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A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*

SARAH ROCHE-MAHDI

An intertextual reading of 'Grisandole' and other passages from the *Prose Vulgate* establishes Merlin as manipulator of the action of the *Roman de Silence* long before the dénouement. Both the wise old man in Cadore's court and the wise old man who helps Silence capture Merlin as Wild Man are the great Trickster himself. Merlin's laughter is anything but liberating. (SR-M)

In the rapidly expanding and increasingly sophisticated body of criticism on the *Roman de Silence*, the figure of Merlin remains strangely neglected.¹ Even where the episode of his capture and revelations is treated as an integral part of the plot, there is considerable disagreement as to his importance, the meaning of his laughter, even as to how often he appears in the story. Silence herself, as transvestite, warrior maiden and musician, has been compared with many other hero(in)es—Penthesilea, Camille, Yde, Blanchandine, Nicolette, Tharsia, as well as several saints. But in each case the comparisons only serve to intensify the sense of difference. She is not a lover, not an Amazon. She does not undergo a miraculous sex change. The names Silence and Eufemie may be indebted to St. Alexis and Eufemien, but Silence/Alexia is not a candidate for sainthood. This is significant in and of itself, but not sufficient. In the meantime, the 'Grisandole' episode, featuring the only other warrior maiden to capture Merlin as Wild Man, has not been given the attention it deserves.² It would seem that, in concentrating on undeniably fruitful approaches to the romance ranging from semiotics and queer theory to feudal politics, critics have relegated its only famous denizen and his immediate literary context to the outmoded account of sources and analogues given by Thorpe, Lecoy, their predecessor Gelzer, and, indirectly but importantly, Paton.³

The general neglect of Merlin seems due in part to the negative attitude of an earlier generation of critics. Not only has *Silence* aroused considerable hostility as well as enthusiasm, it has even been denied the status of Arthurian romance. Thorpe himself did not think all that much of the text he so

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laboriously edited; Lecoy damned it with the faintest of praise. Neither took the work seriously enough to see Merlin as anything but a convenient prop for a mediocre storyteller.⁴ Frappier's assessment was particularly devastating: Heldris is a writer with very little talent; there is no reason to include the work in the canon of Arthurian romances; there is no court of Arthur, no Round Table, no Erec, no Lancelot, no Yvain, no Perceval, no Gauvain; only Merlin is present and he does not appear until the end, as *deus ex machina* (1978, 467, 474). More recently, Gallagher has called the work 'unexceptional' and 'hackneyed' (1992, 39).

I would argue that the text has far more narrative coherence than it is usually given credit for; that if much of the lack of respect for the work comes from the alleged absence of Merlin until the very end, internal clues establish his presence earlier on. Clearly, however, many readers have found these clues insufficient. It seems time to shift to an intertextual approach. Like other, better known authors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the *Silence* poet is to a remarkable degree a poet of contexts. Without seeing Chrétien's major works as reversings of Tristan, we would never grasp their *senefiance* (Uitti 1980). Contextual reading of Jean de Meun is essential to any understanding of his immense work. Similarly, the *Silence* poet delights in turning and twisting a word, in lifting a phrase, passage, motif, plot from its context, reversing, expanding or purposefully suppressing it, and expects the reader to react. Thanks to Bloch and others, reading *Silence* 'like a vernacular version of the *Planctus Naturae*' (Bloch 1983, 197) has yielded a rich harvest. All the more reason, then, to ask what are the other relevant texts and what are their degrees of interrelatedness. Where does one find a 'system of textual correspondences' or a 'web of reminiscences' (Uitti 1980, 4–5)?

Obviously, readers are expected to have a general knowledge of Merlin from a variety of sources. By the mid-thirteenth century, his international persona is fully formed: he is omniscient, a prophet, a king's counselor, a master shapeshifter; he has an urge to live as a Wild Man; he is given to strange fits of laughter (Zumthor 1943, 196–7). We may never agree on Merlin's role in *Silence*; as he himself warns elsewhere, 'Cest gent qui me cuident connoistre ne sevent riens de mon estre' [Those who believe they know me know nothing of my being].⁵ However, an intertextual reading of certain passages from the prose version of the Arthurian romances known as the *Vulgate* leads to greater appreciation for the artistry of the poet who hid behind the mask of 'Heldris de Cornuälle'.⁶ It illuminates crucial passages as well as the dénouement that almost everyone finds so disturbing.

THE *Vulgate* AND *Silence*:

‘FLUALIS,’ ‘GRISANDOLE,’ ARTHUR’S CONCEPTION AND BIRTH

In his 1972 edition, Thorpe called the Grisandole episode ‘the only real literary source of the poem’ (14). That is a vague statement at best, and to speak of ‘adaptation’ or ‘abridgment’ is inadequate (16, 28–32). Nor did Thorpe look far enough. A second glance reveals other sections of *Lestoire Merlin* worth examining: for example, Merlin’s interpretation of the dream of King Flualis and his role in the begetting of Arthur.⁷ In the context of the *Vulgate*, both ‘Grisandole’ and ‘Flualis’ are primarily meant to illustrate Merlin’s ability to interpret dreams and to predict future political crises and their resolutions (Zumthor 1943, 187, 197). In ‘Grisandole,’ the Emperor of Rome dreams of a sow serviced by twelve wolf cubs. A stag appears and tells him that only Merlin, roaming the forest as a Wild Man, can interpret the dream. The emperor offers his daughter and half his kingdom to him who captures stag or Wild Man. Grisandole, his seneschal—in reality Avenable, a beautiful maiden—rides forth with the rest of the knights. When she remains behind in the forest, the stag reappears and tells her how to capture the Wild Man. She thinks it is ‘a marvelous thing [chose espirituels] that [the beast] called her by her proper name and that something of great significance [senefiance] will unfailingly come of it’ (Sommer 2:284). When Grisandole asks why Merlin is laughing at her, he bursts into a tirade:

‘Creature desnaturee de fourme remuee en autre decheuant & engignant sur toutes choses. poignans comme tahon venimeus comme uenins de serpent tais-toi...’

[‘Unnatural, shape-shifted creature, deceptive and deceitful in every way, as stinging as a gadfly, venomous as serpent’s venom, be silent...’]

When he laughs on other occasions, he also refuses to say why, and continues his abuse:

‘Ymage repairee decheuans poignans comme a lesne samblance de creature par coi maint homme sont ochis & affole. raisors trenchans & affiles plusque nule arme. fontaine sourians ki ia niert espuchie tais toi...’ (Sommer 2:284–86)

[‘Counterfeit, deceptive image, as piercing as an awl, false creature that has caused many men to die and go mad, razor sharper and more cutting than any weapon, smiling fountain whose waters will never run clear, be silent...’]

(Here is another likely source for our heroine’s name besides ‘Alexis.’) At court, Merlin reveals the meaning of the dream; the empress and her twelve

lovers are burned. Why did Merlin laugh at Grisandole? Because the most beautiful and the best woman in the kingdom did what no man could do. He tells the emperor to marry Avenable and never do anything contrary to her wishes. A magical inscription in Hebrew reveals what the reader has known all along: that the Stag and Merlin were one. The emperor, having defeated the oppressor of Avenable's family and restored their possessions, marries her and gives his daughter to her brother. The narrative emphasizes that the emperor and his new wife are so well matched in nobility of character and even in age (he is only twenty-eight to his bride's twenty-two) that they, as well as the other couple, live happily ever after.

'Flualis' has not, as far as I know, been mentioned in the context of *Silence*. In this very brief episode, the renowned and wisdom-loving Muslim king of Jerusalem dreams that dreadful winged monsters seize him and his queen. They are dismembered and burned to ashes, which are scattered widely. Their kingdom is devastated. The king makes the standard offer of his daughter and half the kingdom to the man who interprets this dream. Merlin, present but invisible amid the courtiers, expounds its significance. Speaking as a disembodied voice, he reveals that as punishment for the royal couple's paganism, Christian kings will invade the land and kill their children, but they will be baptized and have new, sound offspring who will be mainstays of the 'good law' and establish a new world order. It would seem that Helderis has put the monsters' charbroiling tendencies to burlesque use in Cador's dragon-slaying episode. The ravaged kingdom is also a bit like the Norway of *Silence*, although in the latter case the war is said to have started for no good reason (149). But Merlin's invisible presence and his prophecy of renewed fertility have provided far more important motifs.

Merlin's role in the deception of Igerne and the birth of Arthur is too well known to need recapitulating here. It is important to stress that there are verbal echoes of the *Vulgate* version in *Silence* and that the details are more relevant to the story of our heroine than she might think—even though she is the one to mention the episode as a shameful chapter in her family history. I would argue that an intertextual reading of this and the above passages firmly establishes the figure of Merlin as manipulator of the action and key to the meaning of the *Roman de Silence*. In the guise of the wise old man at Cador's court and the wise old man who helps Silence capture himself, he appears twice as what folklorists call a 'friendly helper' before appearing in his overt persona as Wild Man. His function is to reintegrate Silence into her 'natural' social role as daughter, wife and mother.

THE FIRST OLD MAN: THE 'INVISIBLE' COURTIER

When Silence returns to Cornwall disguised as a minstrel, an old man appears suddenly in the text, looks at the youth very closely, then tells the count that this is his son:

Uns viellars l'a bien ravisé
 Et voit bien qu'il a desvisé.
 Al conte dist sa conscience:
 'Veés la vostre fil Silence,
 Si a apris des estrumens.' (3559–63)

[A certain old man examined the youth closely
 and saw what he was up to.
 He spoke his mind to the count:
 'That is your son Silence,
 he has learned the minstrel's art.']

When Cador dismisses the old man as crazy, he goes up to the minstrel and asks his name. Silence says, 'I won't try to hide it,' but she does: she says, 'Malduit.' He responds:

'Bien sai que vostres nons despont,
 Car malduis cho est mal apris.
 Si estes vos, qu'il n'i a pris
 Ne los a vos n'a vo parage
 D'avoir mené si fait usage.' (3578–82)

['I know very well what your name means.
 Malduit means "badly brought up,"
 and that suits you well:
 such a counterfeit upbringing/falsification of custom
 is no credit to you or your family.']

'Despont' is a loaded word, denoting interpretation, analysis, textual commentary. But there is nothing obscure per se about 'Malduit.' Silence understands that he has seen through her minstrel guise and pointedly refuses to react (3593–5). If she had been listening more carefully, she might have picked up more clues from this rhetorical overkill. But she is overconfident of her double disguise. Although the count has insulted him and Silence has maintained her deception, the old man persists, transforming his story (this is not your son, but a youth who has news of him).

Silence should be more wary of unidentified old men with keen glances who seem to know too much. Cador ridicules the elderly courtier as a senile babbler using the same term [radoter] as the old man who greets Uther Pendragon's companion Ulfin by name and offers to let the king sleep with Igerne:

vn jour auint que vlfins ceualchoit parmi lost tant quil enontra .j. homme quil ne connoissoit pas. & cis homs li dist sire ulfins iou parleroie moult uolentiers...& li hons estoit uiex & ulfins descent a piet por parler a lui si li demanda qui il estoit. & il respont ie sui vns viex hons ce poes vous ueoir si fui iadis quant iestoie iones por moult sages tenus. & ore dist on de maintes coses que ie dis que je *radote*. (Sommer 2:64)⁸

[One day Ulfin was riding amidst the troops when he met a man he didn't know. And the man said, 'Sir Ulfin, I would very much like to talk with you'...And the man was old and Ulfin dismounted to speak with him and asked him who he was. And he replied, 'I am an old man, as you can see. In the days of my youth, I was considered very wise, but now they say that much of what I say is senile babbling.']

When Ulfin returns the next day with the king, the only person he sees is a cripple. He is confused, but Uther knows what is happening:

Ses tu qui cil fu qui ier parla a toi en samblance dun uiel homme cest cil mimes que tu as hui ueu contrait. & ulfins dist comment porroit ce estre que vns hons se peust ensi se desfigurer & qui est ce qui ensi se desfigure. & li rois li dist ce saces tu uraiement que ce est merlins qui ensi se gabe de nous. & quant il uoldra il nous fera bien a sauoir qui il est. (Sommer 2:65)

['Don't you know that the one who spoke to you yesterday in the guise of an old man is the same one you met again today?' And Ulfin said, 'How can it be that a man can thus change form and who is it who changes shape in this way?' And the king said, 'I tell you it is Merlin who thus mocks us, and when he feels like it he will let us know who he is.']

After Arthur's birth, Merlin appears again as an old man. Uther orders that Igerne's most trusted lady in waiting is to give the child secretly to the first person she sees outside. The lady sees '.j. homme qui moult resambloit viex & febles si li demande quatendes vous. & il respont ce que tu maportes'(Sommer 2:76) [a man who seemed very old and frail and she asked him 'what are you waiting for' and he said 'for what you are bringing me'].

I suggest that the tale of Flualis also supports a reading of the old man at Cador's court as Merlin. As a mysterious invisible presence among the Muslim king's courtiers, Merlin, the only one capable of interpreting his dream,

speaks out loudly. Similarly, the unnamed old man is figuratively invisible (unheard), as he himself complains (3568–72), among the newly affluent and the influence peddlers at Cadore's court, and it is he alone who 'interprets' the minstrel, nagging the unobservant father until he pays attention. At any rate, the result of Merlin's first intervention is that Silence is reintegrated into his family, as heir to the duchy of Cornwall, but immediately delivered into the clutches of Eufeme.

'GRAFTED TREES AND BROKEN GENEALOGIES':⁹
THE SECOND OLD MAN AND HIS PROPHECY

As far as the emperor knows, Grisandole is just another knight on a quest. But by imposing on Silence the task of capturing Merlin, King Ebain and Queen Eufeme think, to put it euphemistically, that they have Merlin by the *relics*, because here the Wild Man can only be caught by 'engien de feme' (5803) [woman's wiles].¹⁰ After Silence has wandered for six months in the wilderness, a man with flowing white hair comes and greets him courteously, then asks, "Quels bezoins vos chace en cest galt?" (5886) ['What harsh necessity drives you forth into this wasteland?'] This—as any reader of romance knows—is the moment for the hero to break down and confess.¹¹ In the always significant encounters with hermits, there is precedent for comic distancing: Chrétien has Yvain meet a hermit who is silent, unlike the chatty one Béroul's Tristan encounters (Uitti 1980, 4). Yet for Silence, the consequences are anything but comic. Although the hermit's carefully worded inquiry invites disclosure, the disguised maiden, instead of making a clean breast of things, twice claims 'he' is being made to suffer for no reason. The old man promises to help the youth capture Merlin, but first, looking closely at her, he intones a prophecy (5915–24).

It is only reasonable to assume that this old man, who occupies the same structural and functional position as the Stag explicitly identified as Merlin in 'Grisandole,' is indeed Merlin in anthropomorphic disguise. In 'Grisandole,' it is stated that Merlin is aware of all the preparations for the meal that results in his capture; as Stag, he simply let Avenable know he knew her true identity. In *Silence*, for the second time, Silence is questioned by an old man with the keen gaze of a seer; again, she does not tell him the truth. And when he is captured in his overt guise of Wild Man, he questions her yet a third time: "Amis", fait il, "com as tu non?/ Et por quoi me maines ensi?" (6138–9) ['Friend,' he said, 'what is your name?/ And why are you doing this to me?']. Again Silence prevaricates; this time, however, she brings up the previously unmentioned and pertinent bit of family history. She says

she sought his death because he deceived her ancestor Gorlain, duke of Cornwall, by transforming Uther Pendragon into his likeness so that he could sleep with the duchess (6140–54). If Silence knows this, she should remember Merlin's favorite disguise in this very episode. But just as she did not understand that the words of Cador's anonymous elderly courtier had a double meaning, that he had seen through both disguises, she is unable to decode the hermit's message here. Less virginal readers will take a second look at his words. Like an ancient pagan spell, they are divided into two parts, one past example, one prediction.

'Amis, lasscier le dementer.
 Jo ai veü jadis enter
 Sovent sor sur estoc dolce ente,
 Par tel engien et tele entente
 Que li estos et li surece
 Escrut trestolt puis en haltece.' (5915–20)

['Friend, cease your lamentation.
 I saw in olden days
 often a young bud grafted onto a sterile stock
 by such means (art/artfulness/artifice/ruse/seduction)
 and to such an end (with such an understanding of the
 consequences)
 that both stock and graft
 soon flourished and reached new heights.']

As Gilmore has noted—although her interpretation differs—this passage is fraught with meaning; the terms *engien* and *entente* signify allegorical intent (1997, 113).

Merlin, metacharacter and master of the art of writing, who 'set ja bien u li viers torne' (6160) [knows very well how the story will end], can speak allegorically on more than one level. He is playing a deceptive game with adverbs of time—the generalizing *sovent* paired with *jadis*. To be sure, he has seen it all, more than once. He may well be referring to the text he is part of: a bud grafted onto the stock of older material, producing a superior work of art capable of yielding multiple meanings. But he is also referring to something in the distant past—proverbially known as 'au temps de Merlin' (Zumthor 1943, 235)—that is specifically relevant to Silence's family tree. As 'god of paternity,' 'guardian of genealogy,' he is playing with the metaphor of the tree as 'potent image or structuring vehicle of genealogy' (Bloch 1983, 212). The image of the tree is positive, as in renewed growth, metaphorically, new law grafted onto old, as in the root and branch of the Tree of Jesse. But, as

Bloch says of Marcabru's imagery, grafting could be a potent metaphor for adultery (1983, 109–11).

There is a second key.
That is, I assure you,
why the lord wears a horned cap of cunny fur
for only by means of grafting
does his wife become round, so says Marcabru.¹²

'Spoiler of family fictions' (Bloch 1983, 213), himself wearer of horns, Merlin is notoriously fond of revealing women's sexual misconduct. The most extreme examples are in the *Vita Merlini*, where he accuses his own sister and kills his wife's new husband as if he had been cuckolded, although he had deserted her and urged her to seek a new spouse.

The specific past event to which the Old Man refers is the 'grafting' of Arthur—the very subject Silence herself will soon bring up with the captive Wild Man, who will respond that the deception was for a greater good (6155–7). The reader remembers that the Cornish stock had produced only daughters. Here is irony upon irony: Silence, raised as male, focuses on the male being cuckolded; she does not even name the faithful spouse left pregnant as a result of the rape Merlin engineered. Why should Merlin care? His own birth was the result of rape. And he will trick Igerne's female descendant, Silence.

The Old Man's next lines are in the future tense:

'Alsi pora en ceste voie
Sor vostre dol naistre tels joie
Ki tolte amenrira encore
La dolor que vos avés ore.' (5921–4)

['Thus, in the same way,
such joy will be born of your suffering (grafted onto your
sorrow)
that it will completely transform
the sorrow you feel now.']

In this second half of his metaphorical utterance, Merlin prophesies Silence's marriage to King Ebain. The barren stock will bear fruit. His interpretation of Flualis's dream, with the theme of Christianity removed, seems grafted onto the *matière* of 'Grisandole': he promises a new and fruitful order, a new *loi* or loyalty, in this case superseding the *des-loi-alté* of the degenerate Eufeme. In 'Flualis,' the pagan queen is, of course, blameless as wife and mother. The royal pair are both equally guilty—of being pagan. Once they are baptized, they are newly fruitful. Here, Eufeme is barren; Silence herself, of legitimate birth but falsified gender, is the major disrupter of paternity,

perpetrator of broken genealogy—and potential restorer of fertility to the royal stock. This is the surface happy ending to *Silence* as what Bloch has termed ‘biopolitical drama’ (1983, 195).

THE AWKWARD ENDING

The wicked queen is punished and the heroine marries the king. Inheritance rights are restored. Yet few readers are comfortable with the dénouement of *Silence*. Can we assume this marriage will be happy? Is this for a greater good? In ‘Grisandole,’ the reader is assured that the heroine lives happily ever after. Heldris’s version of the conclusion differs obviously and drastically. The heroine’s sadly banal, brutally realistic destiny is to be a young heiress married to a much older man. A politically, sexually and morally inadequate ruler ends up with a young, loyal and fertile wife who embodies the most important piece of real estate in the kingdom.¹³ No one, least of all Heldris, says she lives happily ever after. Heldris has told us that Ebain is the greatest king in England since Arthur (109–11). But we know exactly what kind of man Ebain is. Putting the phrase “Sens de feme gist en taisir” (6398) [‘A woman’s role is to keep silent’] into his mouth profoundly undercuts its effect, even though Eufeme deserves the reprimand. When Silence, in her first speech as a woman, says, “jo n’ai soig mais de taisir” (6627) [‘I do not care to keep silent any longer’], she is, in effect, already silenced.¹⁴ The last words she utters in the text are those of traditional female submissiveness: “Faites de moi vostre plaisir” (6628) [‘Do with me what you will/have your will of me’].

Heldris refuses to take responsibility: ‘l’estorie’ itself is to blame for the marriage (6678–9). The self-telling tale is the kind of ploy we expect from this narrator. As Psaki has observed, the density of narrative layering becomes even denser at the end; there is ‘no coherence to the sequence of placating remarks which Heldris makes in backing his way out of his text’ (1991, xxx–xxxii). To the double perspective Psaki has stressed, that of a ‘sophisticated tale told by a simple teller,’ I would add the double focus created by the superimposition of two (or more) texts. Here, a particular text is close to the surface: there is heavy interference from ‘Grisandole,’ which becomes extremely disorganized and contradictory at this point. Merlin reveals that Avenable is a beautiful and good woman, then tells why he laughed at others, then says that his ‘couertes paroles’ [veiled words] addressed to her, i.e., his misogynistic rantings, were

because she had assumed male appearance and appropriated improper dress.
And everything I told her was true, because through woman many a man has

been dishonored and deceived, and many a city torched and destroyed and many a country devastated. But I am not telling you this because of any malice in her. And you yourself can see very well that many a man has been dishonored by woman. But now don't bother about your wife whom you destroyed because she deserved it. Don't be angry with other women and don't think them vile. For there are many whose behavior towards their lords is irreproachable. Never in a hundred years would they dishonor their name. And all that comes upon [women] because of the sin of lust that is in them and to which they are susceptible. For woman is of such a nature that when she has the best lord in the world she thinks she has the worst. And this happens because of their extraordinary innate weakness. But don't be put out at that because there are plenty of good ones in the world. And if yours has proved a disappointment, you will have one who will be a worthy empress of such a great empire. And believe me, you will gain more than you lost. (Sommer 2:289, my translation)

He then utters one of his political prophecies. Then he moralizes his minor occasions of laughter (in ways that oddly resemble Heldris's sporadic attacks on greed) before returning to the wickedness of the Empress, assuring that her daughter is legitimate and will not be like her. He tells the emperor to marry Avenable. And after more rambling prophecy, he tells the emperor not to do anything contrary to her will. No wonder Heldris is in a panic. In trying to summarize his source (6684–6701), he is fighting a losing battle. His attempts at artistic superimposition have the effect of two pages stuck together. And what is worse, he presents a concluding 'message' that is not only incoherent but is contradicted by the tale he has just narrated.

Several critics have tried to find a way out for our hero(ine). Stock, for example, notes that the older man married to a young and beautiful bride is a 'classic fabliau plot' (1997, 17). One might also add that the marriage of a weak king to a warrior woman had already been the subject of farce; think of how King Gunther spent the night of his wedding to Brunhild. But from all we know of Silence, even if she matures enough to experience desire, she is too loyal, too virtuous to cuckold the king, let alone hang him on the wall. She will do her duty. Will she find an outlet in her music? To me, this is wishful thinking.

MERLIN'S LAUGHTER

Tel, comme dit Merlin, cuide engeigner autrui,
 Qui souvent s'engeigne soi-même.
 (Lafontaine, 'La Grenouille et le Rat')

As Zumthor as noted, Lafontaine's moral can be traced back to the *Vulgate*: 'Et Merlins li dist: ensi avint de plusors qui quident engignier autrui, si

engignent aus misme' [it often happens that those who wish to trick others are tricked themselves](1943, 235). Merlin pulls the strings; Merlin calls the tune. Although he obviously orchestrates the dénouement of *Silence*, he does not function like the usual *deus ex machina*. Far from performing a miraculous rescuing sex change on the heroine—like Isis or the Christian god who transforms those medieval heroines based more straightforwardly on the Ovidian model—Merlin entangles her further in the plot.¹⁵ As in 'Grisandole,' Merlin's role at the end is to reveal the truth veiled by unnatural language and dress, to reestablish 'straight' sexuality and feudal laws of inheritance. But in *Silence*, the elements that persuade the reader he is a genuinely 'friendly helper' are absent, and much is added that reinforces the impression that he is playing a malicious game. Unlike her sources and analogues, with the exception of female saints, *Silence* wants to keep her assumed gender indefinitely. The only possible setting in which her disguise could continue undetected is a monastery. But this is not a saint's *Vita*. All hinges on her reproductive potential. Already, in the mock nurturing of the Wild Man, Merlin seemed the butt of a jest, but the joke here was on *Silence*, who was already being made to play a woman's part (Stock 1997, 25). *Silence* is exposed as female and left to her woman's fate. In her last inner monologue, she gives voice to her anguish: not only that Merlin has out-tricked her, but that her unmasking is a victory for Eufeme (6458–60). She still doesn't understand to what extent this will be true.

In the end, we are left with Merlin's laughter. Some critics have argued that it 'explodes the poem's allocation of power by gender,' that it is carnivalesque, liberating, empowering.¹⁶ I see no evidence for this. In the *matière de Bretagne* in general, as in 'Grisandole' in particular, he laughs in a mocking manner when he is about to reveal something unpleasant about a character (Zumthor 1943, 196). In *Silence*, Merlin's uncanny, unnerving laughter heightens tension; it does not relieve it. It is the distancing laughter of a supernatural being who mocks mortals for their blindness and their futile attempts to escape their destiny. It is the spiteful laughter of one who takes particular pleasure in revealing women's secrets; it is no more liberating than the laugh that precedes his betrayal of his own sister's adultery in the 'leaf' episode of the *Vita Merlini*.¹⁷ And as coldly as he mocks the other fools, he mocks *Silence*. The fact that she had honorable motives for keeping silent is of no consequence to him. He wants to punish her for trying to trick him, for failing to read her own story, for wanting to be on top. He takes diabolical pleasure in 'righting' the situation. 'Tricheuse trichée' is the name of the game. 'Rira bien qui rira le dernier.' The eternal Trickster will

condemn Silence to take the place of Eufeme, the misogynist's version of Everywoman. But then he knows how his own story ends: he will allow himself to be trapped by one who also goes by various names: Viviane, Nimiane, Niviene. It will become another version of the sage trapped by a woman's wiles, the lust of the flesh: the misogynistic tale, eternally retold, that will soon help fuel the witch-burnings.¹⁸ No *joie de la cour* for Silence: it seems the only *joie* possible here is *Schadenfreude*. Unless we agree with the German saying on that subject, our only consolation as woman-friendly readers is that we are left with a *texte de jouissance*.¹⁹

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Even when the text is read on its own, the tension created between the opening up of radical questioning of sex and gender roles (not to mention of marriage as happy ending) and the 'improbably tidy, artificial felicity' (Stock 1997, 27) of Heldris's conclusion precludes genuine closure. Examination of the reworking of material from *Lestoire Merlin* as well as from other sources does everything to confirm and reinforce the author's subversive intent. A comparison of 'Grisandole' and *Silence* shows that much of the romance emerged from constant, consistently polemical interaction with the *Vulgate* text. 'Grisandole' begins by stressing the insatiable lust of Woman (here, the empress of Rome). Heldris's introduction is one of greed, stinginess, male violence, and thinly veiled lust, followed by a courtly prehistory of the heroine's parents. In 'Grisandole,' the heroine is the daughter of a dispossessed German noble. In *Silence*, the motif of her lost and regained family inheritance is recast as a gender issue. The emperor's genuine dream and the need to find Merlin to interpret it become Ebain's lie and pretext for sending Silence on a quest deemed hopeless because of her supposed sex. Where Merlin praised Avenable's female qualities, here he praises Silence the knightly hero, but stresses the heroine's deceitfulness as well as the queen's.

Silence has been compared to Merlin: in terms of the surface plot of 'it takes one to know one,' this is evident and the source of much irony. But the significant comparison, as Stock has noted, is with Arthur (1997, 26, 33). There are verbal as well as thematic echoes in the secrecy surrounding his birth, his being raised by a faithful *preudom* and his lady. When the man is asked literally to displace his own child (by giving it to a wetnurse), he says: 'Sire cest moult grant chose que vous me requeres que je *desoeure* mon enfant & [le] *desnature*' (Sommer 2:75) ['Sire, you are asking a very great deal of me when you request me to undo my own child and turn him away from his nature']. 'Heldris' transfers the motif to Silence: the seneschal and the lady

'*oeuvrent contre nature*' [work contrary to nature] (2254); Nature is outraged when she finds out that they are trying to '*desnaturer*' her '*oeuvre*' through false nurture (2272, 2268). Silence, although she fights like Roland, is no Arthur. She is a girl. Anatomy is destiny. Many centuries before Virginia Woolf, a writer is asking the equivalent of what if Shakespeare had been born female.

Over and over, *Silence* proves to be an antiromance. If so, what is its message? The recent German dissertation that interprets 'Grisandole' as Christian exemplum and sees *Silence* as its more overtly religious re-vision (Brugger–Hackett 1991, 158) is far off the mark. On the contrary, *Silence* is a striking example of that subversive, secularizing literature that bursts forth in the twelfth century and is an endangered species by the later 1200s. It flies in the face of the religious cooptation of the Arthurian material, the convergence of romance and apocalypse already so obvious in the *Vulgate*. It also subverts earlier romance. If the romance hero is 'precisely he who, having lived through a series of internal crises, either achieves...a balance between personal desire and social necessity or...is excluded from society altogether' (Bloch 1983, 226), substitution of *she* for *he* makes such a resolution impossible. Yvain is healed because he has that little something Silence lacks. If the 'upside-down Tristan references, like the Ovidian play in the lovesickness scene...maintain the essentially comic, or intellectually detached, nature' of Chrétien's attitude toward his hero (Uitti 1980, 4–5), such echoes in the lovesickness of Eufemie and Cador are similarly comic in *Silence*. But if Yvain's cure is also comic, Eufemie's is only briefly so, and Silence's end not at all. It seems to me that the more the reader develops an intellectual grasp of textual correspondences, the more negative her/his emotional reaction to the dénouement becomes.²⁰

One thing is certain: the *Roman de Silence* is not 'essentially about the writer's relation to writing' (Bloch 1985, 93), any more than is the *Chevalier au Lion*, the *Roman de la Rose*, or the *Commedia*. The text reflects other texts in the etymological sense of bending, causing to assume a different, unstraight, even distorted shape or direction. But this does not mean there is no message. The rewriting is too consistently, systematically focused on issues of sex and gender. The fact that Merlin subjects Silence to the prevailing cultural norms of what is 'natural' for a female does not mean that the *Silence* poet is an archconservative misogynist. Merlin is simply being true to his character, as so well defined by Bloch: guarding patriarchal values, reaffirming the power structure. I suggest the author had a far from sanguine outlook on the possibilities of liberating the female sex from traditional roles and upbringing.

In the real world, where men are on top, biology is destiny. Patriarchal society cannot tolerate gender bivalence. The exceptional woman who crossdresses and outperforms men is no solution. The idea that dares not speak its name is that society must change. This did not seem likely in the later thirteenth century. Nor is there much evidence of genuine change in these times, when we are once again in full backlash.

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NOTES

- 1 Important exceptions are Stock 1997 and in this issue, and Gilmore 1997. Bloch 1983 has much about Merlin that is relevant, but in 1985 merely notes that Merlin and Silence are ‘multiform figures’ (88).
- 2 On the female heroes, see Lasry 1982, Brahney 1985, Perret 1985. Paton’s 1907 study of ‘Grisandole’ remains valuable, especially for the emphasis on the *Vita Merlini*. I too am guilty of previous neglect, in my own 1992 summary of ‘Grisandole’ and textnote to *Silence* 6145. In an early fourteenth-century German fragment (in a Rhineland dialect), Merlin is captured by a maiden posing as a male servant (see Brugger–Hackett 1991, 207–29). This warrants further investigation.
- 3 Lecoy (1978, 110) dismisses the text of ‘Grisandole’ as unimportant while accusing Thorpe of being unaware of or neglecting Paton. But Thorpe cites Gelzer, who cites Paton.
- 4 See Thorpe 1972, 17; Lecoy 1978, 110.
- 5 *Huth Merlin* 1:68, cited by Bloch 1983, 2.
- 6 Thorpe notes that the poet may also have drawn from *Huth*, Wace’s *Brut*, or from the now lost text of Robert de Boron.
- 7 For the texts see Sommer, vol. 2: ‘Grisandole’, 281–92; ‘Flualis’, 420–1; the begetting of Arthur, 64–76. Translations are mine.
- 8 See also *Huth* 1:107: ‘Je sui uns hom vieus, et fui ja tenus pour sages quant je fui juvenes, ais on dist que je *radote*.’
- 9 Bloch 1983, 10.
- 10 Allen (1989) notes that the brutal and all too relevant fabliau of the ‘Castrated Lady’ is in the same MS as *Silence*.
- 11 Like Tristan in the forest of Maurois (Heldris’s Malroi), or Wolfram’s Parzival, who says to his hermit uncle, ‘herre, nû gebet mir rât: ich bin ein man der sünde hât’ [‘Sir, you see before you a sinner in need of guidance’] (Book 9:456, 29–30,

- Leitzmann ed. 2:94).
- 12 I have revised Bloch's translation slightly.
 - 13 See Kinoshita 1995 for a finely detailed analysis of the feudal politics in *Silence*.
 - 14 Gaunt's translation of this line (1990, 213) has caused much mischief (e.g. Waters 1997, 36); it has even surfaced in the *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (1996, 232). His reading 'I only care to be silent' goes against both context and syntax. It destroys the irony of the situation: Silence finally speaks the truth, but as Eufeme's replacement, she will be silenced from now on.
 - 15 In fact, the *Silence* poet rewrites 'Iphis and Ianthe' point by point.
 - 16 Stock 1997, 25, Jewers 1997, 107, Gilmore 1997, 122–3. Possibly an overdose of Bakhtin?
 - 17 Zumthor says early on (1943, 46), 'On n'a jamais expliqué vraiment ce rire de Merlin.' At any rate, as Paton has shown, the motif of the betraying laughter of a supernatural being is ancient.
 - 18 Zumthor remarks that for the sage, 'c'est toujours sous cette forme fatale que se présente l'amour' (1943, 248).
 - 19 On *Silence* as *texte de jouissance*, see Allen 1989, Gilmore 1997.
 - 20 This is not to deny that the work can delight, as Professor Psaki remarked after the exquisite performance by John Fleagle and Shira Kammen (April 26, 1998).