CHAPTER 1

QUEER FROM THE VERY BEGINNING

(EN)GENDERING THE VERNACULAR IN MEDIEVAL FRANCE

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THE FIELD OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE HAS BEEN THE SITE of an intensifying struggle for both self-definition and validation. This struggle can best be observed in the dialogue in two collections of essays published under the auspices of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA): *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (2006) and *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (1995) (see Saussy; Bernheimer). While each provides an ACLA ten-year report on the state of the discipline, the latter prints three reports to the ACLA and a range of responses to them. Any discussion of the history and definition of comparative literary studies must begin with Henry Remak's famous definition of the field: "Comparative Literature is the study of a literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences, religion, et cetera, on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with other spheres of human expression" (3). Jonathan Culler essentially dismisses the latter part of this formulation, suggesting that comparative literature should be concerned precisely and only with literature, rather than "with the other spheres of human expression." For Culler, those other spheres are properly the work of cultural studies, and in fact, he suggests that cultural

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studies are the purview of literature departments. "French literature," he suggests, "is obviously a part of French culture, so let French departments become departments of French studies to examine it in this way. But it is also part of literature in general, and to study it as such . . . is the task . . . of comparative literature" (121). Let literature departments study culture, he argues, and "let us become comparative literature at last" (121). But it seems to me that the two cannot be separated; as Culler argues, French literature is a part of French culture, but the reverse is also evidently true: French culture is a part of French literature. It is one of the earliest lessons of literature scholars, traditional or comparative, that no text exists without context, without a history of social significations and inheritances, or without culture in other words. There is no way to study literature without culture, and it seems to me that Culler's arguments do not solve the problem of separating comparative literature from traditional literature studies—it simply makes comparative literature specialists into comparative cultural theorists, which they already are. Indeed, it will be my argument in this chapter that the interconnected nature of literature, language, and culture has existed from the beginnings of the growth of comparative literature, beginnings we can locate in the growth of the European vernaculars that have formed the basis of a comparative literary criticism for so long.

On the other side of this debate, Charles Bernheimer, in the introduction to *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, argues for a renewed emphasis on collaboration, rather than for a clamping down of disciplinary boundaries. He suggests that collaboration "could well reach beyond literary fields to include interested colleagues in such departments as history, anthropology, sociology, music, art history, folklore, media studies, philosophy, architecture, and political science" (13). Indeed, he notes, to seek such a cosmopolitan approach is "not to abandon literature as an object of study [which Culler seems to fear] . . . but rather to suggest a fundamentally relational and dynamic approach to cultural forms, including literary texts" (13).

This expansion and evolution of the fields of comparative literature and cultural studies necessarily entails some reconsiderations. It is no longer sufficient, for example, to limit comparative literature to the study of literature "beyond the confines of one country," particularly at a time when, in the words of David Ferris, "the field reflects the increased presence of literatures other than those of its classical European past" (80). Thus, as writers such as David Damrosch demonstrate, the study of postcolonial literatures is in many ways inherently a comparative literary practice, although often dealing with texts from the same nation, and even the

same language. Because the two sets of cultures are different and produce a different literature, they can fruitfully be the subject of a comparative criticism. It is equally obvious that the study of Latino literature in the United States or First Nations writings in Canada, even when in English, are properly objects of comparative literary and cultural criticisms. Owen Aldridge's reconsideration of comparative literature fruitfully moves us away from the dogmatic focus on national boundaries that has characterized a great deal of the history of comparative studies: "Briefly defined, comparative literature can be considered the study of any literary phenomenon from the perspective of more than one national literature or in conjunction with another intellectual discipline or even several" (1). Aldridge, too, embraces a comparative literary practice that compares literature to other disciplinary objects, thus enabling, perhaps even inviting, cultural criticism.

Embracing this paradigm, this chapter discusses three texts produced in the same country, across two languages, in conjunction with the history of another intellectual discipline, queer theory. This chapter is thus most closely aligned with the thought of Susan Bassnett, who writes that "comparative literature involves the study of texts across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connections in literatures across both time and space" (1). Bassnett articulates an aspect of comparative literature that is far too often ignored—its temporal aspect. While much of the debate over comparative literature and its nature is concerned with questions of nation, language, and the past up until about the early nineteenth century, scandalously little attention has been paid to the premodern intellectual histories out of which both comparative literature and queer studies have evolved. Jan Walsh Hokenson puts it best when she laments that "truly global intercultural conceptions of literary history, diachronic and synchronic, still elude us" (64).

This concern has been probed in depth by Caroline D. Eckhardt, who points out that medieval literature as a whole is nothing if not comparative, containing, referring to, and engaging in dialogue with numerous sources both insular and continental. For example, she notes that Chaucer's "Parlement of Foules" interacted with texts from three languages and several different nations and cultures. Sarah Kay, too, notes that "theories of intertextuality of one kind or another have dominated the critical scene in medieval French studies since at least the 1960s" ("Sexual Knowledge" 69). Because their works usually comprised varied sources, Sylvia Huot argues that "the conventional romance narrator of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries mediates between his audience and a real or posited pre-existent text or texts, usually identified as books and often

in Latin" (84); this characterization is also true of the authors of those texts, and thus medieval authors were, essentially, comparative literary scholars, analyzing, interpreting, and incorporating into their own works themes, sources, images, styles, histories, names, and so on, often from several texts in several different languages. Yet, despite the fact that medieval literature is inherently comparative to a degree unmatched by most contemporary objects of comparative literary study, Eckhardt notes that the study of comparative literature today is still "frequently a presentist discipline" (141). She offers much painstakingly collected data to demonstrate the small part medieval studies has played in comparative literary studies—for example, over a period of 15 years, medieval studies comprised two percent of papers at ACLA conferences, four percent of ACLA prizes, about five percent of articles published in the journals *Comparative Literature* and *Comparative Literary Studies*, and around nine percent of dissertations (144). With exquisite litotes, Eckhardt notes that, within the field of comparative literature, "the representation of medieval studies has not been extensive" (144).

Eckhardt's work demonstrates a lack, the remedy of which offers exciting possibilities for the field of comparative studies, which I hope to demonstrate through my examination of the perceived relationships between the inception of the European vernaculars (a precondition for the existence of a Western comparative literature) and the inception of nonnormative sexualities and genders. By focusing on the specifically medieval emergence of European vernaculars in this way, I hope to queer both the study of comparative literature and queer studies. I wish to suggest, contra Culler, that the study of comparative literature is inevitably bound up with cultural discourses and has been so from the very beginning. My analysis is also based on the possibilities for a comparative literary practice not across national lines but across cultural ones, as proposed by Bassnett. Finally, I wish to demonstrate that the greater inclusion of medieval studies within the field can open up new areas of inquiry and lay bare some of the historical processes that accompanied the rise both of the possibilities of a comparative literature and of nonnormative sexualities within the European imaginary. I hope as well to queer queer studies in two important ways. First, queer studies focused on postmedieval eras (as is the case with the vast majority of work in queer studies) have also been slow to recognize the importance of the medieval to their projects; while many medievalists have engaged fruitfully with queer and gender theories and the history of sexuality,[1] queer theorists focused on more modern eras have resisted looking back to the medieval, ever since Foucault's assertion that homosexuality as a discursive cultural phenomenon (as opposed to

individual homosexual acts) did not exist in the Middle Ages, an assertion strongly and ably challenged by many medievalists. This chapter will show that medieval French writers thought and worried and theorized about homosexuality a great deal, at a time when such thoughts were supposedly "impossible"; indeed, they focused not only on discrete homosexual acts but also on a social phenomenon they perceived as sufficiently widespread to endanger their heteronormative cultural framework. Second, postmedieval queer studies in North America have had an undeniably Anglocentric vision[2]—by focusing on French texts I hope to demonstrate, to scholars working on queer studies in postmedieval contexts, the possibilities inherent in a comparative queer studies as well.[3]

This chapter, then, will focus on the perceived relationship between the growth of the European vernaculars (a necessary condition for comparative literary practice) and the proliferation of unorthodox sexualities and genders in three French medieval literary works. This chapter, it should be noted, uses not a comparative linguistic approach but a comparative literary and cultural one. Because my comparisons are thematic and my texts largely unfamiliar to nonmedievialists (not many of whom will be familiar with Latin and Old French), I examine them largely in translation to show how their authors pictured the relationship between linguistic and sexual queerness and between the rise of nonnormative sexualities and the very possibilities of a comparative literature.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first discusses Alanus de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae* (*The Plaint of Nature*) and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, works that contain polemics against nonnormative sexualities; whereas Alanus also argues against the rise of the vernaculars, de Meun welcomes the linguistic and creative indeterminacy they offer. Both represent a tradition that conflated language, genealogy, sexuality, and gender, and a direct line of influence can be traced from Alanus to de Meun. The second section considers the *Roman de Silence*, a manuscript that, while isolated physically from the other two, is thematically similar to them and participates in the same tradition of conflating sexuality, genealogy, and language. I then conclude with some thoughts on the ways in which these texts relate to present understandings of queerness and comparative literature.

Vernacular Indeterminacy, Vernacular Power

Alanus de Lille was a scholar generally acclaimed by his contemporaries as a genius of profound intellectual range and learning, both of which are demonstrated in the way he synthesizes his society's discursive linking of sexuality with language into a theory of degeneration. Alanus was both a

master of the arts and, in the words of Barbara Newman, "a theologian profoundly concerned with the relationship between the 'queen of sciences' [rhetoric] and her handmaids" (66). He was also deeply concerned with questions of orthodoxy in society and religion (Newman). Upon his retirement, he became a monk at Cîteaux.

Alanus's *De Planctu Naturae* begins with a dreamer falling asleep; as he sleeps, Nature personified appears to him and begins to lament the things that have begun to fall away from perfection in the world. The poem resolves itself immediately into a polemic against homosexuality; it begins, "I turn from laughter to tears, from joy to grief, from merriment to lament, from jests to wailings, when I see that the essential decrees of Nature are denied a hearing . . . when Venus wars with Venus and changes 'hes' into 'shes' and with her witchcraft unmans man." And, a paragraph later, "the active sex shudders in disgrace as it sees itself degenerate into the passive sex. A man turned woman blackens the fair name of his sex" (Alan of Lille 67–68).

For Alanus de Lille, language and sexuality are intricately bound together because all patterns of gender, sexuality, and language originate with Nature. He approaches his discussion through the figures of Venus and Nature, a Nature whom Alanus, unlike his predecessors in the tradition, sexualizes in such a way that she becomes more suitable as the übermatrix of heterosexuality (see Newman 67). When God created the universe and all living things, he assigned Nature the job of ensuring the continuation of every species by ensuring that "like things . . . should be produced from like" (145). Thus language, too, should remain faithful to its original image, which for Alanus, is Latin. Nature, though, soon tires of her job and appoints Venus to take her place. It is when Venus, too, tires of her job and has an affair to pass the time that man begins falling away from the rules laid down by Nature. Here we begin to see most clearly Alanus's conflation of sexuality and language.

Nature, describing the delegation of her role to Venus, explains that she taught Venus the art of grammar and also "which procedures in the art of Grammar she should adopt . . . and which she should reject as irregular and unredeemed by any excusing figure" (156). Venus was to be guided by the rules of grammar in her construction and perpetuation of the sexual union and the procreation of species. Nature's plan centers on two genders, the masculine and feminine, that comprise the domain and limits of both sexuality and language for Alanus.

Alanus most often uses grammatical metaphors to describe man's deviation from the sexual and gender roles laid down by Nature, and specifically homosexuality. According to Alanus's construction, man's role is the

active and woman's the passive. Grammatically, the man is the subject of a sentence and the woman is the object. The active must never be allowed to become passive or vice versa—the roles of man and woman must never be interchanged. Gender and language for Alanus are ways of ordering the world and each other; the relationship between the sexes is crucial to his understanding and explication of language, at the same time that language and grammar are instrumental in discussing the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality.

This conflation of language and sexuality perhaps comes about as a result of what R. Howard Bloch refers to as "the coincidence of the linguistic and the social" (*Etymologies* 18) at this period in history, noting that there was "a long and respected Latin and vernacular tradition according to which Nature, writing, and sexual difference are allied" ("*Silence*" 83). Language and humanity in the milieu of *De Planctu* were considered connatural and inextricably linked. Language, a necessary condition of human society, was held to be proper only to man. Refinement of speech was synonymous not only with rhetorical excellence but also with reason itself. Further, man himself was the reflected image of the natural universe whose laws he embodied. Therefore, if language was synonymous with man as a social being, clearly Nature should somehow mirror that fact, and it therefore makes sense that Alanus and Nature both use language, and by extension grammar, to help understand and explain the world and its workings. As Bloch puts it, for Alanus, "the natural order equated with the social order rests upon an essentially linguistic model" (*Etymologies* 20).

However, the linguistic model to which Alanus refers is a fallen one. When Venus turns her attention away from man, both sexuality and language degenerate; sexuality falls away from the heterosexual ideal, and language from its Latinate ideal. For Alanus, Latin is the perfect language because the confusion of genders is almost impossible due to its highly inflected nature. The growth of the vernaculars, however, threatened the place of Latin as the dominant language. The vernaculars brought with them less-rigid grammatical rules and therefore greater possibilities for the confusion of genders and meaning. Language, in this fallen and "decadent state can no longer lead fallen man back to harmony with Nature and Nature's God" (Newman 67). As Maureen Quilligan puts it, language in its fallen state "makes it impossible to conceive of the proper place of sexuality within the divinely ordered chaos" (172). The possibilities of confusion and lack of strict determination seem to unsettle Alanus most. Bloch observes astutely that Alanus seems "more perturbed by the notion of irregularity than by any

specific linguistic or sexual derogation," and that ultimately, it is "the mobility of poetic language and of sexual identity . . . that represents for Nature the most potent threat to the straightness . . . of grammar and to the continuity of lineage" (*Etymologies* 135–36).

De Planctu continually stresses this relationship between genealogical structures and linguistic and sexual models. When Nature hands over her responsibilities to Venus, she endows her with two instruments of order: orthography, or correct writing guided by the rules of grammar, and orthodox sexuality—symbolized by the hammer and anvil. Both aid Venus's primary function, the continuity of the species: proper sexual intercourse provides continuity of lineage and is synonymous with correct writing and grammar, both inherently excluding deviation from what is proper. Nature herself says to Alanus,

> Since the plan of Nature gave special recognition, as the evidence of Grammar confirms, to two genders, to wit, the masculine and feminine . . . I charged the Cyprian [Venus], with secret warnings and mighty, thunderous threats, that she should, as reason demanded, concentrate exclusively in her connections on the natural union of masculine and feminine gender.
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> Since, by the demands of the condition necessary for reproduction, the masculine joins the feminine to itself, if an irregular combination of members of the same sex should come into common practice, so that the appurtenances of the same sex should be mutually connected, that combination would never be able to gain acceptance from me . . . For if the masculine gender, by a certain violence of unreasonable reason, should call for a gender entirely similar to itself, this bond and union will not be able to defend the flaw. (156–57)

Desire, then, must always be subject to reason, represented by grammar, lest it lead us away from the perfect paradigm of Nature. Bloch argues that Alanus theorizes that desire—which is indiscriminate and disruptive of hierarchy—and linguistic ambiguity—the mixing of meanings and the break with intelligibility—are coterminous principles that cause and reflect equally the subversion of a traditional order, both semantic and social (*Etymologies* 136). Sexual degeneration, mirrored in the linguistic degeneration of the vernaculars, disrupts the continuity of lineage, which is one of *De Planctu*'s primary concerns. The very possibility of a comparative literature is figured as degenerate and as a threat to the continuation of mankind.

This correlation is also of primary concern to Jean de Meun's continuation to Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, a text that complicates Alanus's binary gender conception. The *Rose* is an allegorical dream narrative, in which the Lover (Amant) finds his way into a garden, falls in

love (or more properly lust) with a rose that he sees reflected in a pool, encounters several characters who represent different aspects of the rose and others who represent various human qualities, and in the end plucks his rose, accompanied by sexual imagery of a much more explicit and obvious nature than the phrase that precedes this one. Unlike Alanus's text, which has been described as a homosexual narrative in its suppression of the masculine (see Kay, "Sexual Knowledge" 72), the *Rose* is a text very much focused on the joys and woes of heterosexual sexuality; although, as Simon Gaunt notes, "the apparently straight narrative . . . turns out to be unbelievably camp, while the allegorical embodiment of the Rose alternatively as a castle that one enters through the back door, or as a sanctuary in which one has to kneel down and kiss relics at times leaves one uncertain not only as to the gender of Amant's partner, but also as to whether one is reading about sodomy or oral sex rather than the vanilla sex that Nature and Genius seem to encourage" (*Retelling* 100).

De Meun's continuation is, as Newman puts it, "a vast, sprawling edifice that both dwarfs and deconstructs the original" (98). Inherently comparative in its interpretation and rewriting of the original text and in its reinterpretations of the original source materials, the continuation itself is largely composed "of translations and adaptations of two famous Latin philosophical dream-vision texts, Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* and Alan of Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*" (Kay, "Women's Body" 212) and "draws substantially on a thirteenth-century academic polemic by William of Saint-Amour, concerning Joachim of Fiore and his prophetic mode of historiography. Translations and reworkings of Ovid provide a further important ingredient" (Kay, "Sexual Knowledge" 71). Thus, de Meun performs a comparative analysis and reexamination of these source texts, synthesizing them into a theory of desire, language, religion, identity, and of course, sex.

As in *De Planctu*, homosexuality here is a crime against Nature because it does not result in procreation, and therefore is a threat to the continuation of lineages. The figure of Genius polemicizes against homosexuality as a form of narcissism, and he rages against homosexuals because they are so blinded by pride that they "despise the straight furrow of the beautiful, fecund field . . . and go off to plow in desert land where their seeding goes to waste" (324). Again in this text sexuality is associated with language, and specifically with a language fallen away from its ideal; this association is normally portrayed through three paired images representing male and female sexuality as active and passive, respectively: a stylus and parchment, a plow and field, and a hammer and anvil. For Genius, homosexuals are those who "do not deign to put their hands to the tablets to make

a mark" (322) and he exhorts the people gleefully to "Plow, for God's sake, my barons, plow and restore your lineages . . . Remember your good fathers and your old mothers . . . Don't let yourselves be overcome. You have styluses; think about writing" (324–26).

And as in *De Planctu*, a specific event causes the degeneration of both language and sexuality. Jean de Meun moves from a prelapsarian golden age before the existence of sexual and linguistic difference to a fall visualized through the castration of Saturn. Saturn's son Jupiter cut off his testicles "as though they were sausages, and threw [them] into the sea" (113). From the point of this castration onward, we are told, language and sexualities proliferate and disseminate into multiplicity. Both the proliferation of sexualities and the proliferation of languages and meanings represented by the vernaculars represent a falling away from the ideal, when all things and their names enjoyed a one-to-one correspondence. Sexuality and language are again conflated, and as Bloch notes, "the break in genealogy that castration causes, the physical disruption of the continuity of lineage, is directly associated with a radical problematization of the nature of verbal signification . . . Saturn's mutilation entails a break in genealogical continuity, a disruption . . . that is indissociable from semiological dispersion, a break with the fixity of signs implying, in turn . . . indiscriminate sexuality" (*Etymologies* 138, 140). This conflation can be seen most clearly in the debate between the Lover and Lady Reason. The association of sexuality with the vernaculars is the reason the debate between the two, what Bloch calls "a drama of desire and seduction," can be couched in terms of an argument about linguistic propriety (*Etymologies* 138).

The fact that Reason and the Lover are debating Reason's use of the words *viz* [prick] and *coillons* [balls] points "to the close identification of the directness of a proper appellation and the continuity of generation" (Bloch, *Etymologies* 139). The Lover chastises Reason for using such a crude word. She responds that she can call things by their proper names because, since everything in God's creation is part of his divinity, there can be no harm in using the proper name for a thing. The conflation of proper sexuality and proper language is represented perfectly here; the word *coillons* "possesses grammatical rectitude and is the very instrument of generation; the straightness of proper signification and of linear descent are conjoined" (Bloch, *Etymologies* 139).

The vernacular in this work is clearly associated with the possibilities for confusion inherent in a fallen language. The Lover and Reason argue over the multiple meanings a word may have and the multiple words that may be used to refer to the same thing. Reason complains that women go around referring to testicles as "purses, harness, things, or prickles, as if

they were thorns . . . One should not take whatever one hears according to the letter" (136). Meaning, in other words, like sexuality, has disseminated and proliferated to the point that both are utterly confused. The indefinite nature of the vernaculars, and language in general, is reflected in Reason's highly ambiguous discourse itself. On the one hand, she affirms the importance of linguistic propriety: she says, "How would I dare not to name the works of my Father properly?" But, on the other hand, she maintains the ultimately contingent nature of all verbal signs: she says, "Although God made things, at least he did not make their names; . . . not, at least, the names that things have now" (135). She simultaneously supports a doctrine of names proper to things and one of pure convention or arbitrariness. She is inconsistent in thought and behavior, representing the state that was so horrifying for Alanus, namely indeterminacy.

Again, this degeneration of language, represented in the proliferation and confusion of meanings inherent in the vernaculars, is conflated with the degeneration of sexuality from its heterosexual, procreative ideal. Where *De Planctu* displays an anxiety over the growth of vernaculars, though, the *Rose* seems to welcome the semiological dispersions they offer. While Saturn's castration entails a disruption of lineage, the break with the fixity of signs it represents becomes a source of creativity for de Meun, and he uses the possibilities offered by the vernacular to drive his text. The very allegory of the rose, and of the Lover's sac, walking stick, and plucking of the rose, are made possible by the proliferation of meanings—puns, double entendres, gender-neutral names, and so on—inherent in the vernaculars. The text itself, Bloch argues, is a "directionless, never-ending, ever-supplemental, seemingly tumurous, multiform . . . text that, like Faux-Semblant [False Seeming], is difficult to pin down because it incarnates the very undefined principle of semiotic and sexual indeterminacy, free-floating desire, the abrogation of the rule of family and of poetic form" (*Etymologies* 141).

In the *Rose* the vernacular becomes a positive source of creativity and linguistic play at the same time that it is used to undercut the courtly conception of love subscribed to by the Lover. Both the *Rose* and *De Planctu* conflate sexuality and language and associate degenerate sexuality with degenerate language. The idea of the vernacular in both texts works to create the concept of normative sexuality by hearkening back to a time when both sexuality and language were unfallen and when all things and their names enjoyed a one-to-one correlation. The *Rose*, because it displays a more tolerant attitude to the vernacular, if not to deviant sexuality, is able to go a step further and use the idea of the vernacular to create the category of normative masculinity as well. Jean de Meun moves beyond

Alanus's simple man-woman binary by discussing more fully the idea of the eunuch. For Alanus, the eunuch was effectively a nonentity, a neutral grammatical construction. For de Meun, the eunuch is a third term fully realized in itself, introducing a split within the male term of the binary, which produces the eunuch as an offshoot of "man."

Genius says of the eunuch, "We are certain that castrated men are perverse and malicious cowards because they have the ways of women" (329). The eunuch is not only not-man but also womanish. This has an important resonance because, throughout this text, it is stressed not only that women are inferior to men but also that language and creativity are specifically male prerogatives. Procreation, potency, language, and power all come together in Genius, thereby conflating themselves into a purely masculine matrix. Nature, for example, has a great deal of power, but she remains dependent on Genius, and he has definite authority over her; at one point he commands her to remain within her forge. Only in the figure of Genius, under the sign of the male, do language, power, and procreation come together, and so the category of normative male defines itself here against women, homosexuals, and eunuchs.

These two texts, then, have several things in common. Both acknowledge the potential fluidity of gender and sex roles. While Alanus calls for strictly defined genders and sexuality, the very existence of homosexuality forces him to acknowledge the possibility that these roles can be subverted, as, indeed, can linguistic realities; he himself cannot, of course, write his text without recourse to the passive tense and without linking male grammatical terms to male grammatical terms, as is in fact proper (he . . . his, Natura . . . her, etc.). Likewise de Meun, while lamenting the homosexual's predilection for plowing barren fields, must accept the fact that Nature's plan can be subverted through the exercise of free will. De Meun, however, does not exhibit the same anxiety with regard to the vernacular that Alanus does. While using the possibilities of the vernacular to promote a normative concept of heterosexual love, he employs those same possibilities and potential confusions to lend energy and creativity to his text.[4] For de Meun, writing in the vernacular, the possibilities of a fallen language are also a source of excitement rather than simple anxiety.

Performative Language and the Performance of Silence

By the time the *Roman de Silence* was written, then, there was an established literary tradition that saw genealogy, sexuality, and language as intricately interconnected. *Silence*, written by someone who self-identifies as Heldris of Cornwall, continues to interweave these concepts, and Bloch in fact suggests that this romance "reads in many places like

a vernacular version of Alain's *De Planctus [sic] Naturae* which its author most certainly knew" ("*Silence*" 84). Newman agrees that Heldris, whoever she was, "knew *De Planctu Naturae* and may have known the *Roman de la Rose*" (123).

At the beginning of this story, the King makes a law that women will no longer be able to inherit. This challenges the laws of primogeniture, and it is with this threat to genealogical institutions that gender confusion enters the poem. Silence is the first child born to her parents, and in order to protect her inheritance, they decide to disguise and raise her as a boy. She goes through life as a man until the end of the tale, when the king recognizes her for what she is and takes her as his bride. At this point he repeals his unjust law, and proper genealogical progression is reassured.

The success of Silence's disguise is due primarily to two factors, namely clothing and language. One of the ways in which this text is unusual is in its denial of sex as the essential essence of a person. Here we see Nature arranging and making her materials even before she turns to fashioning Silence's physical body, intimating that there is an essence that precedes and exceeds the body, prior even to the inscription of sex.[5] The physical body, rather than being the determinant of sex and gender, is nothing more than a covering according to Nature herself. Newman suggests that this view of gender construction posits that, in fact, "Silence's core identity cannot or does not change, but a new dress and a makeover suffice" to determine her gender in socially acceptable terms (127). On top of the initial corporeal covering, then, Silence's parents place more coverings, albeit coverings inappropriate to her "true" sex. Silence's father says, "We will have her hair cut short in front, have her wear garments split at the sides and dress her in breeches" (Heldris 97). He subscribes to a fairly fluid view of gender construction in that he is confident that he can make Silence into a boy and that, if they ever really have a boy, they can turn Silence back into a girl.

Linguistically, her disguise is accomplished through her name. Her parents call her Scilentius, rather than Scilentia. In *Silence*, as in the *Rose*, the author revels in wordplay and the proliferation of meanings made possible by the vernacular. Her father declares, for example, that if necessary they will change Silence's name back from Scilentius to Scilentia; he says, "And if by any chance his real nature is discovered, we shall change this -us to -a, and she'll be called Scilentia. If we deprive her of this -us, we'll be observing natural usage" (99). A pun here occurs on the word "us," which translates roughly as modern French "usage," which means something like "habit" or "way of being" or "nature" (descended from Latin *usus*). The pun is immediately evident in the original, which reads

"Se nos li tolons dont cest -us / Nos li dontons natural us" (98). In other words, by removing the masculine ending "-us" from her name they will also remove a certain "us," or a way of being, and replace it with another "us," the "natural" and "correct" one. Silence's confused gendering is underscored here both by the possibilities of linguistic artifice and sexual artifice. The confusion inherent in a fallen language and fallen sexuality become conflated again in constructing deviant sexuality; Silence's "-us" represents both.

Such double meanings, puns, and linguistic play are everywhere in this text and continue to mirror Silence's confused sexuality with its confused elements. Later in the poem, after Nature has once again lamented that Scilentius's "-us" is contrary to Nature's "us," she tries to convince Silence to give up the whole game. Silence, though, has been too effectively gendered as male by this point, and she realizes that she cannot easily become a woman. Her disguise is accomplished through both linguistic and sartorial conventions, and her reply to Nature plays upon both. She replies to Nature, "Donques sui jo Scilentius, / Cho m'est avis, u jo suis nus" (118). These verses can be translated as either "Therefore I am Scilentius, as I see it, or I am no one" or "Therefore I am Scilentius, as I see it, or I am nude." Because her identity as Scilentius is constructed partly through the clothes she wears, the stripping of that identity would leave her both physically naked—"nude"—and figuratively and discursively naked—"no one."[6] The time has not yet come to return to her "true" gender, and so she must remain as Scilentius or literally become no one, a being without gender or place, a being without even the linguistic privilege of a name.

Fallen vernacular language and gender also interact in other very interesting ways in this text, which underscore not only their identification with one another but also the potential for fallen language and false meaning to disrupt the work of Nature. Nature's work is described as an act of writing, a literal inscription of Silence's features and gender upon her body. The narrator tells us, "Nature designed and drew a pair of little ears . . . Then with her thumb she forms the space between the two eyes beautifully . . . and traces a well-turned visage and colors it most beautifully" (91). Her work mirrors the orthography performed by Alanus's Nature, and like that Nature's work, her work is also ruined by the caprices of man.

Through language the rupture with Nature occurs, and through language that rupture is, seemingly, made whole again at the end. Silence's father explains his plan to hide Silence's gender to the midwife and orders her to proclaim that the child is a boy regardless of its true sex; because he will be among the guests, he himself will not know the child's true gender

until later. The midwife does so, proclaiming to the assembled company that the child is male. This is a performative statement in that it initiates Silence into her culture's sexual discourse as a boy, but it is a subversive one in that it is, according to societal norms, false. At this point Silence's father is perhaps more aware than anyone of the importance of gender and language in creating the culturally intelligible subject. Until he knows for sure whether it is a boy or a girl, the child remains an "it," a source of anxiety for him, suspended on the edge of his linguistic matrix and on the verge of entry, but as yet unknowable. Thus the falseness of the utterance both creates and underscores the instability of the child's queer gender.

A second performative utterance, which does not appear to be one on the surface, signals Silence's reinscription into a framework of normative gender roles. Robert Omar Khan suggests that, at the end of the romance, "the protagonist abruptly adopts the female gender role conventionally associated with her biological sex," but her adoption of that role is anything but abrupt (77). After Silence has captured Merlin, a task that only a woman may perform, Merlin tells the king that she is indeed a woman. The king orders Silence stripped, and when he sees her naked, exclaims, "We see clearly that you are a woman" (309). This seems a simple statement, but as Peggy McCracken notes it is immediately undercut by the fact that Nature has to take three days to refinish Silence's body. McCracken observes with characteristic astuteness that this description of Nature's work recalls her earlier "writing of the feminine features on Silence's newly created form and suggests a literal reinscription of gender on the body" (532). She argues that, "ultimately, Silence's body signifies 'female' [only] because the king says it does, not because it demonstrates an inherent truth" (535). In other words, the king's statement "We see clearly that you are a woman" is performative in that it reinscribes Silence into society as a woman when it is clearly *not* obvious that she *is* a woman. The fact that Nature takes three days to remake her into a woman attests to this fact. Gaunt notes too that the removal of the "-us" ending from Silence's name represents "a castrating gesture" ("Significance" 207), thus also suggesting that, in the linguistic terms of the text, she is in fact regendered rather than simply having her true gender revealed. As with the nurse's earlier utterance, it is the king's performative that creates Silence's gender. Thus Silence's gender status is again and irrevocably bound up in language and its possibilities.

Bloch, in fact, argues that this text, especially the figure of Silence herself, is almost entirely an allegory for the process of vernacular writing. He points out that she is very much attracted to poetry from an early age and excels easily at it and that Nature, in inscribing Silence's features,

"reproduces the movement of the author, whose own corpus of inscription is coterminous with the feminine body of romance" (85). The story's maintenance of a false name associated with sexual inversion also mirrors the field on which written romance was played out. The romance, Bloch argues, "is written in the interstices between nature, an assumed propriety of names, sexual difference, and the rule of primogenital inheritance, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ruses of language expressed as artifice or hiding (including silence), transgression of grammatical property, sexual inversion, and the deflection of a proper succession" (87). Cross-dressing romances such as this one, then, are based on the tension between orthography and normative sexuality, on the one hand, and the proliferation of meanings inherent in the vernaculars and fallen sexualities, on the other.

Bloch goes on to suggest that "silence represents the systematic refusal of univocal meaning" exactly as the vernaculars do (88). And, exactly as a romance or allegorical story does, Silence "wears other clothes and takes other names in defiance of Nature" (88). The important thing is not whether Nature or truth lies beneath Silence's clothing or the text's surface, but rather the very incongruity of the relationship between the body and the things that cover it, including a fallen language—this is directly representative of the relationship between vernacular poetry and the truth it purports to represent, between Silence's outer appearance and her true gender, whatever *that* has become by the end of the text.

Conclusion

In all three texts, then, we see a tradition of conflating language, genealogy, gender, and sexuality, a tradition that easily lends itself both to comparative literary studies and to the problems and issues of queer studies. Gaunt has written that *Silence* "appears to engage deliberately with problems that interest modern theorists," a statement that also applies to *De Planctu* and the *Rose* ("*S*ignificance" 19). All three texts, in fact, lend themselves almost extraordinarily to readings based on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), works that remain important for the ways in which they synthesized the history of European and North American feminist work into a gender theory of performativity and performance, a synthesis that lent considerable impetus to the rapidly expanding discourses of queer studies.

For Butler gender is a repeated social performance fundamental to the process of identity creation. Gender is a performance in that it is accomplished primarily through the forced reiterations of norms. This is not to

say that gender is something over which the individual has full control; rather, it is through being assigned a gender that a particular subject is called into existence and assigned a primary societal identity. Therefore, "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be . . . Identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender* 25). Gender occurs through the internalization and repetition of normative behavior over time, a repetition that then fixes itself as the natural order.

It is this very repetition, of course, that the first two works I have examined call for repeatedly. In those texts, proper language is determined precisely by what Butler calls its "iterability," its proper repetition over time; they view any variance from that repetition as degeneration, as they view any variance from normative sexual roles as degeneration. They both long for a world in which, as Alanus puts it, "like things should proceed from like." Yet, as Butler argues, the very fact that normative roles require continual repetition opens up the possibilities for subversion, and particularly for parodic repetitions that question normative representation. Thus, Silence is able to effectively mime a gender that is not "natural" to her; she repeats normative masculine behavior, but her repetition is subversive. Likewise, the vernaculars in these texts mirror the poetry and order of nature. However, the "fallibility" of Latin grammar, the possibilities for its rules to be subverted into gender-bending roles and for queer purposes (indeed, for Latin itself to become a "homosexual text" as has been argued in relation to *De Planctu*), and the very fact that queer identities *do* exist all demonstrate that all constructions are precisely constructions and not natural. These subversive repetitions underscore that "gay is not to straight as copy is to original, but rather as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of the 'original' . . . reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and original" (*Gender* 31). Indeed, "the persistent possibility of disruption and rearticulation" (*Bodies* 8) is what seems to bother Alanus and de Meun, and leads to the confused ending of *Silence*.

As this chapter has demonstrated, then, both comparative literature and queer studies have something to gain from a deeper engagement with medieval studies. Apart from the very comparative nature of medieval literature itself, its concerns with questions of gender and the relationships among languages allow us to view these issues at an earlier stage and in a different context. All three of these texts offer rich fruit for examination in their discussion, indeed their very linkage, of sexuality and comparative language.

All three texts are defined in large part by how they negotiate that relationship. While *De Planctu* does not bother to recuperate the fallen language and the fallen sexuality that it mirrors, and while the *Rose* finds a way to separate the two and thus recuperate the vernacular but not degenerate sexuality, *Silence* simply does not bother to separate them and thus ends on a more ambiguous note than either of the other two works. *Silence*, like the *Rose*, revels in the possibilities offered by the vernacular and is filled with all kinds of linguistic play and confusions. In the end, it does not try to recoup one and exclude the other. It therefore ends on a discordant note because it comes out of a tradition in which the reinscription of a heterosexual paradigm was par for the course, and the figure of a cross-dressing woman who retained significant aspects of her manhood, or at least refused to accept fully her womanhood, was perhaps culturally unintelligible.

Silence is most definitely not easily reinscribed into a heterosexist paradigm. The emphasis on the construction of her role as a man makes it painfully obvious that a similar process must take place before she can be a woman again. Silence hints at this fact earlier in the narrative, lamenting that she would have no idea how to play the role of a woman in intercourse because she has been a man for so long. She says, "I have a mouth too hard for kisses, and arms too rough for embraces. One could easily make a fool of me in any game played under the covers, for I'm a young man, not a girl" (125).[7] Furthermore, the text shies away from many of the romance conventions that typically end such a story. Silence is not the happy bride, pleased to be married to the king and to reassume her feminine "us." In fact, she shows neither happiness nor unhappiness, but merely does as she *must*, which is not necessarily as she *would*. In fact, she has already told us that she would prefer to remain a man because men have the better lot in life. A marriage ceremony and wedding night are also conspicuous by their absence, and Silence's body remains unviolated at the end of the text, even by the king. Silence does not simply slip into the role of the romance heroine; she remains strong and silent. From the time that Nature remakes her into a woman, Silence does not say another word. This is, perhaps, her only possibility of resistance to the heterosexual law to which she must now bow; in assuming a unitary identity, she is simultaneously deprived of the joys of language. In refusing to replace itself firmly within the heterosexual paradigm, this text denies itself the possibility of a satisfying conclusion. Instead, both its sexually ambiguous heroine and the vernacular with which she is identified fade finally into silence, into the vernacular and sexual indeterminacy of the text itself.

Notes

1. See, for example, Lochrie; Lochrie, McCracken, and Schultz; Zeikowitz; Sturges; Dinshaw; Frantzen.
2. There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule. Notable among them are Boellstorff; Provencher; Hayes; Patton and Sánchez-Eppler.
3. Again, medievalists have long challenged this Anglocentric vision. See, for example, Amer; Howie; Burgwinkle.
4. On these connections see especially Hult.
5. Strikingly, but beyond the scope of this discussion, Nurture also enters this poem later. Newman notes that although Nature is a stock figure in this literary tradition, "no text prior to *Silence* constructs 'Norreture' [Nurture] as an allegorical character" (123).
6. For several other examples of the ubiquitous word play in this romance, see especially Cooper.
7. For an excellent reading of this passage, its construction of a passive sodomitic sexuality, and its representation of "homosexual panic," see Clark.

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