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Civilization and Its Discontents: Cultural Primitivism and Merlin as a Wild Man in the *Roman de Silence*

LORRAINE KOCHANSKE STOCK

By depicting Merlin as a Wild Man and referring allusively to Dangiers in the *Roman de la Rose*, Heldris engages ambivalently with the discourse of cultural primitivism, which expresses discontent with civilization and promotes a 'natural' lifestyle as preferable to the corruption inherent in 'nurtured' civilized life.(LKS)

Cultural primitivism is a discourse that expresses the discontent of the civilized with civilization, and the belief held by people in a highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a simpler and less sophisticated life is more desirable than that condition (Elias 3–4). It was thought that attainment of such a model human condition could be achieved by emulating some geographically distant 'savage' people who follow the 'norms of nature' or are said to live in a 'state of nature.' In this paradigm, this natural state is characterized by a repudiation of technology, luxury goods, private ownership, the profit motive, organized government, nationalism, wars, taxes, and the other social ills that ironically accompany the 'civilizing' process.¹ Medieval Europe's complex participation in the discourse of cultural primitivism is attested by the belief in the Wild People, a 'savage' group whose empirical otherness paradoxically not only helped define their very concept of 'civilization' but offered an alternative to civilization's corrupting influence for those seeking escape from civilization through primitivism.

Heldris of Cornwall's controversial inclusion of Merlin and depiction of him as a Wild Man in the *Roman de Silence* demonstrates and documents medieval Europe's ambivalent participation in primitivism.² For some readers and critics, the incorporation of the Merlin episode so late in the plot is a serious flaw.³ Against this view, I argue that 'wild' Merlin allows Heldris to participate in the discourse of medieval cultural primitivism. Significantly, Heldris's romance features the representation of the 'state of nature' as an allegorical character, *Nature*, whose rival for control of Silence, *Norreture*, represents the opposing interests of culture or civilization. The plot also

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revolves around many negative aspects of civilization that inspire a desire for cultural primitivism: greed; the tension between art, fame, and financial fortune; dynastic anxiety over inheritance; territorial and power struggles that erupt into warfare; and the commodification of sexuality and reproduction. To the received commentary that suggests ways in which this romance breaks cultural and literary rules, I offer yet another example in Heldris's controversial employment of Merlin 'Silvester' in the denouement both to explore and to expose the vexing paradoxes inherent in cultural primitivism.

However, just as primitivism's privileging of a simpler way of life is hardly simple, Heldris's engagement with this cultural model is similarly vexed. On the face of it, Heldris seems literally to endorse primitivist ideals by depicting Merlin as a Wild Man who prophesies and admirably privileges 'truth,' uncovering the dirty secrets of nearly all the civilized characters. These secrets, involving financial or legal fraud, treason, marital infidelity, and impersonation, unquestionably implicate civilization in a web of personal and political corruption. To a medieval audience, Merlin's presentation as a Wild Man certainly would register as an alternative or even an antidote to the discontents evoked by the artifices of civilization. The text's attempt to indict this corruption by personifying the morally wholesome tenets of primitivism in Merlin, however, may be a case of too little and far too late. Moreover, the salutary freedom associated with cultural primitivism and embodied in the Wild Man is restrained, even contained, in this romance's ultimate treatment of both its hero(ine) Silence and its literary *homme sauvage* and truth-seeker, Merlin. I will situate Heldris's 'wild' characterization of the Arthurian sage within the context not only of received constructions of Merlin found in a variety of medieval literary texts, but also of the mythic/folkloric traditions about the figure of the medieval Wild Man.

THE MEDIEVAL WILD MAN

Homme Sauvage, Homo Sylvester, NOBLE SAVAGE

The medieval mythic 'Wild Man of the woods' represented an imagined ethnographic group whose appearance, behavior, temperament, and iconography are consistent.⁴ Classified among the monstrous races, the Wild People⁵ lived an outdoor existence in the unsettled and uncultivated lands of the forest outside civilized society. They were skilled hunters whose dominion over the natural world was represented in images of them wielding natural (as opposed to manufactured) weaponry, such as a huge club or an uprooted tree; riding stags, rather than the horse of the medieval knight; or

holding beasts in a posture of submission. The physical trait that most differentiated this race was their long, unkempt hair, shaggy beard, and rough coat of bestial fur (Friedman 200–01). Less frequently, the Wild Man's torso is covered with grass or foliage (Husband, figure 87). Constructed as the cultural antithesis of 'civilization,' the Wild Man was known for his uncontrolled aggression, limited or complete aphasia, and hypersexuality, all associating him with subhuman irrationality and rendering him socially unacceptable.⁶ According to Bernheimer, whose theoretical model of the transformation of the Wild Man from quasi-beast into the 'noble savage' until now has remained unchallenged, in the early medieval period the bestial Wild Man inspired fear and loathing by representing 'the abstract concept of "noncivilization" rendered as a fearful physical reality' (Husband 5). In the late fourteenth century this attitude began to change. The cultural crisis provoked by a perceived discrepancy between the ideals and the realities of the old feudal order produced a disillusionment with the state of civilization, prompting the 'escape' offered by a reversion to a primitivism or 'radical archaism' whose utter radicality was expressed by sympathy for or identification with the Wild Man (Bernheimer 144–45). With the Wild Man no longer considered the inferior antagonist of the knight, writers recast romances to reflect and incorporate his lifestyle, 'replacing the plate armor of the knight [with] the fur of the demon' (Bernheimer 146). Although Bernheimer and those (like Husband, White, and Bartra) who accept his model are quite firm in assigning the change at earliest to the late fourteenth century (Bernheimer 144–46), the handling of primitivism in the *Roman de Silence* renders this dating arguable at best.⁷

The affinity between Wild Man and civilized knight is not so improbable as it first seems. The European medieval Wild Man was known locally by a variety of names: *agrios*, *homo sylvestris*, *hombre salvagio*, *uomo selvaggio*, *l'homme sauvage*, the *wodewose*, and the *wilde mann*. The common denominator is the term 'man,' indicating a resemblance between mankind and the woodland-dwelling *homo sylvestris*. If this kinship between the most primitive aspects of the *homme sauvage* and otherwise civilized humankind might inspire anxiety, it could also encourage redemptive identification between members of an overly-civilized culture and the newly-valorized 'noble savage,' whose simpler lifestyle personified the culturally positive 'state of nature.' This redemptive embrace of cultural primitivism, which theoretically emerged from Europe in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, acknowledged the corrupting influence of the civilizing process which, driven by advances in technology, produced not only progress, but problems such

as: ostentation leading to decadence; ownership of property or land leading to inheritance disputes; the profit motive encouraging greed; and competition over territorial boundaries leading to intensified warfare requiring the use of deadly manufactured weapons. By valorizing a return to a simpler life, such as that of the Wild Man, primitivism offered a double-edged antidote to these social ills. The promotion of a return to 'wildness' unfortunately also entailed the voluntary sacrifice of the refinements and conveniences of civilization.

Represented as both menacing symbol of non-civilization and idealized noble savage, the generic Wild Man thus evoked a variety of intrinsically antithetical responses. In the plot of the *Roman de Silence*, Heldris's calculated depiction of Merlin as a Wild Man (rather than as the more usual sorcerer or sage) invited and anticipated a no less ambivalent response from the romance's audience. The plot of *Silence* is driven thematically by precisely the social ills produced by civilization: the profit motive; nationalism, feudal hegemony, and territorial wars; insecurity about inheritance; and the commodification of sexuality and reproduction. Against the view of Merlin as a thematic intrusion, I contend that Heldris could find no better figure to untangle the complications of a textual world plagued by the negative effects of over-civilization than Merlin, a character whose textual origins and popular construction reflect the redemptive impulse of primitivism.

CONTEXTUALIZING MERLIN THE WILD MAN IN THE *Roman de Silence*

Exploiting the mental and physical characteristics of the Wild Man, medieval authors projected this figure's extreme behavior upon literary characters either afflicted with the torments of erotic passion (*Yvain*, *Tristan*, *Lancelot*) or gifted with prophetic power. These literary Wild Men abandon the artifices of the civilized state and adopt aspects of a natural lifestyle: seclusion in the forest; stalking animals, eating berries and raw meat; sometime nakedness. The most notable example of the prophetic Wild Man was Merlin, a key figure in the Arthurian mythos, who in *Silence* reflects the culmination of an elaborate provenance comprising a variety of textual sources and analogues, ranging from the early twelfth-century works of Geoffrey of Monmouth to the thirteenth-century *Vulgata Cycle* and its continuations.

Heldris's depiction of Merlin as a Wild Man reflects a polyvalent character construction developing out of two figures, named Merlin Ambrosius and Merlin Silvester, the latter a Wild Man of the Woods (Jensen). In his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1135–38) Geoffrey of Monmouth conflates the pair into

the prophet Merlin, also called ‘Ambrosius.’ In Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlini* (c. 1148–54) Merlin appears in a different guise, nicknamed ‘Merlin Caledonius,’ the Wild Man of the Caledonian forest who bewails the fate of mankind. After seeing his companions slaughtered in battle, this Merlin grieves and fasts for days, finally fleeing to the woods, living freely among the beasts and eating grasses, roots and berries. This Merlin, whose lone companion is a wolf, ‘fit silvester homo quasi siluis deditus esset’ [became a silvan man just as though devoted to the woods] (Parry, l. 80, 34–5).⁸ Using the Wild Man’s legendary powers over the beasts of the forest, he drives a herd of stags into a line, mounting one himself, and brings the herd before the window of his abandoned wife Guendolena on the day she is to remarry. Merlin wrenches the horns from the stag he rides, throws them at the prospective groom, smashing his skull and killing him, turns on his hoof, and attempts to return to the woods. He is captured and brought back to court, where he enacts the triple laughter that Heldris incorporates into the plot of *Silence*. Once again, Merlin flees to the forest, ‘populos exosus in urbe’ [hating the people in the city] (Parry, l. 531, 60–61). Emphasizing the prophet’s affinity for and power over wild animals, Geoffrey’s *Vita* establishes Merlin Silvester as a non-hairy type of the mythic Wild Man of the woods. His Merlin also represents the classic tenets of cultural primitivism: a contempt for the corruption of civilized life epitomized by warfare, adultery, deceit, and greed; a preference for life in nature; and the desire to escape from the hated life, people, and ways of the city, all themes crucial to the plot of Heldris’s romance. In the late twelfth century, Gerald of Wales similarly distinguishes between two Merlins, both prophets: Merlin Ambrosius, begotten by an incubus, and who prophesied in the time of Vortigern; and Merlin ‘Celidonius’ or ‘Silvester,’ also a man of the woods. Both Geoffrey and Gerald appropriated this wild version of Merlin from traditions about two other legendary figures: the Welsh seer Myrddin and the Scottish figure Lailoken, both ‘silvan men’ and truthtellers, as in Heldris’s conception of Merlin.⁹

Across the Channel, in the early thirteenth century, the biography of Merlin was developing along similar lines in Robert De Boron’s *L’Estoire de Merlin*, a part of the sprawling *Vulgate Cycle*, and in its anonymous continuations.¹⁰ In Robert’s *Merlin*, the prophet is a Wild Man from birth.¹¹ As in Geoffrey’s *Historia*, Merlin is conceived when his mother is impregnated by an incubus. Because his mother confesses her innocence, her son Merlin is born with a mixed preternatural knowledge: from his demonic father he knows the past, yet God allows him to foretell the future. But his intrinsic wildness is signified when he is born so hairy that his appearance terrifies

the midwives and his mother (Pickens 167–72). Merlin later convinces the court to spare his mother's life despite her unintentional fornication with the devil by revealing that the Judge's own mother fornicated with a priest (Pickens 174–75). This episode prefigures Merlin's consistent role as revealer of truths about adulterous women, including Eufeme in Heldris's *Silence*.

Merlin's depiction as a Wild Man in the *Roman de Silence* most directly correlates with a later episode in Robert's text in which the daughter of a banished Duke disguises herself as a squire named Grisandole and enters the service of Julius Caesar (Pickens 323–29).¹² When Caesar has a troubling dream, Merlin, thinking to interpret the dream, shapeshifts into a great stag with a white foot and charges into Rome. He tells Caesar that only the Wild Man of the woods can explain his dream and immediately vanishes. The emperor offers his daughter's hand and half the kingdom to whomever can capture the Wild Man or the stag. After all other knights abandon the quest, the crossdressing Grisandole continues and the white stag appears, instructing her to attract the Wild Man of the woods by cooking food. Drawn to her food and wine, the Wild Man eats it greedily and falls asleep, whereupon Grisandole captures him. On the way to Caesar's court the Wild Man, as in *Silence*, breaks into laughter three times. Standing before Caesar, the queen, and her ladies, the prophet reveals that the queen's twelve ladies are all disguised males with whom she is cuckolding her husband. He explains his laughter, reveals Grisandole's male impersonation, and recommends that Caesar restore their lands to her parents and offer his daughter to Grisandole's brother. The emperor burns his wife and the twelve lovers at the stake and marries Grisandole. The Wild Man reveals that he and the stag are one and the same, Merlin the counselor of Arthur.

In the final section of my essay, I shall analyze how Heldris employs this borrowed episode from the *Estoire de Merlin* to engage with the discourse of primitivism and its promise of escape from the trappings of civilization that literally trap the civilized in a web of corrupt deceit. However, just as Heldris challenges our expectations of generic and gender norms, Heldris also resists reducing primitivism to the simplistic, sentimental mode of anti-city/pro-Arcadia pastoralism that it could (and often did) easily become in the Renaissance. Instead, Heldris's version of this cultural model recognizes and emphasizes how complicated, 'indeed impossible, it is to implement the seemingly salutary but sometimes unpragmatic tenets of primitivism. The *Roman de Silence* also testifies to the often contradictory significances that the Wild Man could convey to a medieval audience.

MERLIN IN THE *Roman de Silence*

In Euseme's comments about Merlin as she plots to send Silence on an impossible quest, Heldris conflates incidents intrinsic to the characterization of 'wild' Merlin from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* and *Vita Merlini*, from the Welsh and Scottish texts about Myrddin and Lailoken, and from the *Vulgata Merlin* materials. These include Merlin's role in erecting Vortigern's tower (5784–5802; 5910–11); the detail that his captor could only be female (5803); and his diabolical paternity (5792–3). Through such intertextual imbrication, Merlin's signifiers in the *Roman de Silence* are a thoroughly polyvalent mix—holy and unholy Wild Man, prophet and devil—forming the ultimate trickster figure. After half a year of searching the woods, Silence encounters a mysterious old man, Merlin in disguise, who describes the object of her quest:

Cho est uns hom trestols pelus
 Et si est com uns ors velus;
 Si est isnials com cers de lande.
 Herbe, rachine est sa viände. (5929–32)

[He is a man who is hairy all over,
 furry like a bear,
 and he is as quick as a wild deer;
 herbs and roots are his food.]

Heldris's Merlin combines the quintessential characteristics of the medieval Wild Man. He is a creature with an ambiguous identity somewhere between man and beast (5908) who lives in the deep forest. His hairy pelt resembles that of a bear. He is as elusive as a swift stag, the animal that Geoffrey's Merlin easily subdued. His vegetarian diet of roots and berries also mimics that of Merlin Silvester.

In a variation on the usual significations of nature and nurture, Merlin's 'nature' as a creature of civilization has been denatured by his 'nurture' as an 'homme sauvage.' Paralleling the Grisandole story, and incorporating the same dichotomy that Lévi-Strauss articulated as the difference between the 'raw and the cooked,' Heldris has the old man explain that Merlin must be lured back to his civilized 'nature' with such processed foodstuffs as wine, milk, honey, and cooked meat (5944–76).¹³ The old man assures Silence that Merlin will be attracted to these processed viands if there is any 'humanité' [human nature]¹⁴ left in him (5955). Here the clear separation of human from beast that defines mankind as 'civilized'—a distinction blurred in the medieval Wild Man figure—reverses the usual identification between nature and the more desirable 'savage' lifestyle promoted through primitivism.

When Merlin is indeed drawn to the roasting meat, allegorical Nurture attempts to reattract him to his learned, primitivistic life of a holy Wild Man. Clearly, another dichotomy is operating here, that of Nature and Culture, roughly analogous to the Nature/Nurture opposition articulated in the text of *Silence*, though with some unusual twists. Nature aims and succeeds at restoring Merlin's links to the civilized world, represented by processed and cooked food, while Nurture attempts but ultimately fails to remodel his behavior to reflect the idealized and explicitly vegetarian, sylvan life that primitivism valorizes—a life uncontaminated by the artifice and corruption of organized civilization.

Perhaps Nurture fails only on the surface and not in the deeper plot. Her immediate lack of success provides a textual impetus for Heldris to conduct a more thoughtful examination of the complex Nature/Culture dichotomy by revealing the responses of various 'civilized' characters to Merlin's primitivism. For example, although Eufeme and Ebain use the capture of Merlin as the pretext for punishing Silence, they reveal not only latent unease about Merlin's 'uncivilized' Wild Man lifestyle, but also a 'silent' desire to convert him to their own 'civilized' mode of existence. To their way of thinking, paradoxically, his adoption of an existence that primitivism defines as the 'state of nature' is 'unnatural' because it explicitly repudiates their own values. The consummate deceiver herself, Eufeme even suggests that Merlin may be lying, in which case it will serve him right if he is caught (5819–20). Surprisingly, the attitude of the king and queen is allied with that of personified Nature, who also believes that, like Silence, Merlin has been seduced by Nurture away from his intrinsic 'natural' state of being 'civilized.' Nature and Nurture battle over possession of Merlin, as they had with Silence earlier, his return to civilized humanity or continued practice of his primitive Wild Man ways at issue (5996–6089).

Because this exchange is lengthy, one representative passage will exemplify the ambivalent position Heldris adopts in the text's valuation of civilization over primitivism. Merlin, about to succumb to the tempting aroma of roasting meat prepared by Silence to trap him, is accosted by an exasperated personified Nurture:

'Ahi!' fait Noreture. 'Ahi!
Com cil sont malement *trahi*
Ki *noriscent* la gent a faire
Cho que *lor nature est contraire*.
Quanque *jo noris et labor*
Me tolt Nature a un sol jor.
Tant a esté *noris en bos*

Bien deüst metre ariere dos
Nature d'ome, si voloit
 Herbes user, si com soloit.'
 Or est Merlins en male luite.
 'Qu'as tu a faire de car cuite?
 Dist Noreture. '*Est cho dangiers?*
 Herbes, racines est tes mangiers.' (5997–6010, my emphasis)

[‘Ay!’ cried Nurture. ‘Ay!
 How cruelly they are (deceived) betrayed,
 those who train (condition) [nourish] people to do
 what is contrary to their nature!
 Everything I work to create [nourish]
 Nature takes from me in a single day.
 As long as Merlin has been living (nurtured) [fed/trained] in
 the woods,
 he should have put human nature
 behind him, and wanted only
 herbs to eat, as he has been accustomed.’
 Now Merlin was in a bad state.
 ‘What do you want with cooked meat?’
 Nurture asked. (‘Is that what you want?’) ‘What whim
 [willfulness, resistance] is this?’
 Herbs and roots are your food.’]¹⁵

The speech occurs at a pivotal moment in the text. As Merlin approaches the cooked meat, Nurture is outraged and complains indirectly that she has been ‘trahi’ [betrayed] by him. First, this is a significant emotion in light of the multiple betrayals—political treason, marital infidelity, feudal disobedience, gender impersonation, and economic fraud, to name just a few—that drive the plot of this romance. Ordinarily, betrayal carries an unequivocally negative valence. But in Heldris’s complicated plot, Cador and Eufeme’s violation of the ban on female inheritance seems warranted, even valorized, by Ebain’s rash law. Previously, I have argued that even Eufeme’s infidelity is mitigated by Ebain’s possible physical impotence and her history of commodification (‘Gender Stable’ 15–22). In light of her dramatic rescue of the king and her other stunning military triumphs, Silence’s blatant gender-bending, really the perpetration of major personal fraud, also seems justified. In short, cultural primitivism’s condemnation of civilization’s corruption of the ‘norms of nature’ or the ‘natural law’ of truth or loyalty does not hold up consistently in the pragmatically-devalued ‘value system’ of this romance.

Second, throughout the passage, Heldris plays with *double entendre* in the repeated forms of the verb *norrir*, whose semantic range includes ‘to educate, to raise, to foster, or fortify,’ and its related noun *norreture*, denoting ‘nurturing’ in both the alimentary and the educational sense. As *Norreture*, the personified force claiming Merlin, is the speaker in the passage, it is hardly accidental that the subject of the scene—Merlin’s imminent rejection of Nurture, the sponsor for his holy Wild Man lifestyle—revolves around what he eats. Merlin is about to choose a variety of prepared foodstuffs whose processed state is one of the markers of civilization’s excesses. He is about to gorge himself on roasted meat, honey, milk, and wine until he is vulnerable to capture by Silence—another betrayal, since the old man, really Merlin, was kind enough to help her capture the wizard. Nurture has not only educated Merlin, the devil’s son, to adopt what is clearly promoted as a more wholesome (even holy) regimen, but as the verb *norrir* denotes, has literally nourished him with the fruits and herbs that primitivism lauds as simpler, more ‘natural’ sustenance.

Next, Nurture claims that since she did teach him to betray ‘his own nature’ by adopting the habit of a primitive, he should have put the ‘nature d’ome’ [the nature of man; human nature], whose inclinations are so corrupt as to be evil, permanently behind him. When Nurture thus privileges education over natural inclination, personified Nature engages Nurture in an academic dispute over the origin of evil at the time of the Fall. Nurture argues that it was Adam’s ‘*nature de pute aire*’ (6039) [ignoble *nature*] that caused the Fall, through the *eating* of an apple, while Nature retorts that it was the devil’s *norreture* or teaching (another kind of nurturing) that betrayed mankind’s natural innocence and led to the Fall: ‘Car le diâbles le *norril* Par son malvais conseil porri’ (6069–70) [For the Devil *taught (fed)* him/ with his evil corrupt counsel]. Thus, the official ideology of Heldris’s romance seems to privilege ‘progress’ and civilization over primitivism, for Merlin’s ‘wild’ habits are considered not ‘natural,’ but ‘learned.’ To muddle matters even more, in the French text’s intertextual relation with *Genesis*, Merlin’s ‘learned’ nature is analogous with Adam’s ‘learning’ evil (in the form of eating) through the *norreture* of Merlin’s father, the devil.

Further complicating these paradoxes and intertextualities, Heldris weaves yet another semantic/intertextual knot into Nurture’s exasperated speech to Merlin quoted earlier. When Nurture berates Merlin for wanting cooked meat, she asks, ‘Est cho *dangiers*?’ which Psaki renders ‘What *whim* is this?’ The semantic range of *dangiers* conveys not only whim, but ‘free will,’ ‘willfulness,’ ‘resistance,’ even ‘power.’ ‘Dangiers’ certainly suggests the ‘free

will' (with an emphasis on primitivism's freedom?) that informed what could be construed as the 'willfulness' of both Merlin in the woods and Adam in Eden. However, the word also alludes to the name of another notable textual Wild Man from Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, the allegorical character *Dangiers*, whose name is translated variously as 'Danger,' 'Rebuff,' or 'Resistance.' Both the allegorical *modus operandi* of this seminal French romance/quest and its date of composition in the first quarter of the thirteenth century argue for an intertextual relationship between the *Roman de la Rose* and Héldrīs's *Roman de Silence*.¹⁶ Endowing Dangiers with most of the classic characteristics of the medieval Wild Man, Guillaume describes this 'villains' [churl] (2825, 2920) as being 'd'erbe et de fuelles couvers' (2830) [covered with grass and leaves] and adds:

Grans fu et noirs et hericiés,
Les yex ot rouges comme feus,
Le nés froncié, le vis hideus,
Et s'escrie cum force[n]és. (2922–25)

[He was huge and black and covered with bristly fur,
his eyes were red like fire,
his nose was wrinkled, his face hideous,
and he cried out like a madman.]

Described again as 'hidous et noir' (2944) [hideous and black], Dangiers firmly controls his natural domain which, if not the primeval forest, is a large, strange, and figuratively dangerous garden of which he is specifically the keeper and guardian of the rosebushes (2827–28). When the Dreamer approaches Dangiers, he finds him armed with both a belligerent attitude and 'un baston d'espine' (3157) [a thorny club], surely a version of the Wild Man's classic weapon. Nevertheless, despite Dangiers's fiercely protective attitude, through the help of the allegorical figures of Generosity and Pity, the Dreamer convinces him to relent. Ultimately this permits the Dreamer's overtures to be rewarded by a long-desired kiss from the Rose, the first step towards the consummation that culminates Jean de Meün's continuation of the *Rose*.

Covered by both the leaves and fur of the traditional *homme sauvage*, featuring a bestial appearance and ferocious attitude, wielding his thorny club, and eventually promoting forbidden sexuality, Guillaume's Dangiers is unquestionably a prominent exemplar of the medieval literary Wild Man, and one which enjoyed the widest possible textual circulation. However, in terms of the model of primitivism, his character is rather oddly placed within the highly unnatural and allegorical discourse of *amor cortois* that drives the

plot of the *Rose*. In the context of this extremely artifized, class-obsessed discourse, the casting of personified Resistance as a socially marginal Wild Man renders Dangiers a paradoxical amalgam of the primitive and the courtly, the uncouth and the civilized. However, the same paradoxical mix of wild and courtly characterizes Dangiers's literary descendant Merlin in Heldris's romance. Within a network of multiple intertextualities—the various constructions of Merlin from the *Vulgate Cycle* and other related materials, *Genesis*, and the *Roman de la Rose*—Nurture's exasperated outburst to Merlin, 'Est cho *dangiers*?' bristles with multiple literal and figurative resonances, including some or all of the following:

1. What *free will* are you exercising (in choosing tainted civilization over wholesome primitivism)?
2. What *willfulness* are you exhibiting (in rejecting my nourishment/teaching)?
3. What kind of *resistance* did you mount against Silence (since you helped her catch you)?
4. What kind of allegorized *resistance* are you?
5. What kind of *Wild Man* are you?

CONCLUSION

Although Heldris's romance seriously engages with the discourse of cultural primitivism, the conclusion deconstructs its own nascent primitivism. If the Wild Man's habitation in the woods removes him from the organized court, his salutary 'natural' lifestyle also rescues him from its accompanying artifices and corruptions. Through his social isolation, therefore, the Wild Man iconically embodies and powerfully realizes the personal freedom which the cultural philosophy of primitivism seeks to idealize. However, if primitivism is liberating, it is also threatening, literally *dangerous* to the hegemonic status quo. Such anxiety-producing threat almost inevitably requires containment. To the disappointment of most modern readers, the author of *Silence* apparently could not summon sufficient artistic *dangiers* to resist the prevailing culture's compulsion both for the orderly reestablishment of sociopolitical norms and for tidy textual closure. Ultimately, Heldris's otherwise revolutionary romance suppresses the freedom associated with and promoted by cultural primitivism.

Heldris is not unique in being ambivalent about primitivism and the dangerous freedom of 'wildness.' While Guillaume's Wild Man *Dangiers* represents the Rose's temporary exercise of freedom against the constraints of love, that resistance is ultimately thwarted when, through the plotting of

False Seeming and other signifiers of civilization, the Rose succumbs to the Dreamer's quest for physical possession and consummation, losing any autonomy that may have been personified in her *dangiers*. Similarly, in the *Roman de Silence*, Merlin's resistance to the greed and corruption of civilized life, which Heldris calls his 'dangiers,' is co-opted and contained at the end. In one sense, Merlin's show of *dangiers*, whether expressing his willful return to a carnivorous diet or his earlier adoption of a primitive life in the woods, is this consummate impersonator's own *tour de force* textual performance of Guillaume's Wild Man *Dangiers*. Nevertheless, after Merlin's various revelations of the corruption and treacheries at his court, Ebain

Fait Merlin *fermement tenir*
 Et dont a fait avant venir
 La nonain, sil fait despollier...
 Et Silence despollier roeve. (6569–72; my emphasis)
 [...] had Merlin *firmly* restrained
 and then had the nun come forward,
 and had her stripped...
 and requested Silence to strip.]

Ironically, this consistently unstable and infirm king elects this moment to exercise his dubious authority through 'firmness,' imposed legitimately upon the crossdressing, cuckolding 'nun' and his adulterous queen but precipitously upon the reluctant soothsayer Merlin.¹⁷ In effect, Ebain decides to punish the messenger for *revealing* the treachery almost as much as he punishes the traitors. This king chose a similar tactic when he entirely abolished female inheritance in order to compensate for losing two men who killed one another over their twin wives' inheritances. Ebain's 'firm restraining' of the freedom-loving Wild Man is the last textual reference to Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*. Unlike Geoffrey, whose Merlin happily fled back to the woods at the end of the *Vita*, Heldris invites the inference that Ebain firmly restrains Merlin from returning to the liberation of his forest life. By dealing with his fate so ambiguously, Heldris places Merlin in textual limbo, the equivalent of the living death of incarceration in a rock imposed on Merlin by Nineve in other Arthurian romances. Likewise, Ebain's immediate execution of both the queen and her lover indicates that his 'instability,' in part exemplified by his lifelong impulse to make and act upon rash, ill-considered judgments, has not undergone the stabilizing that might portend a better and more fruitful marriage with his second wife. Silence, the former 'vallés-meschine' [boy-maiden], has herself been prepared at best hastily for her new role as royal *female* consort, thanks to Nature's

swift makeover. By marrying her off to Ebain so abruptly, Heldris similarly coopts Silence's temporary attainment of the freedom of a male-gendered life through crossdressing. Ironically, both containments are orchestrated by personified Nature, a force traditionally associated with the promotion of primitivist freedom rather than with its suppression.

Thus, Europe's engagement with cultural primitivism through the figure of the Wild Man, traditionally authorized as beginning only in the late fourteenth century, can be documented already at least a century earlier in the *Roman de Silence* and the *Roman de la Rose*. In light of the intertextual relationship between these two texts, Heldris's deployment of the Merlin subplot provocatively demonstrates that the vexing opposition between nature and civilization was an active intellectual issue in the thirteenth century or even earlier.¹⁸ The *psychomachia*-like debate between *Nature* and *Norreture* underscores not only this author's general intention of representing the controversy between the respective opposing positions but also Heldris's own conflicted position(s) on the issue of valorizing nature at the expense of civilization. While Heldris's importation of Merlin as a Wild Man into the plot seems on surface to support the discourse of cultural primitivism, nevertheless Nurture's speech indicates that this author recognizes the tension between civilization and its discontents and the possible drawbacks of primitivism.¹⁹ If not utterly cynical, Heldris is at least disconcertingly pragmatic in suggesting that roasted meat, however decadent its origin or associations, does taste better than raw roots.

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NOTES

- 1 Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism/Antiquity* 1–7; Long 43–44; Boas, *Essays*.
- 2 I quote from the Thorpe edition of *Roman de Silence*; unless otherwise noted, translations are by Psaki.
- 3 Thorpe posited that Heldris constructed the entire narrative that precedes the Merlin episode to 'lead up to and to explain this final episode' (32). Except for Perret (338–40), Stock 'Gender Stable' (24–27), Roche-Mahdi (in this volume), and Gilmore, most critics either ignore Merlin's role, refer to it in passing or, like Lloyd (84), resist Thorpe's claim of its structural importance.
- 4 See Bernheimer, Dudley and Novak, Husband, and Bartra.
- 5 As this essay concentrates on Merlin, my comments about the medieval

construction of the Wild People refer exclusively to the male figure. However, the Wild Man had a female counterpart, the Wild Woman, who, though often either hirsute or grotesque, was nevertheless capable of transformation into a ravishingly seductive beauty.

- 6 It is significant that the classic characteristics of the Wild Man—self-imposed exclusion from the *civitas*, the political/social center of civilization, the silencing of speech, and the questionable control of sexuality—resonate with major themes explored in Heldris's text. These include Silence's several self-exiles or banishments from Cador's or Ebain's courts; her lifelong inability to speak about her identity; Eufeme's uncontrollable sexuality; and Silence's own conflicted sexuality.¹
- 7 Writing in the 1950s, Bernheimer is unlikely to have known Heldris's romance, which Thorpe edited for publication in 1972.
- 8 On the *Vita*'s transformation of Merlin from the 'unholy Wild Man' to a 'holy Wild Man,' see Doob, 153–58.
- 9 For thorough accounts of the literary provenance of the British and Celtic constructions of Merlin and his Irish Wild Man analogue, Suibhne, see Parry's Introduction (15–20), Jarman (117–45), Tolstoy (187–99), and the individual introductory essays in Goodrich.
- 10 The Old French text of Robert's *Merlin* comprises volume II of Sommer. The translation by Pickens identifies the appropriate passages in Sommer II; page references to Pickens's translation are noted parenthetically.
- 11 For a comparison between Geoffrey's Merlin and Robert de Boron's, see Ladden (11–17).
- 12 On the Grisandole episode see Freymond (33); Paton, who traces the motif's sources and analogs; and Thorpe (28–35).
- 13 Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain*, also living in the woods as a kind of Wild Man, is gradually weaned from raw meat and coarse bread to cooked meat and his former civilized existence by the hermit, who plays a role similar to the old man here.
- 14 This is Roche-Mahdi's term.
- 15 The richly ambiguous language of the passage inspires different translations of the italicized words. For most of the passage I rely on Psaki; Roche-Mahdi's reading is included in parentheses; my own additions or emendations are included in brackets.
- 16 References to the text of the *Roman de la Rose* are to Poirion's edition, identified parenthetically by line number; translations are my own.
- 17 See Stock, 'Gender Stable' for the text's destabilization of Ebain's political power, physical prowess, and sexual potency, symptomatic of masculine and kingly infirmity.
- 18 In my book in progress, *Monster or Noble Savage? The Wild Man and Late Medieval Primitivism*, I demonstrate that medieval Europe's ambivalent engagement with primitivism is evident much earlier than Bernheimer and others have posited.
- 19 Chaucer is similarly ambivalent about endorsing primitivism in his lyric 'The Former Age,' where he recommends that his fourteenth-century audience emulate the lifestyle of figures resembling the Wild People, yet recognizes how unpopular such a return to a 'primitive' existence would be; see Stock, 'Past and Present.'