent the romance does not coincide, however, with the extra-literary aspect of this particular romance. One might argue that this particular romance needs to be read, that the words on the page need to be seen, in order to avoid entangling the characters. Only a slight differentiation in pronunciation distinguishes Euphemie (Silence's mother) from Eufeme (the queen); seeing the different spellings of their names obviates the possible confusion.[4] The reader's comprehension is aided then by viewing the words as they appear on the page.

Similarly, the reader gains a richer understanding of this romance by looking not only at the words but also at the images on the page. The images contained in the only extant manuscript of this romance offer an extra-literary commentary on the narrative, and guide the reader's interpretation of it. The images of *Silence*, which relatively few analyses of the text consider, visually reveal the extent to which the narrative expands the ambiguous intersection of language and gender.

THE IMAGES

While I examine primarily the images of the *Silence* section of Mi LM 6, a shorthand look at those of *Erec et Enide* in BN f.fr. 24403 will highlight the uniqueness of the former. Stylistically, the images accompanying the two romances are similar: both are relatively small, and inset within columns of

Figure 1: BN MS F.FR. 24403 119R
Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Figure 2: BN MS F.FR. 24403 142R
Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Figure 3: NOTTINGHAM MS MIDDLETON LM6 FOL. 195V

Figure 4: NOTTINGHAM MS MIDDLETON LM6 FOL. 199R

Figure 5: NOTTINGHAM MS MIDDLETON LM6 FOL. 209R

Figure 6: NOTTINGHAM MS MIDDLETON LM6 FOL. 211R

Figure 7: NOTTINGHAM MS MIDDLETON LM6 FOL. 222V

text. In both manuscripts the frames of the miniatures are relatively simple, though those of *Erec et Enide* less so. Few figures people the images of both manuscripts; landscape and architectural details are minimal. There are differences, however: while the miniatures of *Erec et Enide* depict some landscape features (a stylized tree, a sketched-in ground), the figures of *Silence* are for the most part posed against a plain ground. More important for my purposes is the type of action depicted by the miniatures of each manuscript; as I noted earlier, whereas the images of *Silence* record the important dialogues between central figures, the manuscript of *Erect et Enide* tends to represent pivotal narrative actions, especially as related to the protagonists' adventures.

There are only three images in the *Erec et Enide* of BN f. fr. 24403, their importance highlighted by their patterned frames.[5] Figure 1 (f. 199r), a crowned figure, presumably Arthur, hunts the white stag with two knights. Bow in hand, his right foot out to spur his horse, the crowned figure places the horn to his lips. In the foreground two dogs leap toward the stag, which bounds up and out of the frame. In the second miniature (Figure 2; f. 142r) Erec and Enide encounter the robber knights. Enide's right hand on her heart expresses her fear, described in the text (2827). With a lance the knight before her pierces the shoulder of one of the robber knights. In the final miniature (f. 155r) Erec runs his lance through a giant's eye. The jumble of figures departs from the text: instead of Erec alone fighting two giants, several knights follow the primary figure of Erec, who faces five club-wielding giants dressed as knights.

In contrast with this sparse pictorial program, the *Roman de Silence* is accompanied by fourteen miniatures, eleven of which are narrative in form and content.[6] *Silence*'s general interest in language is recorded in the eleven narrative images that depict the interaction and dialogues of the characters rather than action and exploits. Since these images for the most part accompany speeches or monologues, they correspond directly to the focus of the written text. Lewis Thorpe proposes that these eleven miniatures were probably all by the same artist (Thorpe 1972, 6), and the stylistic details of the heavy drapery, and the repetition of clothing color and pose, support this hypothesis.

The first image (f. 188r) presents an unusual portrait, identified by Thorpe as Heldris de Cornuälle (Thorpe 1972, 6), and by Psaki as the narrator (Psaki 1997, 84–85).[7] The pose of the figure, seated before his writing desk, recalls that of an evangelist portrait, such as is found in the *Ebo Gospels*. With his right hand holding his robe, he points toward an open book, presumably the romance itself, highlighting the romance in its literal form as a written

object; his gesture in the direction of the images that follow also calls the reader's attention to the important position of the miniatures in the manuscript.

The remaining ten narrative images focus precisely on speech, on the primary verbal interactions between the main characters. Because the text of *Silence* plays on language and its absence, I have classified the miniatures in two groups: those in which Silence appears, and those in which she does not. This distinction, while artificial, yields two, albeit overlapping, sets of iconographic programs. The first set of four miniatures generally depicts dialogues between a lord and someone of a slightly lower social rank; the second set focuses on Silence.

The first four images present an explicitly unequal power relation. The composition of the images portrays feudal relations; moreover, they are based on the protagonist. Although Silence is absent in these miniatures, she is present as the subject, implicit or explicit as the case may be, of conversation.

While the text that precedes the image of f. 195v (Figure 3) presents the count of Chester confronting Cador about his love for Euphemie, the image shows a scene not explored in the text: that of the count talking to Euphemie, perhaps about her love for Cador. The image thus fills in a textual gap, giving equal time to Euphemie's feelings. The count of Chester's open left hand is raised as in a gesture of debate, while Euphemie's hand, which grasps her mantle, indicates not only careful attention to what the count says, but also maidenly modesty. With its focus on Euphemie, and by extension on her imminent marriage with Cador, this image presents the origin of Cador and Euphemie's marriage, and the conception of Silence that ensues.

The miniature of f. 201r depicts Cador's orders to the seneschal to raise Silence as a boy. Holding his red robe in his left hand, the seated Cador raises his right hand high to point at the seneschal. That Cador holds his robe in his right hand visually recalls the opening portrait of the writer figure, fashioning a link between this particular pose and a certain narrative power. The seneschal responds by raising his right hand, palm open, toward Cador in a sign of acceptance. While the image follows the description of how Silence was raised as a boy, it precedes the section in the text when Silence has reached puberty and begins to question the discrepancy between her upbringing and her 'true' sex. This image thus glances back at the origins of Silence's rearing, and so highlights the role of Nurture, as opposed to Nature, in her present male shape.

On f. 206v, the old man, monk-like in black garments, and the richly-dressed Cador talk together, both with hands raised: Cador points, while

the old man's palm is open, as he listens. The image represents the text on the page accurately for the most part: the old man, who has recognized Silence as the *jongleur,* convinces the king to conduct a private interview with him/her. The miniature, then, may record the king agreeing to the interview, and directing the old man to let Silence in.

The chancellor's confession of the switched letters to Ebain immediately precedes the image of f. 214v. The chancellor, kneeling before and pointing toward an upset Ebain, explains how Queen Eufeme exchanged the letters. Ebain sits with his right hand posed aggressively on his knee in an obvious gesture of anger. The chancellor's left arm, placed on his knee, mirrors that of Ebain. The pendant on the chancellor's belt depicts a *fleur-de-lis,* signaling his dependence on the court of France.

Conceived as a group, these four images reinforce the status quo of the monarchy, and indicate the conclusion of the romance: Silence's marriage and silent subjection to King Ebain. They serve then as a subtle thread that associates the various elements (visual and literal) of masculine authority, from the opening portrait of the writer figure to King Ebain's execution of Queen Eufeme at the end of the romance.

The second set of images offers a chronological record of Silence's life, moving from infancy through puberty into womanhood. With some notable exceptions, certain of these images, like the first set, portray unequal feudal relations. However, they serve a double function: they visually inscribe the idea of proper and ordered feudal relations as they simultaneously trace Silence's various incarnations before she is revealed as a woman. These images record Silence's chameleon-like changeability, but emphasize her final role in the romance as a subservient and silent wife.

The image of f. 199r (Figure 4) expands a scene from the text: that of the nurse interacting with Euphemie, prior to taking the baby Silence to be baptized. This image highlights the primary role of the nurse in deceiving the baptizing priest regarding Silence's sex. With her index figure, Euphemie, robed in green, points at the nurse who holds the infant Silence.

In the image of f. 203r, a young Silence stands between two figures identified by Thorpe as the *jongleurs* (Thorpe 1972, 7).[8] Although this image appears when Silence has just run away to follow the *jongleurs* to Brittany, the figure on Silence's right, wearing a gold belt tightly cinched around the waist, more closely resembles a woman. I propose, then, that the image represents instead the seneschal and the nursemaid who have raised Silence. The misplacement of this image visually distracts the reader from the portrait created within the text of Silence as an accomplished *jongleur* and, I would

argue, continues the conservative ideological program, here in terms of class as well as of gender, of the rest of the images. The woman holds Silence's hand high over Silence's head, while the seneschal clasps both hands together, pleading, near Silence's shoulder. Silence's own pose is one of sadness and shame, perhaps representing her confusion and distress about the masquerade she is living: with one hand limp in front of her in a gesture of passivity, Silence holds her head inclined in sorrow.

On f. 209r (Figure 5), framed within a vaulted architectural space suggesting both intimacy and opulence, Queen Eufeme points at the smallish figure of Silence, perhaps revealing her desire. The color of their clothing further highlights this intimacy: while Silence wears a light green cape over a red undergarment, a red mantle covers Eufeme's light green robe. Although both figures are seated, hierarchical scaling indicates Eufeme's greater importance: she is not only queen but an active seductress. Consequently, Silence's small size highlights his feminine figure underneath his masculine dress in addition to his subordinate position at court. Textually this image is framed by the interviews between Silence and the evil Queen Eufeme. Prior to the image, Eufeme protests that her previous declaration of love was only a test of Silence's loyalty to the king. As the narrator comments to the right and directly below the image, she invents this excuse in order to get Silence back into her bedroom, and the text following the image describes a Phaedra-like Eufeme who, rebuffed by Silence, tears her hair, punches herself in the nose, and dishevels her clothes to accuse Silence of attempted rape.

In the image on f. 211r (Figure 6), a kneeling Silence presents his 'letter of introduction' to the seated King of France. Silence's foot extends out beyond the frame and into the margin, perhaps signifying her precarious position, since the letter instructs the king of France to kill the bearer. This image follows the chancellor's reading of the letter to the king, and opens the passage in which the king expresses his anguish at the order. He has, the text tells us, already welcomed Silence with the kiss of peace; this image thus emphasizes the king's honorable welcome of, and his resulting obligation of hospitality to, Silence.

The final image (Figure 7) presents a naked Silence, her hands raised and open-palmed before King Ebain, who points towards her with his left hand in a gesture marked by its restraint. That Silence, listening, stands with her hands raised, palms out, may indicate her very lack of speech; this image would then present the control of both female speech and female sexuality.[9] This image (f. 222v) follows the passage in which Ebain orders both Silence and the nun disrobed, and discovers their true sex. While the miniature

presents Silence as a woman, her pubic area has been obscured, perhaps effaced. In addition, whereas the image depicts Silence as already extraordinarily pale, in the text it is 75 lines later that Nature refashions Silence's coloring, replacing the ruddiness with delicate pink and white (6674–76). The image thus presents Silence as an already entirely female woman at the time of the discovery, with not only the breasts but also the fair, pale skin of a woman. Although Margaret Miles considers that 'a naked female figure cannot communicate innocence,[but] easily communicates sin, sex, and evil,' I think it more likely in this context that Silence's nudity serves to emphasize further her dependence on, and vulnerability to, King Ebain (125). Moreover, we cannot discount the expression of surprise in Silence's gesture, attracting the gaze of all the members of court as well as the reader's prurient interest. The language of subjection is thus played out visually in this image.

How do we read these images in relation to the narrative on a global level? If for much of the narrative Silence is a dynamic, active heroine, freed from the traditional roles accorded to women, her place in the images is limited. She appears in only five of the fourteen miniatures; moreover, she appears in these five as dependent and vulnerable: as an infant, a youth, a knight to a foreign king and a lascivious queen, or a woman, stripped naked. In the remaining images, Silence does not appear at all; at best, she is only the explicit or implicit subject of conversation. The images appear to interrupt the reader throughout the narrative to issue a visual reminder of what will be the romance's concluding message: women are to submit, in silence, to the authority of masculine and, as Kathleen Blumreich emphasizes, heterosexual power structures (58). However much *Silence* may be a proto-feminist story of gender bending and crossdressing, the conclusion toward which the images point is predetermined, traditional, and even doctrinal (Jewers 91–92). Her conclusive silencing at the end strips away her (masculine) autonomy and her voice and, as Gaunt claims, 'firmly [reinstates] the status quo' (203). As an ensemble, these images reveal then that Silence is subject not only to King Ebain at the end of the story, but also to the narrator, author, and reader.

This illustration of the changing iconography of the miniatures and their relationship to the highly flexible genre of romance suggests that the images function as ideological guideposts. They do not transparently reflect the narrative of each text, but are themselves dynamic agents in shaping and revealing important concerns and ideological processes of the narrative. The miniatures thus simultaneously echo and establish the principle ideological concerns of the narrative. Moreover, the difference in the miniatures' narrative

depictions may indicate the changing nature of romance. The action-packed images of *Erec et Enide* accentuate the reading of this twelfth-century romance within the traditional confines of the genre. The images reaffirm the standard Arthurian notion that a good knight is characterized by serving a glorious lord, doing brave battle, and loving a beautiful lady, as witnessed in Chrétien's other works. The miniatures that accompany the surprising thirteenth-century romance of *Silence*, with its fascination with problems of language and gender, record conversations, and as a consequence appear more self-reflexive.

The miniatures of *Silence* not only serve as visual signs of this romance's *jeu* of language and polyvocality, but may also indicate a shift of interest toward a different kind of text. The images of *Silence* form an iconographic link with another genre, the judgment poem, which reaches its apogee in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Like the images of *Silence*, the images that accompany debate or judgment poems generally depict the debaters in static poses, in the midst of their verbal exchange.[10] In this way, the iconographic correlation of the images of *Silence* and that of debate poems may offer yet another indication of generic shifts within this romance.[11] Certainly the long debate of Nature, Nurture, and Reason (2500–2624), and the counsel given to the king of France after he has received Eufeme's altered letter (4531–4873), underscore the presence of the debate form already present in the text of this romance. This interest in language thus places *Silence* not only in the line of allegorical romances of the thirteenth century such as the *Roman de la Rose* but also in that of the judgment poems of Guillaume de Machaut and the love debate poems of Christine de Pizan.

In the end, these narrative images visually record speech acts, and highlight the romance's enormous interest in language. These images reenact a Derridean *passe-partout*, creating an additional frame of visual commentary on language within the manuscript (Derrida 1–13). More importantly, they are not simply marginal, but central to our understanding of the romance. To rephrase Bloch, the images transform the problem of indeterminacy by accentuating the perceptual and cognitive problem of seeing, reading, hearing, or speaking Silence (Bloch 1986, 98). *Silence*'s narrative images thus visually reenact the ambiguity of language at the heart of the romance.

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Michelle Bolduc is Assistant Professor of Humanities at the University of Arizona. A Fulbright scholar, she explores the relationship of text and image in Old French and Occitan manuscripts.

NOTES

1 In both romances the reshaping of appearance, and thus of social standing, figures prominently.

2 All quotations from the *Roman de Silence* are from Roche-Mahdi's edition; English translations are from Psaki.

3 As Peter Brooks writes, 'Signing or marking the body signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story. The signing of a body is an allegory of the body become a subject for literary narrative—a body entered into writing' (2–3).

4 However, Eufeme's name also changes in the narrative. In the beginning of the romance, she is known as 'Enfeme,' whose homophonic relationship with the related Old French *infame* and *enfamer* indicate a possible pejorative connotation of her name (Jewers 99).

5 A description of the manuscript can be found in Micha, 50–1. The images also appear in Busby, et al., figures 82, 83, and 84, pp. 290–91.

6 The remaining images include three creature portraits and an image of Merlin that, as I have argued elsewhere, may derive from the bestiary tradition. Close in proximity, the creature portraits appear near the end of the romance and signal the conclusion to the narrative: the reestablishment of royal and patriarchal power. Although Thorpe includes the portrait of Merlin (f. 221r) with the narrative images (6–8), I believe that it more properly belongs with the three creature portraits, since Merlin, like the creatures, appears static and isolated from any narrative context (Bolduc 194–96).

7 As Sylvia Huot notes, authorship was not an important component of vernacular literature before the fourteenth century; even Chrétien's works do not introduce him literally or visually as the author (Huot 1987, 39–40). This image of an otherwise unknown writer, Heldris de Cornuälle, is thus unusual. If, however, one considers the initial portrait as an image of the narrator rather than the author, one might speculate further that the other miniatures are meant to be seen as emanating from the narrator, and read the images as visual counterparts to the narrator's textual bombast.

8 Psaki recently made the intriguing suggestion to me that the two figures with Silence may represent the male and the female genders, and thus the adolescent Silence's dilemma (ll.2625–84).

9 As Edith Joyce Benkov remarks, 'much of medieval literature seems to have as its subtext that women's speech must be carefully controlled.[...F]emale discourse, like female sexuality, could be a genuine threat to established order (whether husband or king)' (245).

10 See, for instance, the image that accompanies Christine de Pizan's *Livre du Debat de deux amans* in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale MS 11034, f. 2r. This image, and others like it, appear in Altmann.

11 Jewers notes how the romance slips between genres such as the *roman courtois* and the *chanson de geste* (98–109).