

RETICENT ROMANS:
SILENCE AND WRITING IN
LA VIE DE SAINT ALEXIS, LE CONTE DU GRAAL,
AND LE ROMAN DE SILENCE

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Epigraph

For if when I speak I am unable to make myself intelligible, then I am not speaking – even though I were to talk uninterruptedly day and night.

— Søren Kirkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Silence itself is defined in relationship to words, as the pause in music receives its meaning from the group of notes around it. This silence is a moment of language; being silent is not being dumb; it is to refuse to speak, and therefore to keep on speaking.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*

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Table of Contents

Epigraph	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Silence in the Middle Ages.....	17
Religious Silence and the Ineffable God	18
Silence Incarnate	20
Of Silence and Signs	26
Monastic Silence and Desire	28
Literature and Rhetoric: Silence of the Subject	31
Chapter Two: Silence and Sainthood in <i>La Vie de Saint Alexis</i>	35
Poetry and Parentage	37
Refusal and Reticence.....	43
Sacrifice, Silence, and the Self.....	50
Writing and the Will.....	60
Chapter Three: Silence and Sin in <i>Le Conte du Graal</i> (Perceval)	70
Structure, <i>Semence</i> and <i>Sen</i>	74
Perceval: The Silent Knight.....	86
The <i>dist</i> , <i>enseignement</i> , and the Law	96
Silence, God, and the <i>Mer(e)</i>	111
Chapter Four: Silence and <i>semence</i> in <i>Le Conte du Graal</i> (Gawain)	119
Shields and Silence	122
Silent Progress and the Law	134
Healing Old Wounds	142
The <i>oltre</i> and the Great <i>dela</i>	156
Marvelous Metaphors	162
Chapter Five: Being Silent and Silent Being in <i>Le Roman de Silence</i>.....	174
Romance and Truth.....	176
The Politics of Signification	181
Law and Loss	191
Desire and the Silent Other.....	196
Nature's Nurturing, Nurture's (de)Naturing	204
That Which is Not There	211
The Silent Truth	216
Conclusion.....	223
Bibliography	228

Appendix: Medieval Illustration.....	242
Vita	243

Abstract

Apart from discourse and yet somehow part of it, silence is a powerfully ambiguous linguistic phenomenon that blurs the lines between presence and absence. Eluding the material aspects of oral and written language, it is only perceptible as the gaps or spaces between words. Nonetheless, it plays a role in all linguistic productions: although silence itself cannot be directly communicated, it can influence communication. In a literary text, silence may take on many different guises, including rhythmic hesitations, rhetorical omissions, and poetic oppositions that mimic the audible gaps of spoken language. The visual, aural, and fictional interaction of all these components ultimately induces otherwise unnamed meanings, meanings that exist as part of the symbolic network of a text, yet beyond the division and difference of signifiers. And while traces of this phenomenon may be found in literature from all historical periods and genres, the three medieval romances in which I have chosen to explore it – *La Vie de Saint Alexis*, *Le Conte du Graal*, and *Le Roman de Silence* – exhibit a particularly strong awareness of the communicative problems and possibilities engendered by silence. Each one demonstrates – albeit in a slightly different way – that silence is more than just omission: within their pages, it becomes an elusive yet creative force that shapes thematic development and structures poetics. Ultimately, however, silence's structuralizing force is not just textual, but also ontological, affecting our existence and perceptions of who we are.

Introduction

For what is the presence of silence but the absence of sound?

– Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

Apart from speech and yet somehow part of it, silence is a powerfully ambiguous linguistic phenomenon that blurs the lines between presence and absence. Indeed, its problematic discursive status has made it an important source of intellectual reflection for a great many disciplines, including psychoanalysis, philosophy and, more recently, literary criticism. Both Lacan's theory of the unconscious and Heidegger's philosophy of Being, for example, accord a privileged discursive role to silence.¹ Even linguistics, a field traditionally concerned almost uniquely with the scrutiny of substantive signifiers, has come to recognize its communicative potential, finding in the pauses and hesitations of our speech not just a lack of words, but a meaningful linguistic act "that communicates just as intensely as anything we might verbalize."² Ultimately, each of these disciplines assigns different linguistic functions and signifying abilities to silence within its particular theoretical framework. Nonetheless, there is a common sentiment that the space between words – this *absence of sound* – is also something more than nothing. For while it

¹ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the unconscious (also femininity, the Real) is beyond language, a tacit domain within the speaking subject that can be intimated, but never directly stated, through language. Further information can be found in almost any of Lacan's texts. For a general view, see *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). Silence, especially in the form of a refusal to speak – reticence – is, for Heidegger, the fundamental space in discourse where understanding occurs, where *Da-sein* is articulated. See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of *Sein und Zeit**, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 1996) 150-156 as well as *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1982) 111-138. Both of these theoretical perspectives are discussed below.

² Joseph A. Devito, "Silence and Paralanguage as Communication," *Etc.; A Review of General Semantics* 46:2 (1989) 153.

only becomes manifest in the gaps between phonemes, syllables, words, and sentences, this same lack of form – its nothingness – is what constitutes its representational force.

Silence is thus without form, but not without function. Eluding the material aspect of language, it is only perceptible to human ears as the gaps or spaces between words. Nonetheless, it plays a role in all linguistic productions. This is perhaps more easily understood in regards to oral expression than to a written document, but the underlying mechanism is really the same. After all, a text is more than just a benign collection of words on a page³; it is also a self-enclosed symbolic network binding together a unique collection of written characters, rhythmic hesitations, rhetorical omissions, and poetic oppositions that mimic the audible gaps of spoken language.⁴ The visual, aural, and thematic interaction of all these components ultimately induces, or “conditions” otherwise unnamed meanings that exist as part of the written text, yet beyond the division and difference of signifiers.⁵

Though physically absent, silence would thus be present in language as part of what Jacques Lacan calls “an encounter with the real.”⁶ To better grasp

³ While this appraisal would be applicable to texts from all literary periods, it is particularly relevant in the case of medieval manuscripts: because the vellum used for textual composition was often recycled, a palimpsest of shadowy words and images from past tales sometimes appears behind the newer text.

⁴ Cf. Muriel Saville-Troike, “The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication,” *Perspectives on Silence*, ed. Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1985) 5. According to Saville-Troike, one of the more common examples of written silence is the punctuation marker ‘...’ frequently used in both Japanese and European literature.

⁵ Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, introduction, *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) xii.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1978) 52. Central to Lacan’s theory, the Real (it is capitalized in many English translations in order to draw attention to its importance) is explained here in

the sense of this encounter, it will be helpful to follow Lacan's own example by first returning to Freud, and an appropriate choice for such a return is *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung*).⁷ First published in 1900, this lengthy study of the psychological mechanisms influencing the formation, analysis, and significance of our dreams has, with time, become one of his most widely recognized and most important works.⁸ At its core is a method of interpretation that emphasizes the contextuality of representation – the unique weaving (Latin *contexere*) of images, gestures, and events within each dream. Of course, Freud was not the first person with an interest in the deeper significance of human reverie, but he does take deliberate pains to set his approach apart from previous ones, which he deems either too specific or not broad enough.⁹

The first of these two methods is of the same sort used in many Biblical prophecies, where all the events in a particular dream are interpreted as symbolic yet analogous representations of some future occurrence. Freud's own example is Joseph's explanation of Pharaoh's dream in the forty-first book of Genesis:

Aristotelian terms, where *automaton* is the "network of signifiers" and *tuché* that which exists beyond this network.

⁷ Beginning in the 1950s, Lacan describe his intellectual journey as a return to Freud (*retour à Freud*), whose ideas he would continue to examine, criticize, and refine over the remainder of his career.

⁸ In his introduction to the English translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, James Strachey notes that the renown of this study came long after its initial publication, with sales of only 351 copies during the first six years following its release. In spite of this, "*The Interpretation of Dreams* was always regarded by Freud as his most important work: 'Insight such as this' as he wrote in his preface to the third English edition, 'falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime.'" James Strachey, introduction, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, by Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953) 4: xx.

⁹ Freud provides a summary of these in the first chapter. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953) 4: 1-95. The interpretation in question is delivered in Genesis 41:31

The seven fat kine followed by seven lean kine that ate up the fat kine – all this was a symbolic substitute for a prophecy of seven years of famine in the land of Egypt which should consume all that was brought forth in the seven years of plenty.¹⁰

The problem with this approach, he claims, is that it is not really a method at all, since it depends not on deliberate examination of the dream content, but on the fabrication of a plausible link between the dream and some real-world situation. In such a case, successful interpretation requires no more than “hitting on a clever idea.”¹¹ The second approach – a ‘translation’ of each image in the dream achieved with the help of a specialized index – is one toward which Freud is relatively more sympathetic since it “takes into account not only the content of the dream but also the character and circumstances of the dreamer.”¹² At the same time, however, he acknowledges the obvious limitations of this approach, namely that the quality and success of such an analysis is dictated by the completeness of one’s dream concordance and, furthermore, that “interpretation is not brought to bear on the dream as a whole but on each portion of the dream’s content independently.”¹³

A direct response to these shortcomings, Freud’s preliminary articulation of his interpretive method relies on two fundamental assumptions. First, he holds that the dream is not a unified whole nor a completely haphazard conglomeration of otherwise disparate elements, but something in-between, a fractured matrix of constituent parts whose connection can only be elucidated by

¹⁰ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 97.

¹¹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 97.

¹² Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 98.

¹³ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 99.

analyzing each component both separately and in relation to the others in the matrix. The illustration he uses is that of a *rebus*¹⁴, or picture-puzzle:

But obviously we can only form a proper judgement of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element by a syllable or word that can be represented by that element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance.¹⁵

Furthermore, the process of replacement outlined above is not fixed like that of the decoding procedure, but relative to the individual dreamer, with Freud willing “to find that the same piece of content may conceal different meaning when it occurs in various people or various contexts.”¹⁶ The structure of this visual riddle points to the important place of silence in psychoanalysis: as the above passage suggests, it is what remains unsaid in a dream that is important. The rebus itself does not state the meaning of the dream, even if it provides all the clues necessary to arrive at this meaning. Silence is the dream’s locus of meaning.

This is true in large part because silence plays a fundamental role in the primary forces that Freud says govern dream formation, namely wish fulfillment, which “constructs the wish” expressed in a dream and censorship,

¹⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines rebus (a plural form of the Latin word for ‘thing’, *res*) as “an enigmatical representation of a name, word, or phrase by figures, pictures, arrangement of letters, etc., which suggest the syllables of which it is made up.”

¹⁵ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 278.

¹⁶ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 105. Here, it becomes clear that popular use of the term “Freudian” is potentially imprecise: while some components of dreams discussed by Freud appear to have a specular link with certain physical marks of sexuality, such relations are particular rather than general: the meaning of a given image depends not upon itself, but upon its relation to the other parts of the dream.

which “forcibly brings about a distortion in the expression of the wish.”¹⁷ It is through this process of distortion that the dream is transformed into the picture-puzzle to which Freud refers. The two mechanisms by which these changes occur, displacement – the movement from one thing to a related thing – and condensation – the combination of several components into one – both repress some thought or image in favor of another. If taken to their extreme, these twin mechanisms of distortion can create a situation where “what is clearly the essence of the dream-thoughts need not be represented in the dream at all.”¹⁸ This process of censorship – itself a sort of silence or silencing – forces us to, as Freud says, sniff out the “scent of the true meaning.”¹⁹ By virtue of the analytic process, the sniffing out of this meaning is really a ‘listening to,’ and thus what Freud is often listening for is what the patient does not say or, in the case of secondary revision²⁰ what he tries to not say:

The interpolations are easy to recognize. They are often reported, with hesitation; they are not themselves particularly vivid and are always introduced at points at which they can serve as links between two portions of the dream content or to bridge a gap between two points of the chasm.²¹

¹⁷ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 144.

¹⁸ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 305.

¹⁹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 142.

²⁰ The primary revision occurs in the initial presentation of the dream, which because of the process of censorship is itself not a faithful account of unconscious desires and wishes, “but the distortion [or as Freud says, a translation] (*Entstellung*) of the unconscious dream thoughts as they regress to the level of perception.” Anthony Wilden, “Lacan and the Discourse of the Other,” *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, ed. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) 262. To this first ‘translation’ is added a second, which Freud associates with patients’ voluntary censorship images that, even after the primary revision, seem incongruously strange or unacceptable. This is secondary revision. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 277-278.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part)* and *On Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953) 5: 489.

Thus, within Freud's theory of dream interpretation, we find the foundation for a psychoanalytical notion of silence: as the linguistic realm to which repressed wishes, information, and images are relegated, silence becomes synonymous with the unconscious.

Since the entire corpus of Freud's work was available to Lacan from the start, it is sometimes difficult to identify the provenance of a given reference or idea. This is particularly true of Lacan's later work, in which his own theories appear in mature form, having benefited from the same kind of continual revision as Freud's own writings.²² On the one hand, much of what forms the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis can be found in Freud, though under different names: displacement becomes metonymy (the movement from one signifier to another), condensation is supplanted by metaphor (the replacement of one signifier with another), and the id, ego, and superego are traded in for the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic. Yet the advancements made by Lacan are much more than just semantic in nature. Whereas Freud strives to understand what might be called the 'hidden' psychological significance of our actions, dreams, and thoughts, Lacan takes things one step further by elaborating the more general applicability of Freud's seminal psychoanalytic structure, particularly where it concerns our relationship to language and, by the same token, silence.

Still, it is Freud himself who provides much of the necessary intellectual momentum for this progress. His work on wit and what we now call 'Freudian slips' clearly attests to his interest in a connection between psychoanalysis and language, a point upon which he touches in the seventh chapter of *The*

²² During his lifetime, Freud published eight German editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Interpretation of Dreams, when he mentions the relationship between dream images and linguistic representation:

The work of condensation is seen at its clearest when it handles words and names. It is true in general that words are frequently treated in dreams as though they were things and for that reason they are apt to be combined in just the same way as are presentations of things.²³

Yet if Freud seems to sense a broader significance within his theories, he does not always manage to fully articulate it. One of these ‘diamonds in the rough’ that Lacan mines and polishes to a new luster is the *Fort! Da!* episode outlined by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Observing a young boy at play, Freud makes the following observations and conclusions:

What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o." He then pulled the reel again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da" [there]. This, then, was the complete game – disappearance and return. The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child's great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting.²⁴

Whereas Freud's analysis of this episode concentrates on a discovery of the personal sense behind the use of the German words *fort* and *da*, Lacan's elaboration concentrates not on the words themselves, but on a more general relationship of these playtime activities to the place of presence and absence in the child's – and, by extension, our – world. For him, this apparently simple game is a telling demonstration of the fact that “the moment in which desire

²³ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 295-296.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953) 18: 14-15. I have quoted only the essential points of the case study here.

becomes human is also that in which the child is born into Language."²⁵ What does this mean? Well, his observation is based on the fact that the child's linguistic enunciation occurs at the same time as the toy's occultation: it is when the object is lacking – the moment at which the child begins to long for its return – that this lack is filled with a word, or more precisely a signifier. Lack is thus contiguous with the beginning of language, the moment at which we first embark on a quest to speak the unspoken.²⁶ If there were no lack there would be no language.

However, as in the case of the dream's deformed representations of unconscious desires, this articulation always falls short of its mark: language never says quite what we want it to say. Silence is a totality that remains out of our linguistic reach, an impossible abundance that, suggests Lacan, takes on many guises, including God, Truth, desire, and femininity.²⁷ Confronted with these ineffable concepts, our words only manage to draw their own lack into sharper focus:

Rupture, split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge – just as the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence."²⁸

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Anthony Wilden (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) 83.

²⁶ This perspective is very similar to Martin Heidegger's suggestion that "[e]verything spoken stems in a variety of ways from the unspoken, whether this be something not yet spoken, or whether it be what must remain unspoken in the sense that it is beyond the reach of speaking." Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 120.

²⁷ Lacan also sexualizes silence when he says: "Il n'y a de femme qu'exclue par nature des choses qui est la nature des mots." However, if a woman is "excluded" from the nature of words, this does not mean that she herself does not exist, nor that she is unable to communicate using words. Rather, she is "not-all" (*pas-toute*), a totality that, like silence, can only enter language as an approximation of itself. Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XX: Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1971) 68.

²⁸ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 26.

As for Freud, this emergence of absence is thus particularly discernable in the verbal failures and occultations of speech, linguistic turns that contain what Lacan calls the “significative term” of the psychoanalytic subject’s distorted linguistic productions. In them, one must often take “a simple lapsus for a highly complex statement, or even the sigh of a momentary silence for the whole lyrical development it makes up for.”²⁹ This phenomenon is not, however, limited to spoken language. Something similar occurs in the spatial distribution of words in a written text, a punctuation that can change how they are read and understood:

It is a fact, which can be plainly seen in the study of the manuscripts of Chinese canonicals, that the absence of punctuation in them is a source of ambiguity. The punctuation, once inserted, fixes the sense; changing the punctuation renews or upsets it.³⁰

Whether written or spoken, silence is a void within language that structures meaning.

As several of the preceding notes in this section have suggested, Lacan’s ideas about language and silence bear a strong resemblance to certain aspects of Martin Heidegger’s philosophical writings. Indeed, Lacan himself acknowledges Heidegger as one of his theoretical influences, and the two – along with Freud – share a common view of silence as a potentially significant discursive act. For Heidegger, this significance hinges on a distinction between ‘speaking’ and ‘saying’:

²⁹ Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* 13. Later in the same essay, Lacan describes the unconscious as “that chapter of my history which is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter. However, “the Truth can be found again; it is most often already written down elsewhere.” Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* 21.

³⁰ Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* 78. Like the Chinese manuscripts, Old French uses almost no punctuation whatsoever, and does not abide by modern rules of capitalization.

To say and to speak are not identical. A man may speak, speak endlessly, and all the time say nothing. Another man may remain silent, not speak at all and yet without speaking, say a great deal.³¹

That which is truly said, then, is something apart from the verbal elaboration of an idea or concept, for it does not need words to be articulated. Such moments of silence are times when “language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being.”³² Like the psychoanalytic unconscious, saying is that which is expressed beyond the signifier.

Silence is thus a double-edged sword, for it simultaneously opens up a space for language in our lives and reveals our profound estrangement from that language. Our words, *in other words*, are not entirely our own. What they mean – and what we can say with them – is subordinate to a function beyond our control. Indeed, the Saying³³ described by Heidegger is an essentially passive exercise, one that is “not of our own making” but merely “comes about, comes to pass, happens.”³⁴ In order to ‘say’ instead of just ‘speak,’ the subject must, therefore, acknowledge his inability to signify anything for what it truly is. It is only at this moment that the disparate elements of speech and silence are joined together in meaning, “a renunciation in whose self-denial the relation of word to thing promises itself [to us].”³⁵ For Lacan, this conference of a relation between word and thing is the functional domain of the Other, which he defines in

³¹ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 122.

³² Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 59. The entire passage is as follows: “But when does language speak itself as language? Curiously enough, when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away oppresses or encourages us. Then we leave unspoken what we have in mind and, without rightly giving it thought, undergo moments in which language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being.”

³³ After its initial presentation, this term is capitalized in *On the Way to Language*.

³⁴ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 57.

³⁵ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 69.

various ways, including “the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject.”³⁶ The relationship between subject and silence is thus a symbiotic one. Without the subject’s reticence, silence would never appear in language as Saying, and silence, in turn, is what allows a subject to emerge as such, to speak and be understood. Seen from this perspective, silence is not just a mark of linguistic impotence: it also belies a certain discursive awareness, the ability to use language’s inadequacies to shift attention toward something extraordinary that has come together in the silent space between words.

It is this signifying dimension of silence that is most relevant to a study of literature, for the writer’s task is, at its most basic level, to give form to formless thoughts, to find a way to articulate his silent ideas. But while silence has been a significant part of theoretical disciplines for quite some time, it has only just begun to receive concerted attention from literary critics. Most significant studies have been published within the last ten to fifteen years, and the vast majority concentrate on nineteenth and twentieth-century writings by or about historically marginalized groups (e.g., women, racial minorities).³⁷ Such work has, admittedly, yielded some important insights into how silence can both stifle and facilitate personal expression, including the ideas about its role in social oppression and verbal or written resistance, part of what Robin Patric Clair calls

³⁶ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 203.

³⁷ Some examples of this trend are Irène Assiba d’Almeida, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), Shirley Marie Jordan, *Broken Silences: Interviews With Black and White Women Writers* (New Brunswick, N.J. Rutgers University Press, 1993), and Leila Brosnan, *Reading Virginia Woolf’s Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

an “organizing silence.”³⁸ Yet in many cases, more focus is put on the social context surrounding textual composition than on the texts themselves. Here, I do not wish to imply that cultural or historical realities do not play a role in literary representations and our understanding of them. Indeed, the dominant cultural and political discourses of the Middle Ages clearly influence how silence is used and portrayed in the medieval narratives discussed in the following chapters: it would, for instance, be impossible to deny that the speechlessness of some female characters in medieval texts reflects a certain misogynistic and repressive element in religious beliefs and social realities of the period. However, overemphasis on the fictional relevance of such influences can lead to a sublimation of the text’s own ideas, possibly preventing one from hearing all that its silences have to say.

The texts which I have chosen for this study – *La Vie de Saint Alexis*, *Le Conte du Graal*, and *Le Roman de Silence* – all exhibit a particularly acute awareness of the communicative problems and possibilities engendered by silence and its related gestures. By limiting this commentary to writings from the Middle Ages, I hope not only to correct what I feel is a critical deficiency in the study of silence’s literary significance, but also to explore how artistic and intellectual expression from this chronologically distant period accentuate our contemporary understanding of this fundamental linguistic phenomenon. Within the symbolic economy of the texts in question, silence is intimated in any number of possible ways, including hesitations, pauses, omissions, informational

³⁸ Though hers is not a work of literary criticism, Robin Patric Clair’s book *Organizing Silence* contains many interesting analyses of the role of silence in maintaining and defying modern organizational structures and social roles as related to minorities and women. Robin Patric Clair, *Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities*, (Albany State University of New York Press, 1998).

voids, and physical or fictional separation. The interplay of these different modes of silence demonstrates that the signifying potential of this 'presence of absence' goes beyond mere lack, its function more appropriately conceived of as a creative force that shapes meaning and structures poetics, thereby impacting internal thematic development of the narrative as well as the poet's lyrical artistry. Furthermore, the different fictional contexts of these works bring silence into close conceptual contact with some of the major intellectual issues and of the time. Ultimately, then, insights provided by these readings will constitute not just a collection of literary analyses, but also a theory of silence in linguistic representation.

After a brief introduction to the primary medieval perspectives on language and silence in Chapter One, Chapter Two offers a reading of the hagiographical *La Vie de Saint Alexis*. Long recognized as one of the most important works in the history of French literature, it is one of four very early examples of written French. At the same time, its surprisingly refined poetic structures afford a glimpse into many of the rhetorical games that later vernacular poets will further exploit and perfect. A number of early studies of *Alexis* focus on the historical accuracy of the tale and relative value of its extant versions, while others concentrate on how the text reflects various historical, theological, and social influences (Stebbins, Burger). More recently, some critics have taken note of how the story of this saint's life engages questions of linguistic signification, sexuality, and subjectivity (Durling, Leupin). My analysis builds on this latter scholarship by asking what the saint's silence – arguably his most important attribute – says about the connection between writing and desire at

this most important stage in the development of vernacular French language and literature.

While there is an enormous amount of criticism regarding *Le Conte du Graal* and its continuations, no study of significant length concentrates on the issue of silence in the text as a whole. Certainly, a great many articles and books call attention to the fundamental importance of Perceval's verbal abstinence during the grail procession (Williams, Bourquin, Dragonetti). However, silence also plays an important role in the story of the tale's other knight, Gawain, whose knightly adventures both complement and contradict those of his less polished counterpart. By treating silence as an integral facet of both characters' textual exploits and of Chrétien's writing, Chapters Three and Four show that it can be both linguistically sterile and productive, a functional nuance is rooted in a subjective manipulation of language. In the *Conte du Graal*, this adaptable character of silence helps to determine not only the meaning of what is spoken, but also the identity of who is speaking.

In the fifth and final chapter, I consider the interaction of silence, sexuality, and social organization in the thirteenth-century *Le Roman de Silence*. Though less celebrated than *La Vie de Saint Alexis* or *Le Conte du Graal*, a considerable amount of criticism regarding this verse romance has recently been published, including a special issue of the journal *Arthuriana* (7.2, 1997). Most of the available articles focus on gender issues (Blumreich, Brahney, Bullough, McCracken, Stock, Waters), although some do shift attention to the close connection between sexuality and language (Allen, Bloch, Cooper). Indeed, it would be impossible to read *Silence* without considering questions of gender and sexuality, for the text and its transvestite protagonist would hardly allow such

negligence. Positioned at a point at which these imperatives intersect the text's fictional political structure, my reading of this provocative narrative provides a look into the dynamic relationship between silence and truth, both among the fictional characters of *Le Roman de Silence* and between the poet and his text.

Chapter One: Silence in the Middle Ages

*Just as one affixes trimmings to clothes and badges to hats, so it behooves every
one of us to write in silent marks.*

— Andrea Alciato, *Book of Emblems*

Major social and intellectual institutions of the Middle Ages, including Judeo-Christianity, rhetoric, and secular fiction, exhibit a marked interest in the expressive functions and limitations of human language.¹ Consequently, this period also offers exceptionally fertile terrain for a study of silence. Of course, the contemplative paths of these various domains do not always coincide, and the diverse ways in which each one incorporates silence as part of a more general discourse on language (e.g., religious or mystical ineffability, monastic restrictions on speech, rhetorical reticence) ascribe differing values and functions to this ‘presence of absence.’ Furthermore, since the theoretical imperatives behind these different modes of silence frequently overlap, isolating their distinct characteristics can be a difficult proposition. It would, for instance, be impossible to fully explain monastic silence without first accounting for the more general religious concept of God’s ineffability.² Still, by elucidating the divergences among them, a typology of silence in the Middle Ages begins to emerge, one that belies its ambivalent yet indispensable role in all manner of linguistic expression.

¹ Eugene Vance has gone so far as to argue that “no important medieval literary text lacks an awareness of language, whether as a medium of consciousness or as a living expression of the social order.” Eugene Vance, *Marvelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) xi.

² Vance calls this problem “one of the most consistent linguistic enigmas of the Middle Ages.” Vance x.

Religious Silence and the Ineffable God

Because silence is by its very nature formless, this typology cannot account for different forms of silence, only the different ways in which it is defined or used in conjunction with more substantive linguistic structures.³ Understanding silence in the Middle Ages thus requires an awareness of medieval perspectives on language, and one of the most influential forces in this domain is theology. Like many of its scriptural foundations, the primary Biblical law governing representation is intimately linked to Judeo-Christian monotheism. Whereas statues and other tangible manifestations of faith are fundamental components of worship in pantheistic religions like those of ancient Greece or Rome, the first and second commandments of the Jewish *shavuot* explicitly forbid such idolatry while affirming God's singularity:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make thyself any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them or serve them.⁴

The juxtaposition of these two mandates explicitly sets their particular deity apart from the division and imperfection of any worldly forms that might be used to represent him.⁵ Thus, the break with what were previously divine roles and attributes of several deities in favor one all-encompassing God has more than just structural implications: this commandment (a key doctrinal foundation

³ Joseph A. Devito, who was cited in the Introduction, makes a similar suggestion: "Perhaps the best way to approach silence is to consider some of the functions it might serve or the meanings it might communicate." Joseph A. Devito, "Silence and Paralanguage as Communication," *Etc.; A Review of General Semantics* 46:2 (1989) 154.

⁴ Exodus 20:3-4.

⁵ I have chosen to use masculine pronouns when referring to God in order to maintain conformity with the sources in this chapter.

of both Judeo-Christianity and Islam) alters the established linguistic relationship between humans and the divine.

Pursuant to this law, the name previously used for God, represented by the Tetragrammaton YHVH (Yahweh), is suppressed from speech, its now-sacred consonants linguistically taboo. In Hebrew scripture, this forbidden mark is most often replaced by the more generic *adonai* (my lord), as though by simplifying the enunciation one might lessen the severity of the verbal transgression. Ultimately, of course, the only truly appropriate way to speak to or about this ineffable God is not to speak at all. Thus, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, the twelfth-century Jewish Talmudic authority Moses Maimonides asserts that, with respect to God, all language is inappropriate:

For of whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, and on the other we perceive in it some deficiency. Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more appropriate...⁶

These thoughts are echoed by Saint Augustine who, in the first chapter of *De Doctrina Christiana*, considers the possibility of referring to God as 'ineffable':

If what I said were ineffable [*ineffabilis*], it would not be said. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said, something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. This contradiction is to be passed over in silence [*silentio*] rather than resolved verbally.⁷

In an insightful volume, Silvia Montiglio shows that the same is not true of pantheistic religions, which discourage rather than encourage silence in worship,

⁶ Moses Maimonides, *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1972) 271.

⁷ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958) 11 (I.vi.6)

and thus seem “unaware of the strongest meaning that other traditions, including Christianity, attach to silence.”⁸ So, in the shift to monotheism, silence takes on a new and paradoxical significance, one brilliantly reflected – albeit somewhat cryptically – in Saint Augustine’s suggestion that it is the ‘presence’ of an ‘absence.’ As the point at which human language arrives at its signifying limitations vis-à-vis God, silence is the symptom of a representational lack, an inability to find any appropriate name for this ineffable being. By the same token, however, silence is, like God, beyond language and is therefore the only discursive act that does not betray the perfection of this radical Other. Silence is the absence of sound, but it is also the linguistic presence of the divine: in Judeo-Christian monotheism, silence and the sacred coincide.

Silence Incarnate

Such a state of affairs is nonetheless problematic for the religiously faithful. For in addition to the aforementioned invectives against direct linguistic representation of the divine, there is an implicit obligation to speak of God in worship or to address him for the purposes of prayer. This antithetical position, what could be called a linguistic ‘double-bind,’ is one of Saint Augustine’s most pressing concerns in his *Confessions*:

And with all this, what have I said, my God and my Life and my sacred Delight? What can anyone say when he speaks of Thee? Yet woe to them that speak not of Thee at all, since those who say most are but dumb.⁹

⁸ Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 9. Montiglio’s study focuses on the role of silence in Greek tragedy and maintains that its function is linked to a concept of silence culturally and religiously specific to ancient Greece. Specifically, she suggests that, unlike the ineffable silence of Christianity, silence in Greek religion reflects the power of *logos* (words) and is most often used as a means to avoid saying something that might offend the Gods.

⁹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. F.J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943) 5. (I.iv.20-23)

In spite of the suggestion that total silence (dumbness) is the only true expression of the divine, there is in this passage – as elsewhere in the *Confessions* – clear evidence of a need to address God with words, to communicate devotion through language. Note, for example, the proliferation of stylized names in the first sentence of the above passage: what is elsewhere said to be too perfect for even the word ‘ineffable’ is referred to here as ‘my God,’ ‘my Life,’ and ‘my Sacred Delight.’¹⁰ Religious faith thus seems to provoke violation of the very law that it strives to honor and uphold, forcing those who wish to address God to multiply their use of – to borrow from Maimonides’ vocabulary – ‘deficient’ signifiers.

Into this apparent linguistic impasse comes to rest the definitive symbol of Christianity’s doctrinal separation from Judaism: the Incarnation. Both human and divine, Jesus partially draws back together the two linguistic realms that the second commandment drives apart. As Alexandre Leupin suggests, the conception of this man-God hybrid necessarily positions the religiously acceptable use of language somewhere between all and nothing, between pagan idolatry and Jewish iconoclasm:

The new law rejects the vetero-testimentary “You will make no graven images” as well as the “You will make only images” of mythology to demand *that every image be an icon*.¹¹

¹⁰ Compare these to the relative linguistic poverty of Maimonides’ pair of terms, ‘Him’ and ‘He.’ See p. 19.

¹¹ Alexandre Leupin, *Fiction et Incarnation* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993) 14. The original passage is as follows: “La nouvelle loi récuse aussi bien le « Tu ne feras pas d’image » vétéro-testamentaire que le « Tu ne feras que des images » de la mythologie, pour prescrire *que toute image soit icône*.” Leupin’s work focuses on an exploration of the far-reaching effects of the doctrine of the Incarnation in the theological, rhetorical, and literary domains. He argues – successfully, I believe – that the medieval reaction to this radical teaching is the very source of scientific and literary modernity.

It is within the purview of this new representational decree that Augustine presents his *confessio*:

After this, from corporeal matter, you produced sacraments, miracles that men could see, and voices to carry your message according to the firmament of your Book. These were meant for the initiation of unbelievers and also for the blessing of the faithful.¹²

So, what before lead to derision might now instill devotion. No longer tainted *de facto* by the mark of an empty fascination with the material world, human representation is granted new signifying potential, endowed with a divine message. But while communicated by means accessible to the senses, the actual content of this message remains unarticulated. It is not part of the words themselves, but a silent truth that Augustine says is beyond all languages, regardless of national origin:

But deep inside me, in my most intimate thought, Truth, which is neither Hebrew nor Greek nor Latin nor any foreign speech, would speak to me; though not in syllables formed by lips and tongue.¹³

Human language is not the Word, but it has become its earthly representation, the vehicle whereby an ineffable God may be intimated.¹⁴

This perspective is similar to the one found in practices of Christian and Jewish mystics of the Middle Ages, who search for a way to approach the unspeakable through the only means at their disposal – language. While different practitioners' methods vary in content, all seek to transform words into

¹² Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1961) 345 (XIII, xxxiv).

¹³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 188 (XI.iii). Cf. Leupin, *Fiction et Incarnation* 69, who notes that this language beyond language "can only be a silent language."

¹⁴ The relationship between God and language in Saint Augustine's writing is very close to Lacan's view of the relationship between the Real (unconscious) and the Symbolic (language). In both, what is most significant remains unsaid, although its significance can be grasped through contemplation and analysis of what is said. See p. 5 ff.

a linguistic path leading a spiritual union with the Other and the empty fullness of silence. The general name for an entire collection of medieval Jewish mystic beliefs, *cabala* prescribes a variety of practices, including regular meditation and prayer, severe asceticism, and constant study of scripture meant to lead the truly devout follower to a perfect knowledge of God and creation.¹⁵ Perhaps the most provocative of all these procedures is the meditative technique known as *tzeruf*, or the manipulation of letters. Working with words yet adhering to the notion of God as an unspeakable truth, many cabalists try, through meditation, to envision the dissolution of signifying language, a verbal deconstruction that would allow them to penetrate the ‘beyond-ness’ inherent in the words:

By taking the word inside out of itself, playfully shaking it loose from its denotative meaning, and melting it down as he led his rapt disciples from rational discourse to the realm of pure, non-verbal perception, the Kabbalah master directed the novice out of the circular and constricting round of thought.¹⁶

Moving into a realm of linguistic otherness by stripping away all worldly associations from the syllables of God’s Hebrew name, the initiate is expected to arrive at a perfected vision of divinity. While this state is generated through a vocal elaboration, it remains essentially silent. For, as Abraham Abulafia – a follower of Moses Maimonides and one of the most ardent supporters of Jewish mysticism – notes, this spiritual activity should occur in complete isolation:

And this is the secret of the pronunciation when you wish to mention this glorious [divine] name: Make yourself right and isolate yourself in a special place, so that no one will hear your

¹⁵ The Judeo-Christian God has been seen as paving the way for the development of a destructive attitude toward the natural world, but the Cabalist teachings generally recognized the omnipresence of God in the natural world, seeing in the various beings (animate or inanimate) a mark of God’s presence, and thus worthy of the mystic’s reverence and contemplation.

¹⁶ Perle Epstein, *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988) 73-74.

voice except you, then purify your heart and soul from all thoughts of this world.¹⁷

Consistent with the divine ineffability contained in the second commandment, this tactic draws the initiate toward a silent knowledge of God, but maintains divine linguistic alterity through the obliteration and abandonment of signifiers.

This practice is similar to the *apophatic* (negative) theology that is such an essential part of medieval Christian theology. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, the fifth-century Greek philosopher who is arguably the most recognized advocate of this mystic approach, lays out his theory in *On Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology*. Like the masters of cabala, Pseudo-Dionysius maintains that spiritual union with God may be attained by means of concerted linguistic meditation and manipulation, a divine silence that he tries to speak by means a specific sort of linguistic denial. For Pseudo-Dionysius, things *associated with* God may be talked about with *kataphatic* (affirmative) statements. However, God himself, and thus silence, must be indicated only by negation, as in the following example from *The Mystical Theology*:

Ascending higher we say:
It is
not soul, not intellect,
not imagination, opinion, reason and not
understanding,
not logos, not intellection,
not spoken, not thought,...¹⁸

¹⁷ Abraham Abulafia, *The Light of the Intellect*, in Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, December 2001, <http://www.tabick.abel.co.uk/abulafia.html>.

¹⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980) 221. I have quoted only a small portion of the passage in question, which goes on for well over thirty lines and is similar to others in *The Mystical Theology*.

This linguistic cancellation signals a position in “the darkness beyond intellect” where *logos* is “wholly without sound and wholly united to the unspeakable.”¹⁹ Gradually moving further and further away from the substantive affirmations of human discourse, the effort to name God once again ends in silence. However, rather than trying to dismantle language with the intellect, Pseudo-Dionysius uses one of language’s own tools (negation) to methodically advance toward an eventual revelation and union with the divine.

In both these approaches, silence remains closely allied to the idea of an ineffable God, but the idea that we may be able, through language, to express this silence confuses its theological status. Whereas the initial religious doctrine of ineffability posits silence as a mark of humanity’s and human language’s separation from the divine, the philosophy of the mystics casts silence as both the source and object of human discourse. As a result, it is not without controversy. For instance, the idea that, once in their meditative state, cabalistic ‘Masters of the Name were no longer separated from God, was “sacrilege to the ears of a Jewish establishment steeped in logic, order, and dualism.”²⁰ As noted above, such objections are to some extent alleviated by the representational shift inherent to the Incarnation, but even Pseudo-Dionysian mysticism contains an inadvertent affirmation of language’s signifying power, concentrated in the ‘not’ of his apophatic denial. Judeo-Christian mysticism thus teeters precariously on the frontier between man and God, between the imperfection of human language and the divine perfection of silence.

¹⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite 217-218.

²⁰ Epstein 78.

Of Silence and Signs

The separation between the sensual properties of language and its loftier²¹, spiritual significance constitutes the basis of an entire theory of the linguistic sign that Augustine outlines in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Here, his goal is to provide readers with the intellectual tools necessary for an independent exploration of figurative meaning in scripture, an activity he says deals through and through with signs:

All doctrine concerns either things or signs [*signorum*], but things are learned by signs.²²

As Augustine himself readily admits, the division between these two fields is sometimes hard to define, and just because something is a thing in one context does not exclude it from being a sign elsewhere. Words, however, belong to a special subcategory of signs that is entirely removed from the more literal world of things:

There are other signs whose whole use is in signifying [*significando*], like words. For no one uses words except for the purpose of signifying something.²³

With this statement, floodgates are unlocked that will require considerable attention if they are not to fly wide open. For if words are, as he asserts, solely used to signify something else, then it stands to reason that they themselves are devoid of meaning and therefore able to be interpreted to multiple and perhaps contradictory ends. Indeed, even for an informed reader such as Augustine, there are words whose meaning cannot be definitively pinned down:

²¹ Augustine describes the Word of God as being both “silent and eternal” (*aeterno in silentio*) and says it is “above” (*supra*) him. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions* 258 (XI.vi).

²² Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 8 (I.ii.2).

²³ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 8 (I.ii.2).

There are, however, instances in which it is uncertain whether the signification is to be taken in a good or evil sense, like “in the hand of the Lord there is a cup of strong wine full of mixture [*mixto*].” It is uncertain whether this may signify the wrath of God but not the ultimate penalty, or, that is, “the dregs,” or whether it may signify rather the grace of the Scriptures passing from the Jews to the Gentiles, because “he hath poured it out from this to that,” certain practices remaining among the Jews which they understand carnally because “the dregs thereof are not emptied.”²⁴

Like the Stoics before him, Augustine anticipates Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion of the arbitrary linguistic signifier by recognizing that what a word means is not dictated by the thing to which it refers, nor by the word itself, but by random and ultimately mutable association between word (*signifier*) and thing (*signified*).²⁵ In the case of the ambiguous *mixto* described above, both interpretations are theologically acceptable, since both lead to a deeper understanding of Christian doctrine. At the same time, Augustine’s own example shows that how a word is interpreted rests with the individual, making a variety of meanings possible, some permissible and others not.²⁶ But because language itself now embodies

²⁴ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 100 (III.xxv.36).

²⁵ For the Stoics, a similar distinction is made between the signifier and the ‘name-bearer,’ while the signification or meaning of this relationship is located in an intangible entity called the *lekton*, or ‘sayable.’ These *lekta*, therefore, “change their truth value, and they can “perish” or go out of existence. Thus they are not to be identified with what is meant by a sentence where that is thought of as being timelessly true. On the other hand, they cannot be identified with what is meant on a particular occasion; otherwise they could not change their truth value. In this context what is most important about *lekta* is that they are what is conveyed in language, and are not to be identified either with the language itself or with the thing or state of affairs referred to...” Julia Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind: Hellenistic Culture and Society* 8 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992) 76. Similarly, Ferdinand de Saussure clearly affirms that “the bond between signifier and signified is arbitrary” (67). And although he suggest that this relationship is “fixed, not free” (71) at any given moment in time, language is also “powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signifier and the signified” (75). *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959). One could envision this signifying evolution through time as occurring at an accelerated rate in the linguistic associations and contradictions of the written text.

²⁶ Indeed, for Augustine, the only proper scriptural interpretation is one that leads the reader back to God: “Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all.” Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 30 (I.xxxvi.40).

the Word of God, it cannot be words themselves that contain this faulty meaning, for this would invalidate the doctrinal truth of the Incarnation, and with it Augustine's entire approach to scriptural enlightenment. Instead, it is "the desire of the user which is culpable."²⁷ Elsewhere in his writings, this problem is illustrated with a metaphor very similar to the one used in the passage cited above. This time, however, the vessel containing the duplicitous linguistic mixture offers meanings both suitable and flawed:

I have nothing against the words themselves. They are like choice and costly glasses [*vasa*], but they contain the wine of error which had already gone to the heads of the teachers who poured it out for us to drink.²⁸

Ultimately, then, the means by which Christianity brings its incorporeal divinity into the corporeal world is far from stable. The fact that God remains in the realm of the unsaid means that terrestrial comprehension of the Word is subject to the potentially faulty desires of human will, a misguided reading that can transform silence from a locus of the sacred to one of sacrilege.

Monastic Silence and Desire

Controlling this unacceptable desire is one of the primary objectives of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, a primer to the highly regulated life of medieval monasticism. Believed to have been composed in the latter half of the sixth century at the monastery of Monte Cassino, it demands rigorous obedience to an intricate set of religious laws, social restrictions, and schedules for daily labor. In no less than seventy-six separate chapters, this treatise offers detailed

²⁷ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 90 (III.xii.18).

²⁸ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 37 (I.xvi). Thus, "the only thing that counts is the motivation of the speaker, who uses language arbitrarily to good or bad ends by plying all rhetorical and stylistic forms to his *vouloir-dire*." Leupin, *Fiction et Incarnation* 69.

recommendations for even the most basic of activities, including the election of the abbot and other monastic officers, schedules for sleep, the number of psalms to be read each day, and daily food rations.²⁹

Given his preoccupation with the orderly arrangement of even minute facets of daily life, it is not surprising that Benedict is also quite anxious to control speech within the monastery walls, something he makes very clear in the chapter entitled *De Taciturnitate (On Silence)*:

Indeed, so important is silence that permission to speak should seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good or holy or constructive their talk, because it is written: In a flood of words you will not avoid sin (Prov 10:19); and elsewhere, The tongue holds the key to life and death (Prov 18:21).³⁰

So, even though he recognizes a useful side to speech, its potential benefits are far outweighed by the risk of error inherent in human language. Of course, monks following the Benedictine rule would not remain completely silent throughout the day. Organized verbal activity in the form of psalms, scriptural readings, and prayers is also an integral component of the lifestyle. However, exceptions to the rule of silence are tolerated only in controlled settings, and any unauthorized departure from the statute is to be met with stern retribution:

If anyone is found to transgress this rule of silence, he must be subjected to severe punishment [*gravi vindicare*], except on occasions when guests require attention or the abbot wishes to give someone a command, but even this is to be done with the utmost seriousness and proper restraint.³¹

²⁹ Cf. C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Longman, 1989) 23.

³⁰ Saint Benedict, Abbot of Monte Cassino, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981) 191 (VI.3-6).

³¹ Saint Benedict, Abbot of Monte Cassino 243 (XLII.9). This passage is from a later chapter in the *Rule* entitled *Ut post completorium nemo loquatur (That No One Speak after Compline)*.

There are in fact several chapters of the *Rule* whose titles attest to Benedict's distrust of the spoken word,³² which is really just another manifestation of his abhorrence for desire. Indeed, the *Rule* proclaims in both spirit and in letter that "no one is to follow his own heart's desire."³³ Nowhere is this desire more distasteful than in empty, self-serving applications of language:

We absolutely condemn in all places any vulgarity and gossip and talk leading to laughter and we do not permit a disciple to engage in words of that kind.³⁴

Here, as in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, a distinction is made between loving words for what they show and loving words themselves, between using signs and enjoying them.³⁵ The ultimate goal of these many linguistic interdictions and reprimands is thus a suppression of earthly desire (words) in exchange for a desire for God (silence).³⁶ With personal will constantly bent to that of a master (an abbot, Benedict, the pope, God), the manipulative discourse of Benedict's monastic law seeks to assimilate individuals into a faultless whole by covering over linguistic imperfection with a cloak of silence.

³² A full list of such chapters is too long to note here, but it would include "How the Night Office is to be Said on Sundays," "At What Times Alleluia is to be Said," and "In What Order the Psalms are to be Said."

³³ Saint Benedict, Abbot of Monte Cassino, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict* 181 (III.8).

³⁴ Saint Benedict, Abbot of Monte Cassino, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict* 191 (VI.8). Elsewhere in the *Rule*, he refers to such speech as "idle talk" (XLVIII.18).

³⁵ See, for example Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 9 (I.iv.4): "To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love. For an illicit use should be called rather a waste or an abuse."

³⁶ Cf. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), especially pp. 11-37.

Literature and Rhetoric: Silence of the Subject

Yet is it really possible to completely efface desire just by controlling spoken language? Even monastic life developed ways to get around the proscription of speech, including an “elaborate sign language, a kind of deaf-and-dumb alphabet [that] was developed so that the monk could express his needs without speaking.”³⁷ Frivolous use of this secondary means of communication was undoubtedly discouraged, but it does suggest that the personal will [*propria voluntas*] so detested by Benedict could be expressed without making a sound. In fact, this is precisely what occurs in secular fiction of the Middle Ages, a feat that it achieves by divesting itself and silence of the sacred aspect of ineffability. This is not to say that religious or theological references cannot be found in medieval writing. On the contrary, traces of Christian theology abound in these texts, and readers with even a cursory knowledge of Scripture will find them easy to identify. However the literary text plays by rules other than those drawn up by St. Benedict: a physically isolated and self-referential collection of signifiers from varying types and sources, fiction shifts discursive focus from an unattainable and exteriorized God to its own internal locus of meaning. In the process, both the subject’s relation to silence and silence itself are unmistakably transformed.

One of the first necessary steps in this process is to detach the signifier from any mystical value beyond the linguistic realm. Here, literature owes a debt of gratitude to classical rhetoric, which paves the way for this dislocation. In the *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian describes two types of rhetorical silence. The

³⁷ Lawrence 118-119.

first, *detractio*, is a simple omission of words. However, far from leaving the listener in a state of confusion or uncertainty that could be likened to a mystical encounter with the ineffable, this rhetorical strategy is essentially ornamental, used to maintain decorum by avoiding immodest or embarrassing statements. Furthermore, Quintilian notes that it is used only when “the word omitted may be clearly gathered from the context.”³⁸ The second figure of silence, *aposiopesis* is commonly known in literary studies as the inexpressibility topos, a feigned silence that artificially multiplies the value of the person, event, object, or quality being described.³⁹ Here, an example from *Le Conte du Graal* illustrates its use in medieval narrative:

Si se combatent par igal
 As espees molt longuement.
 Assez vos deïsse commant,
 Se je m’en vosisse antremetre,
 Mais por ce n’i voil paine metre (ll. 2616-2620)

They fought equally
 with swords, for quite a long time.
 I could easily tell you how long,
 if I wanted to take the time.
 But what good would that do?⁴⁰

Somewhat subtler than the omission of words, this silence nonetheless communicates something that is readily provided by both the surrounding context and literary tradition. Given this, it would seem as though literature may never be able to invest silence with anything more than simple and direct

³⁸ Marcus Fabius Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, 4 vols., trans. H.E. Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) IX.iii.58.

³⁹ For more information, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, 1953. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) 159-161.

⁴⁰ This translation is my own, while others from the *Conte du Graal* are taken from Kibler and Pickens’ edition.

referential qualities. However, the use of *aposiopesis* is not understood in the exactly the same way by all writers. In the *Poetria Nova*, Geoffrey de Vinsauf frees this figure from its denotative restriction:

A statement thus born does not arrive at beautiful colors openly,
but reveals itself through signs. It shines *indirectly*, nor does it wish
to proceed directly into the light.⁴¹

Furthermore, this meaning depends not only upon the discursive framework, but – as Augustine also suggests – on the physical and mental reception of a given listener. Part of the discourse is destined to be heard by the ear (*partem dedit auri* l. 1582) and another is the exclusive domain of the intellect (*partem servavit animo* l. 1583).⁴² By locating the ultimate meaning of discourse in neither an untouchable ‘beyond-ness’ nor perceptible linguistic traces, Vinsauf’s ‘new poetics’ clears a space in fictional writing for silence.

The path carved out by rhetoric has enormous implications for the literary exploitation of silence. For, once divested of its theological and mystical trappings, silence can signify any type of perceived perfection, whether spiritual, sexual, or textual. Take, for example, the bold claim made by the poet of *Le Roman de Silence*:

Si est li voirs, cho dist l’estorie
Ki de Silence fait memorie. (ll. 2657-2658)

This is the truth, according to the story
which preserves the memory of Silence
[which from Silence makes writing].⁴³

⁴¹ Geoffrey de Vinsauf, *The Poetria Nova*, ed. and trans. Ernest Gallo *The Poetria Nova and its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine*, (The Hague: Paris, 1971) 99. (ll. 1585-1586)

⁴² Geoffrey de Vinsauf 99.

⁴³ Unless enclosed in brackets, translations of *Le Roman de Silence* are taken from Psaki’s English edition.

By telling his story, the poet claims to render a tangible linguistic presence from a silent absence, to bring the ineffable into language, a totalizing fantasy that is takes the shape of a protagonist whose body silences linguistic divisions (masculine/feminine, Nature/Nurture, silence/language). A complete expression of all signifying possibilities, Silence becomes the perfect sign of the writer's own desire for linguistic perfection. Like the silence of divine ineffability, literary silence in *Le Roman de Silence* and other secular texts is also the mark of a linguistic fullness. However, what it expresses is not devotion to God, but the poet's own desire.

In both sacred and secular expression of the Middle Ages, silence is thus more than just the absence of sound. Whether the intimation of divine ineffability or the fantastic repository of a poet's desire, silence is a powerful discursive tool. As the locus of that which remains unsaid, it makes a space within discourse for ideas and desires that surpass language. Suppressing individual desire in deference to an ultimate Being, medieval theology strives to ensure the integrity of religious doctrine by maintaining a strict concordance between God and silence. However, because what silence means is always a function of the words that surround it and the (mis)interpretation of an individual listener or reader, this attempt can only succeed within well-delineated confines such as those of Benedictine monasticism. Freed of such restrictions in secular writing, it becomes a productive source of expression for less than sacred aspirations.

Chapter Two: Silence and Sainthood in *La Vie de Saint Alexis*

*A voir ce que l'on fut sur terre et ce qu'on laisse
Seul le silence est grand ; tout le reste est faiblesse.*

— Alfred de Vigny, “La Mort du loup” (*Les Destinées*)

Nowhere is medieval Christianity’s ambivalent attitude toward silence more evident than in its beliefs regarding those whom it deems closest to God.¹ While never entirely free from sin, the lives of many saints are marked by an unwavering concern for the theologically proper use of words and, consequently, silence. Nonetheless, just what constitutes such propriety is not altogether clear, even among the most distinguished Church fathers. On the one hand, silence is a necessary and unmistakable mark of linguistic humility, the only truly fitting description for a deity whose absolute alterity places him beyond any and all appellations. In this sense, linguistic profusion is inherently suspect,² leading Saint Benedict to declare that a monk in search of divine exaltation “controls his tongue and remains silent, not speaking unless asked a question.”³ On the other,

¹ In the Bible, spiritual perfection is often spoken of in terms of one’s proximity to God. See, for example, James 4:7-9. For a brief background on the rapport between these ideas and the portrayal of saints in medieval writing, see also Brigitte Cazelles, “Introduction,” *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) 1-3. The twin themes of separation from the world and proximity to God have also been tied to an imaginative etymological heritage of the Greek word for saint, *hagios*. While its more accurate meaning is merely “holy,” André Vauchez notes that it has often been associated with the phrase *a gios*, or “external to the world.” André Vauchez, “Lay People’s Sanctity in Western Europe: Evolution of a Pattern (Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries),” *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) 23.

² One of the Biblical passages glossed by Saint Benedict, Proverbs 10:19 clearly affirms that with profuse language comes transgression: “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.”

³ Fittingly, this chapter of the monastic *Regla sancti Benedicti* carries the title *De humilitate* (On Humility). Saint Benedict, Abbot of Monte Cassino, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Timothy

those who are truly faithful cannot – as Saint Augustine so clearly affirms – remain completely silent.⁴ To do so would constitute man’s failure to recognize God as such, to tacitly reject divine authority by verbal omission. So, despite the fact that he describes his *confessio* as a “secret exultation” (*secreta exultatione*) between him and God, Augustine concedes to share his story with others susceptible of being inspired by it, a recitation to be heard “in the ears of the believing sons of men, companions of my joy and sharers of my mortality, my fellow citizens, fellow pilgrims.”⁵ When taken to its extreme, silence would thus be rebellious, a form of resistance that borders “dangerously on abstention, indifference, and disappearance;” a radical void intimating not servile humility, but free will.⁶

La Vie de Saint Alexis stands as a marvelously crafted theopoetic exploration of the precarious frontier between these two related yet ultimately contradictory uses of silence. The hagiographic account of a noble layman who

Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981) 201 (VII.56). For additional information regarding this work, see p. 28 ff. Though not proof of any intentional Benedictine influence on this particular version of the Alexis legend, it is interesting to note that St. Alban’s, the abbey where the *L* (Hildesheim) manuscript was composed, belongs to the Benedictine order.

⁴ The only people Augustine excuses from not speaking are those who are dumb. Paradoxically, they are also those who, in his mind, say the most. See p. 20 f. Even in secular forms of praise or eulogy, silence is typically no more than a rhetorical strategy used to amplify the value of the person in question. This is the category of rhetorical *topoi* to which Ernst Robert Curtius gives the name “inexpressibility.” *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 159-162.

⁵ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. F.J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943) 214. (X.iv.6)

⁶ Lisa Block de Behar, *A Rhetoric of Silence and Other Selected Writings* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995) 6. Robin Patric Clair makes a similar suggestion concerning an excess of silence on the part of a mourning widow in the aboriginal Warramunga tribe of central Australia: “Although the ‘mourning silence’ is imposed on the women for a period of two years, this woman remained silent for twenty-four years. Her silence speaks to us. It speaks of oppression; it enunciates defiance; it articulates resistance. Furthermore, it evidences creativity; it demonstrates control; it languishes in frustration; and it isolates the woman while simultaneously joining her to others who have known or know of the imposed silence.” Robin Patric Clair, *Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities*, (Albany, NY: Albany State University of New York Press, 1998) 147.

forsakes the material trappings of secular life for a spiritually oriented existence, this narrative details a series of privations (financial, sexual, alimentary, vestimentary, and linguistic) meant to serve as apophatic evidence of the saint-to-be's absolute devotion to God. Sanctified upon death, Alexis and his life of personal denial are cast as the terrestrial realization of God's celestial *talent* (OF, will; plan).⁷ Yet while verbal asceticism helps to secure his place in the theological hierarchy of the narrative, the devotional orientation of Alexis' only other notable linguistic act – hasty composition of an autobiographical missive just prior to death – is less certain. In fact, careful examination of this and other significant episodes from the saint's life suggests that his brief deviation into substantive representation transforms silence from a tacit partition denoting spiritual obedience and linguistic submission into an articulate space where anonymity gives way to identity and language melds with desire.

Poetry and Parentage

Though the vague chronological origins of medieval texts make their dates of composition approximate at best, most linguistic and physical evidence suggests that this Old French version of the Alexis legend had its genesis near the middle of the eleventh century before being transcribed into the *L* (Hildesheim) manuscript – part of the celebrated St. Alban's Psalter – sometime during the first half of the twelfth.⁸ For this reason, *La Vie de Saint Alexis* has long

⁷ While other Old French words (e.g., *volentet*) have more or less the same meaning, *talent* is the one use most often by the hand that composed *La Vie de Saint Alexis*.

⁸ Gaston Paris was the first to propose this dating, and his work continues to be an authoritative reference. Gaston Paris and Leopold Pannier, *La Vie de Saint Alexis, Poème du XIème, et renouvellements du XIIe, XIIIe, et XIVe siècles* (Paris: 1872). MS. L. is part of the St. Alban's Psalter, now housed in the collections of St. Godehard's (Bremen, Germany). For a discussion of the significance behind what would be the "lost original" upon which the text in *L* is based, see Alexandre Leupin, *Barbarolexis: Medieval Writing and Sexuality*, trans. Kate M. Cooper (Cambridge:

been recognized – alongside the *Saint Eulalie*, the *Saint Léger*, and the *Clermont Passion* – as one of the preeminent works of French literature.⁹ As such, it was part of an important evolution in the sociolinguistic diffusion of information and ideas. Whereas both religious and secular books composed in Latin and Greek were, by default, reserved for an intellectual elite, writing in the vernacular opened new and wider avenues of textual dissemination. For, if an overwhelming majority of the medieval populace remained functionally illiterate, “people were accustomed to hearing, understanding and acknowledging the authority of the written word.”¹⁰

Today, this oral propagation of medieval textual material is most often associated with the *jongleur*, that wandering bard who shared his predominantly secular repertoire with the masses. However, the Church also played its part: having no doubt recognized the evangelical and doctrinal advantages of a more flexible linguistic policy, the council of Tours voted in 813 to require translation of homilies “*in rusticam Romanam linguam*” (in the rustic romance language) so

Harvard University Press, 1989) 40-44. There are three other extant versions of this Old French *Alexis* (later medieval versions have also been found in thirteenth and fourteenth-century manuscripts), including MS. A (Bibliothèque Nationale de France), MS. P (No. 19525, Bibliothèque Nationale de France), and MS. V (the Vatican). I have chosen to use *L* because it is the most complete of the four. For more information concerning the physical condition and format of this particular manuscript, see Otto Pächt et al., *The St. Alban's Psalter (Albani Psalter)* (London: The Warburg Institute - University of London, 1960).

⁹ For a discussion of these and other examples of early hagiographical romance, consult Duncan Robertson, *The Medieval Saints' Lives* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1995) 200-252.

¹⁰ R.I. Moore, “Literacy and the Making of Heresy c. 1000 – c. 1150,” *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530*, eds. Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 32. See also M.B. Parkes, “The Literacy of the Laity,” *The Medieval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London: Aldus Books, 1973) 555-577. It should be noted that there is much debate about just what might constitute “literacy” when speaking of the European Middle Ages. Its use in this sentence refers first and foremost to the ability to read and write, though one could envision the exceptional case of someone who manipulates language in a creative fashion – a *jongleur*, for example – without being able to understand or reproduce its written forms.

that the general public might understand them.¹¹ With this decision, the catholic hierarchy not only strengthened clerical influence on the laity, but also helped legitimize a fledgling tongue: use of Old French as an official ecclesiastical language both enriched its vocabulary and expanded its discursive registers. Furthermore, like the celebrated *Serments de Strasbourg* (c. 842), this directive attests to the historical progression toward a continuum between use of the vernacular and national identity in medieval France, a trend that brought together diverse ideas and terminology from politics, literature, and religion.¹²

But while this cultural amalgamation shored up the linguistic foundations of Old French, it also made vernacular poetry an inherently eclectic form of expression. From complex notions to simple words, its articulations were often drawn from these different sources of inspiration with equal vigor. The medieval text is thus a heterogeneous one, its language capable of conditioning any number of relationships and meanings, “a unifying act that establishes and generates meaning as it is performed.”¹³ Indeed, like so many other examples of early vernacular literature, the Hildesheim *Alexis* shows unmistakable signs of a

¹¹ Charles Joseph Hefele, *Histoire des conciles*, 5 vols., ed. and trans. H. Leclercq (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1910) 5.2:1143. Hefele’s work provides an excellent summary of all major medieval councils and their most important decisions and recommendations. In addition, cf. Nancy Vine Durling, “Hagiography and Lineage: The Example of the Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis*,” *Romance Philology* 40.4 (1987) 458, who also suggests that vernacular hagiographical works like *Alexis* “grew out of” these doctrinal linguistic policies.

¹² The oldest surviving example of Old French is found in the *Serments de Strasbourg* (c. 842), political declarations in which two grandsons of Charlemagne – Louis le Germanique and Charles le Chauve – proclaim allegiance to each other and form an alliance against their older brother Lothaire. For more information regarding the ties between political consolidation and linguistic development in medieval France, see Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993).

¹³ Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Philip Bennet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 81.

mixed heritage, its pages the offspring of a union between two very different parents, one pleasing and the other spiritual:

Ici cumencet *amiable cançon* e *spiritel raisun* d'iceol noble barun Eufemien par num, e de la vie de sum filz boneüret del quel nus avum oït *lire et canter*.

Here begins the *pleasing song* and *spiritual account* of that noble baron named Euphemian, and of the life of his blessed son, about whom we have heard *reading and singing*.¹⁴

With broad yet masterful strokes, the fundamental duality of medieval vernacular hagiography is brought sharply into view: nourished by both factual accounts and felicitous rumors, it binds the weighty authority of written documentation to the satisfying evanescence of song.¹⁵ It is, in other words, governed by the contradictory set of motivations that Saint Augustine describes as part of an ethical choice between enjoyment (*fruendum*) and use (*utendum*) of things:

To enjoy something is to cling to it for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of that love. For an illicit use should be called rather a waste or an abuse.¹⁶

¹⁴ Carl J. Odenkirchen, ed. and trans., *The Life of St. Alexius* (Brookline, MA: Classical Folios, 1978) 142, *emphasis mine*. All passages in Old French from *La Vie de Saint Alexis* are taken from Odenkirchen's edition. For the English translations, I have used Odenkirchen as a point of departure but made slight adjustments in places where I deemed his wording cumbersome or imprecise.

¹⁵ As Lawrence Cunningham notes: "One of the most difficult tasks of the scientific hagiographer, is trying to unravel the skein of fiction to find what historical material might be hidden in the entire fabric" of a saint's recorded life. Lawrence Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 40. For an informative discussion of many of the distinctive features of vernacular hagiography versus its Latin counterpart, see Evelyn Birge Vitz, "From the Oral to the Written in Saints' Lives," *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) 97-114. While Vitz does not discuss *La Vie de Saint Alexis* in her article, she does touch on many relevant points, including an interesting discussion of the vaying influence of textual models in Latin and vernacular hagiography.

¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958) 9 (I.iv.4).

Nowhere is this dilemma more prevalent for Augustine than in the ambiguous ‘things’ of language. Since the only purpose of words is to signify something else,¹⁷ deciding just what this something else might be is a delicate exercise: whereas “many and varied obscurities and ambiguities deceive those who read casually,” the rigorous lector will esteem the same words to be “magnificently and wholesomely modulated.”¹⁸ It is not – as was explained in the preceding chapter – words that are to be despised, but rather their misuse and misunderstanding.¹⁹ Mired in contradictory compositional motivations, it is almost impossible to tell on which side of this fence the *Alexis* summary falls. For, as other critics have noted, careful attention to the audible component of what appears to be a prose synopsis detects instead a contiguous string of rhymed verses (signaled by word pairs like *raisun / num* and *bonëuret/canter* in the passage cited above).²⁰ Vacillating between two poles of a rich yet ambivalent linguistic origin, between spiritual and sensual vocabularies, between a reasonable use of words and their shallow enjoyment, this introductory passage joins the story of Alexis to a study of the intricacies of medieval poetic lexis.²¹

Like the *précis* to his *vita*, Alexis is himself descended from two distinct sources, one worldly and the other divine. Yet while its conflicting poetic styles

¹⁷ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 8 (I.ii.2).

¹⁸ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 37-38 (II.vi.7-8).

¹⁹ See p. 28 f.

²⁰ Cf. Leupin 43, who also addresses the relationship between the text’s various ambiguities and what he calls the “dissimulated versification” of its prologue. For additional enlightenment on this section of the poem, see Joseph P. Williman, “The Hidden Proeme in Verse of the *Vie de Saint Alexis*,” *Romance Notes* 14 (1973) 606-612.

²¹ These and other uncertainties surrounding the legend could, perhaps, explain the Church’s wavering devotion to it: his *vita* was not given official status until it became part of Bolland’s *Acta sanctorum* (17th century), and other commentators (Odenkirchen, Pächt) have noted that there is very little evidence of commitment to the saint’s cult in the celebratory calendars of medieval abbeys.

and inspirations make the pseudo-prose summary waver in uncertainty, its protagonist's similarly diverse origins are – at least on a first reading – much less troublesome. From the start, it is God's omnipotent authority that holds sway over earthly and familial influence in Alexis' life, an unfaltering spiritual devotion that is the direct result of his parents' desperate plea for divine reproductive intervention:

A Deu apelent parfitement:
 "E reis celeste, *par tun cumandement*
 Amfant nus done ki seit *a tun talent*." (ll. 23-25, *emphasis mine*)

Both call on God in perfect form:
 "Ah heavenly king, *by your command*
 Give us a child who is *according to your will*."

A rather obvious borrowing from the Biblical story of Abraham and Sarah, this pious request subjugates the couple's future offspring *de facto* to the will of God and, more generally, human desire to heavenly influence.²² Indeed, Alexis is not so much a product of sexual copulation as he is the earthly manifestation of celestial power. Described as the son of a noble Roman baron, he was nevertheless "engendered by divine will" (*Par le divine volentet il desirables icel sul filz angendrat*).²³

Confused with images of the goddess Natura in later medieval romance, the role of a *Deus creator* is given particular weight in the Old French *Alexis* in comparison to other versions of the same legend. For instance, even the 'official' hagiographic account in the *Acta sanctorum* acknowledges – albeit indirectly – a physical coitus between Euphemian and his wife prior to the future saint's birth:

²² For the story of Abraham and Sarah, see Genesis 16:1-3, 15-16, 17, 21:1-2. The two stories are, of course, not identical, since the Biblical couple had a multitude of offspring. However, other similarities discussed below (see p. 48 f.) reinforce this parallel.

²³ Odenkirchen 142.

...atque statuerut ut deinceps castum et sanctum reliquum vitae
suae tempus ducerunt...

...they decided from then on they would spend what was left of
their lives in chastity and holiness...²⁴

The Hildesheim manuscript, however, contains no such allusion. Instead, the text redirects all traces of a beginning toward God. Both the mother's fecundity and her son are thus the result of symbolic donation rather than physical generation:

Tant li prierent par grant *humilitet*,
Que la mulier *dunant fecunditet*.
Un filz lur *dunet*, si l'en sourent bon gret. (ll. 26-28, *emphasis mine*)

So much they prayed to him with great *humility*
That he *gave* the woman *fecundity*.
He *gives* them a son, and they were very thankful to him.

With its repetition of the verb *doner* (OF, to give) and use of the rhyming pair *humilitet/fecunditet*, this passage reinforces the general theological distinction between man (thankful receiver of life) and God (generous provider of life) noted above. Furthermore, the parents' successful plea for a child binds spiritual devotion and reward to sexual abstention, a saintly standard of conduct that will be essential to this hagiographical account as well as its complementary discourse on the linguistic implications of silence.

Refusal and Reticence

But if the text's initial passages point to a harmonious alignment of terrestrial and celestial designs for Alexis' life, their fundamental discord soon becomes apparent. Having previously offered up his son for divine stewardship with great humility (*grant humilitet*, l. 26), Euphemian begins to act out of

²⁴ Odenkirchen 36.

unabashed self-interest when confronted with the possibility of genealogical discontinuity:

Quant veit li pedre que mais n'aurat amfant,
Mais que cel sul que il par amat tant,
Dunc se purpensisent del secle en avant.
Or volt que prengent mogler a sun vivant. (ll. 36-39, *emphasis mine*)

When the father sees that he will have no other children
Except this one alone, whom he loves so much,
He takes to thought about the world to come.
He now wants him to take a wife while he is yet living.

The father is thus willing to subject himself to the dominance of divine *talent* only so long as this obedience does not interfere with his own worldly plans for an orderly inheritance of his extensive lands (*larges terres*, l. 402) and great palaces (*granz paleis*, l. 403). A common theme in medieval fiction, such concerns are, in some measure, a reflection of the social structures that governed feudal heredity.²⁵ But while the content of this passage may not hold exceptional significance, its contextual placement does. For the future to which Euphemian so intently turns his attention is one that has already been condemned by the text's own verse:

Bons fut li secles, ja mais n'ert si valiant.
Velz est e frailes, tut s'en vat declinant;
Sist ampairet, tut bien vait remanant. (ll. 8-10)

The world was good, never again will it be as honorable.
It is now old and weak – it all continues to decline.
It has worsened so, all good is left behind.

²⁵ Characters in the other two texts examined by this study express similar concerns. See p. 101 ff., p. 169 ff., and p. 206 ff. As Bloch notes, such literary perspectives on the topic are a "faithful echo" of popular and political trends of the time, with one of the first official decrees regarding the inheritance of feudal holdings having been issued by Charles the Bald in 877, prior to his military campaign in Italy. March Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L.A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 194-197.

Cast as the denigration of a glorious past to which the scribe also refers as “the days of Noah and Abraham” (*Al tens Noe ed al tens Abraham*, l. 6), the future in *La Vie de Saint Alexis* is nothing short of sinful, a prurient object of desire that leads one away from God.²⁶

This is a significant position, because it paves the way for a censure of not only the destructive love for material possessions, but also the superfluous enjoyment of language, both of which are represented by the paternal estate. For, in addition to the usual marks of familial prosperity mentioned above, Alexis stands to inherit significant linguistic assets, a verbal largesse that Euphemian begins to hand down soon after his son is born:

Puis ad escole li bons pedre le mist;
Tant aprist letres que bien en fut guarnit. (ll. 33-34)

And then his good father put him in school;
He learned letters so well that he was well provided with them.

The name Euphemian is itself indicative of such verbal profusion: as a rhetorical figure of speech, the *euphemism* operates via the exchange of more mild, indirect, or vague terms for ones considered exceedingly harsh, blunt, or offensive. So, “[a]s a substitution from signifier to signifier...the father’s name would dissimulate evil and point once again in the direction of the splitting at work in the text’s beginnings.”²⁷ Alexis’ paternal legacy is, in other words, one that revels in a clever manipulation of the subtle distinction between *spiritel raisun* and

²⁶ There are a great many examples of this disdain for the present and/or future in medieval writing, whether secular or religious. One of the most scathing of such condemnations is Bernard of Cluny’s *De Contemptu mundi* which, in addition to insightful reflections on a variety of theological and philosophical topics, begins with a clear expression of hatred for the present and pessimism regarding any terrestrial future: “Hora novissima, tempora pessima sunt” (It is the final hour, the times are wicked – be watchful!). Bernard of Cluny (Morlaix), *Scorn for the World: Bernard of Cluny’s “De Contemptu mundi,”* ed. and trans. Ronald E. Pepin (Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1991).

²⁷ Leupin, *Barbarolexis* 45.

amiable cançon, between a sparing, precise use of language and its more opulent, melodious subterfuge.

True to his name, Euphemian tries to disguise his irreligious intentions with a more pleasing and conformative facade, presenting marriage and its consummation as a divinely ordained task:

Ço dist li padres: “Filz, quar t’en vas colcer
Avoc ta spuse al cumand Deu del ciel.” (ll. 52-53)

His father said, “Son come go to bed now
With your bride, as God in heaven orders.”

Yet the motivation behind this renewed concern for doctrinal compliance is, as suggested above, not spiritual but sociopolitical. The bride chosen for Alexis is thus not just any woman, but one of “distinguished parentage” (*halt parentet*, l. 41) and the couple’s respective fathers are much more focused on the physical and political assemblage of their children (*Lur dous amfanz volent faire assembler*, l. 45) than on any sacred bond between man and wife. Furthermore, Euphemian’s claim that God requires Alexis to consummate his marriage is not entirely accurate. Though medieval Christianity conceived of marriage as an “honourable estate,” it was deemed an insufficient alternative to complete sexual abstention – “an excellent continence” (*excellentis continentiae*) – particularly for those devoted to a higher calling.²⁸

Still, the mere fact that the *L* manuscript and other medieval variants of the *Alexis* legend allow this marriage to take place suggests that the father’s plans may succeed: earlier Greek and Syrian versions place Alexis’ departure from

²⁸ For Augustine, marriage is a viable yet ultimately insufficient solution to a need for total religious devotion (including that typified by saints), which can only be satisfied by an “excellent continence” (*excellentis continentiae*). Saint Augustine, “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” trans. Peter Holmes, et al., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (First Series), 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971) 5:271 (I.xviii).

Rome *before* the wedding.²⁹ But instead of compromising the saint-to-be's integrity, this poetic innovation only serves to render his refusal of it all the more prominent. Almost as quickly as he enters into the social contract of marriage, he refuses to honor it out of devotion to God:

Danz Alexis l'espuset belament;
Mais ço est tel plait dunt ne volsist nient;
De tut en tut ad a Deu sun talent. (ll. 48-50)

Lord Alexius marries her in a brilliant ceremony
But this is the sort of contract he wanted none of:
Altogether his will is directed towards God.

Thus, Euphemian's earlier pact with God has now come back to haunt him, for Alexis' desire (*talent*) is not sexual, but celestial, and the familial contract (*plait*) that would join him to this woman cannot hold up against the one that binds him to God. Beaten at his own game, the count is betrayed by the inherent etymological instability of the word *plait*, which intimates unity and division, the possibility of sexual rapport and the dark shadow of its lack.

Indeed, soon after this initial refusal, a direct correlation between sexual and material privation becomes evident. Still faced with the unwanted task of physically consummating the symbolic union between him and his bride, Alexis is torn between faithfulness and obedience. Though he does not *want* to disobey his father (*Ne volt li emfes sum pedre carocier*, l. 54), he cannot, it seems, forsake God:

Cum veit le lit, esguardat la pulcela;
Dunc li remembret de sun seinor celeste,
Que plus ad cher que tut avoir terrestre. (ll. 56-58)

As he sees the bed, he looked at the maiden;
He then remembers his heavenly lord,

²⁹ Odenkirchen 13-29.

Whom he holds dearer than all earthly goods.

Whether intentional or not, the scribe's description of this scene paints a rather humorous picture of the worried saint-to-be glancing from bed to wife, wife to bed, all the while thinking of God. As anticipated, the *señor celeste* ultimately wins out over *aveir terrestre*, with Alexis sacrificing the tangible but fragile (*frailles*, l. 69) rewards of his patrimony for an esoteric but lasting truth (*veritet*, l. 64) afforded by absolute spiritual devotion. Even the manuscript's decorative accents seem to preclude satisfaction of Euphemian's request; the image of the couple on the frontispiece of *L* shows bodies much too large for the bed in which they are meant to lie.³⁰ A colorful rejection of reproductive obligation in favor of paradoxical *noces virginels* (virginal nuptials),³¹ this episode serves as a narrative foundation for the stark asceticism that will characterize Alexis' existence throughout the tale.

The concordance between pictorial and lexical features in this part of the manuscript signals yet another point of differentiation between father and son. Just as Alexis' commitment to his *señor celeste* entails a rejection of paternal attitudes regarding material and sexual production, so too, does it predicate a different linguistic perspective. Whereas Euphemian tries to coerce his son into bed by using deceptive verbal arguments, Alexis' justification for choosing abstinence is both demonstrative and declarative, relying upon the authoritative

³⁰ A monochrome reproduction of this image is available in Odenkirchen 6. For a high-quality color image of the same folio, see the Internet website for the University of Aberdeen's St. Alban's Psalter Project, Nov. 2002, Jan. 2003, <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/diss/historic/stalbanspsalter/>. A copy of the latter is included in this study as appendix A.

³¹ Odenkirchen 142.

display of a textual *raisun* and symbolic gestures to support his devotional discourse:

Quant sa *raisun* li ad tute *mustrethe*,
Pois li cumandet *les renges de s'espethe*,
Ed un anel; a Deu li ad a ço mandethe.
Dunc en eisset de la cambre sum pedre. (ll. 71-74, *emphasis mine*)

When he had *shown* her his whole *argument*,
He entrusted her with *the sash from his sword*
And a ring; whereupon he commended her to God.
From there he left his father's room.

But if Alexis' reasoning is clearly presented to his bride, the vocabulary of the second and third lines of this passage has long puzzled readers, particularly the word *renges*. In his edition of the text, Odenkirchen provides several possible etymological antecedents for this term, and the translation I have chosen – “sash” – is one of those he suggests.³² It is, therefore, surprising that Odenkirchen instead opts for the relatively awkward “sword-ring,” especially since the frontispiece shows that the object in question is indeed a decorative bolt of cloth draped around the handle of a sword.³³ As suggested above, these items may be read as symbols of the saint's abandonment of his bride (*un anel*) and feudal authority (the *renges* from his sword). Later in the tale, Euphemian does, for example, lament what would have been his son's privileged military status had he not given up his inheritance:

Tei cuvenist helme e brunie a porter
Espede ceindra cume tui altre per. (ll. 411-412, *emphasis mine*)

You should have worn helmet and mail;
Girt on a sword like the rest of your peers.

³² He associates it with the Syrian word “renda.” Odenkirchen 71-72.

³³ See note 30, p. 48.

Still, once closer attention is given to the whole of this scene, another possible interpretation comes into view. Specifically, the illuminator's positioning of the sword in this frontispiece – waist high with the handle tilted towards Alexis' soon-to-be estranged wife as she grasps hold of its discarded ornamentation – is, I believe, a visually striking reference to another, more religiously inspired pact: the abrahamic covenant of circumcision.³⁴ Recalling his parents' initial deference to divine authority and implying Alexis' dedication to the *bons secles* praised in the opening lines of the poem, adoption of this new contract marks a general disdain for the material world that will come to define both the language and identity of this saint.³⁵

Sacrifice, Silence, and the Self

One of the more common motifs in both Latin and vernacular hagiography of the Middle Ages is that of the pilgrimage, a religious voyage whose connotations of hermetic isolation were especially popular during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.³⁶ Unlike the errant chivalric wanderings depicted in Arthurian *chansons de geste*, such physical displacement in the *vita sancti* is generally indicative of a spiritual progression toward God.³⁷ It is

³⁴ God's promise of descendants to Abraham required the latter's acquiescence to the covenant of circumcision. Genesis 17:10-14.

³⁵ Thus as Durling asserts, "Alexis is defined by his opposition to lineage." Nancy Vine Durling, "Hagiography and Lineage: The Example of the Old French Vie de saint Alexis." *Romance Philology* 60.4 (1987): 454

³⁶ Vauchez notes that imitation of the meekness, poverty, and trials of Christ became an increasingly popular model during the twelfth century. André Vauchez, "Lay People's Sanctity in Western Europe: Evolution of a Pattern (Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries)," 26-31. See also *Monks, hermits, and the ascetic tradition: papers read at the 1984 Summer Meeting and the 1985 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. W.J. Sheils (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1985).

³⁷ The opposite is true of Perceval's departure from his homeland in *Le Conte du Graal*, during which time he eventually "no longer remembered God." See p. 115 ff.

therefore of no great surprise that the itinerary of Alexis' flight from unwanted paternal *aveir* in Rome is, like the rest of his life, willed by God:

Dreient lur sigle, laissent curre par mer;
La pristrent terre o *Deus les volt mener*.
Dreit a Lalice (ço fut citet mult bele)
Iloec arivet sainement la nacele. (ll. 79-82, *emphasis mine*)

They raise the sail, let the ship speed across the sea,
They find land *wherever God wishes to take them*,
Straight to Laodicea (which was a very attractive city)
That is where the ship arrives unharmed.

Driven by sacred forces, Alexis goes not where he wants, but where God chooses, his mortal *talent* still indistinguishable from that of his *seignor celeste*. Accordingly, he "never ceases to serve God" while at this divinely ordained destination. Nevertheless, the port city of Laodicea offers no more than a momentary respite for poet, saint, and reader alike; the whole of Alexis' time there is condensed into just three short lines:

Dunc en eisit danz Alexis a certes
Ço ne sai jo cum longes i converset;
Ou qu'il seit de Deu servir ne cesset. (ll. 83-85)

Without hesitation Lord Alexis disembarks.
I do not know how long he sojourns there;
However that may be, he never ceases to serve God.

Whether genuine or feigned, the poet's ignorance regarding this transitory sojourn minimizes its fictional significance, diverting attention toward verses yet to come. So, as its name in Old French (*Lalice*) suggests, this city is just a permeable barrier – *une lice* – that delimits passage from one place to another, from the decadent pitfalls of Rome to whatever lies on the other side.³⁸

³⁸ *Lice* was fencing used near medieval castles to demarcate small areas of land for jousts and other purposes.

Given the preponderant role of heavenly authority in Alexis' life and travels up to this point, it is only natural to assume that the next destination would stand as a textual counterweight to the oppressive materialism of his rejected patrimony. It is thus odd that the future saint's departure from Laodicea seems to be motivated by an idolatric fascination not unlike the illicit material desires of his father:

D'illoc alat a Alsis la ciptet,
Pur une imagine dunt il oit parler (ll. 86-87)

From there he went to the city of Edessa,
Because of an image that he had heard talked about.

Pulling his pilgrimage astray from its strict theological orientation, Alexis' visual curiosity throws – at first blush anyway – the legitimacy of his spiritual commitment into doubt. Yet nowhere is this *imagine* described in detail, and not once during seventeen long years in Edessa does Alexis try to catch even the slightest glimpse of it. This, despite the fact that he sleeps, eats and begs for alms just outside the church where it is housed.³⁹ In fact, the journey from *Lalice* to *Alsis* ultimately points not to an abusive love of things but to their deliberate abandonment, a concerted scorn for the very sort of desire that initially provoked this departure.

Indeed, the name *Alsis* is itself suggestive of deprivation. Phonetically, it differs from the proper name Alexis by just a single syllable (*eks*), represented in

³⁹ Thus, when later in the tale this same *imagine* summons Alexis, he is referred to as “the one who is seated across the portal” of the church (*Cil qui tres l'us set*, l. 177). In a study of the historical and philological foundations of this legend, Cooper argues that this relic is none other than the famed Shroud of Turin, the burial cloth said to carry the corporeal image of Jesus. Linda Cooper, “The Old French Life of Saint Alexis and the Shroud of Turin,” *Modern Philology* 84.1 (1986): 1-17. Though I do not agree with her thesis in its entirety, the comparison is a fitting one, since both objects are portrayed as tangible remnants of a divine presence now departed.

the saint's name by the privative pairing “-ex-.”⁴⁰ Thus, while Laodicea is a “very attractive city” (*citet mult bele*), Edessa is merely a “city” (*ciptet*) where, upon arrival, Alexis promptly rids himself of all superfluous material belongings:

Tut sun aver qu’od s’ei en ad portet
 Tut le depart par Alsis la citet –
 Larges almosnes, que gens ne l’en remest (ll. 91-93)

All his possessions that he had brought with him
 All of them he distributes throughout the city of Edessa–
 Generous alms, so that nothing whatsoever was left to him.

Donating everything carried from Rome to the local poor, the future saint accepts and retains only those amounts of food or money absolutely necessary for survival (v. ll. 93-95, 251-253). Foreshadowed by his earlier rejection of the patrimonial *renge*s and *anel*, Alexis’ temperance and generosity in this episode reinforce his dedication to a Christic selflessness that is clearly opposed to the selfish materialism espoused by his father, Euphemian.⁴¹ He is, as the text repeatedly claims, not a man of the world, but *l’hume Deu* (l. 170), the man of God.⁴²

⁴⁰ As a prefix, *ex-* denotes someone or something ‘apart from’ or ‘outside of’ an established norm or relationship.

⁴¹ St. Thomas Aquinas defines temperance as a “disposition of the soul which imposes a measure on any passions or operations.” St. Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on the Virtues*, trans. John A. Oesterle (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966) 113.

⁴² With good reason, Vauchez asserts that the rapport between asceticism and Christ is a fundamental tenant of medieval hagiography: “As their enthusiastic practice of charitable works showed, behind all these initiatives lay the conviction that the poor were images of Christ and a privileged means of access to God.” André Vauchez, “Lay People’s Sanctity in Western Europe: Evolution of a Pattern (Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries),” 28. Moreover, this was a model that surpassed gender divisions, since the life of Jesus was also used as a framework for the literary interpretations of female saints’ lives. For an interesting perspective on this topic, see Magdalena Carrasco, “Sanctity and Experience in Pictorial Hagiography: Two Illustrated Lives of Saints from Romanesque France,” *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) 33-66.

Aside from demonstrating his spiritual qualities, such modifications to the protagonist's clothes and material accoutrements bring about – as in *Le Roman de Silence* – perceptible physical changes on the body.⁴³ In this case, however, their purpose is not to preserve a familial estate but to embody its rejection. Like his furtive escape from Rome, Alexis' metamorphosis from *sire* (l. 124) to *almosners* (beggar, l. 124) is meant to distance him as much as possible from the role of paternal heritor. So, when Euphemian sends a pair of trusted household servants to search for his wayward son, they are unable to recognize their former master, even though they see him among a group of beggars in Edessa:

Deus, at li emfes sa tendra carn mudede!
Ne-l reconurent li dui sergant sum pedre. (ll. 116-117)

God! How the boy has changed his tender flesh!
The two servants of his father did not recognize him.

Literally a changed person without the tangible trappings of his high social estate, Alexis escapes his past by eliminating its physical signs. Here, bodily asceticism and identity go hand in hand.

Yet material wealth is only one component of this forsaken inheritance.⁴⁴ It is therefore fitting that Alexis' path of self-denial is also a linguistic one, the saint-to-be subjecting his tongue to the same temperate standards as the rest of his body. Thus, when faced with the task of summarizing Alexis' stay in Edessa, the poet highlights both carnal *and* verbal manifestations of his abstinence:

Dis et seat anz n'en fut nient a dire;
Penat sun cors el Dame Deu servise. (ll. 161-162)

⁴³ At one point in *Le Roman de Silence*, the female protagonist's masculine guise changes her to such an extent that "everything one can see of her is very nearly male" (*Quunque on en voit est trestolt malles*, l. 2478). See p. 204 ff.

⁴⁴ See p. 45 ff.

For seventeen years there was nothing to say
He practices self-denial in the service of the Lord.

Mirroring the privative pain of physical asceticism, linguistic restraint is what ultimately ensures Alexis' social isolation. In fact, when Euphemian's servants first fail to distinguish this "man of God," among the city's many beggars, particular care is taken to note that no words have been exchanged between the two parties:

Ne-l reconurent ne ne l'unt anterciet. (l. 121)

They did not recognize him, nor did they ask him any questions
Similarly, when Alexis makes an unexpected return to his father's house later in the text, preservation of his anonymity hinges on not only an altered physical appearance, but also the quietude of all concerned:

Par nule guise unces ne-l aviserent,
Ni-l ne lur dist ne il ne-l demanderent.
Quels hom esteit ne de quel terre il eret. (ll. 238-240, *emphasis mine*)

They never had the slightest suspicion about him,
And he did not tell them, nor did they ask him
What sort of man he was or from what country.

Complementing Alexis' material asceticism, this linguistic self-deprivation leads to a deprivation of the self: all demonstrable traces of conspicuous existence are exchanged for the empty signs of nameless anonymity.⁴⁵ Silence in *La Vie de Saint Alexis* constitutes a verbal suppression of identity.

Yet Alexis does not, as one might expect, experience feelings of anxiety as a result of this social alienation. There is, for example, none of the "fear and

⁴⁵ Here, self can be opposed to a social group or community. Cf. Lawrence Cunningham 68. Although Cunningham's appraisal of this hagiographical theme reverses the flow of events described above, it asserts a similar rapport between religious devotion, asceticism, and the self: "[R]eligious conversion gives one a wider horizon than the self...and this widening horizon itself engenders a certain asceticism."

trembling” that Augustine associates with his spiritual salvation.⁴⁶ Rather, his new and different state – his otherness – only gives him cause for an unspeakable joy:

Il fut lur sire, or est lur almosners.
Ne vus sai dire cum s’en firet liez. (ll. 124-125)

He was their lord, now he begs from them.
I cannot tell you how happy this has made him.

Apart from his satisfaction at being released from his genealogical burdens, the explanation for Alexis’ happiness is found in the text’s theologically inspired discourse on language. In it, religious perfection is always tied to linguistic absence, with divine speech portrayed as an overabundance that can only be imperfectly translated into terrestrial signs.⁴⁷ Thus, whenever God speaks in *La Vie de Saint Alexis*, it occurs through a passive intermediary using “a voice” (*une voix*, l. 292) whose words are not immediately understood by those who hear them.⁴⁸ This is, for example, what occurs when the *imagine* that first drew Alexis to Edessa asks – at divine behest – a sacristan in the church to “bring the man of God forward” (*Ço dist l’imagera: “Fai l’ume Deu venir,”* l. 171). Confused by this vague appellation, he asks the image for clarification. The reply attests not only

⁴⁶ Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *Sermons (94A-147A) on the New Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1991) 317-318. The passage from which this reference is taken points to the questionable nature of Alexis’ will, a notion that will be explored in the following chapter: The point is, even those who are already walking along the road of justice will, if they attribute this to themselves and their own strength of character, disappear from it. That’s why, to teach us the necessary humility, holy scripture says through the apostle, *With fear and trembling work out your own salvation*; and to stop people from claiming anything for themselves because he said ‘work out,’ he immediately added, *For it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure* (Phil 2:12-13)."

⁴⁷ As Augustine suggests, God’s word can be intimated but never directly represented or reproduced. See p. 20 ff.

⁴⁸ Such misunderstandings crop up both time God makes himself heard (v. ll. 171-177; 291-315).

to Alexis' spiritual devotion but also to the shocking linguistic maturity of this early vernacular text:

Respont l' imagine: "Ço est cil qui tres l'us est
Pres est de Deu e des regnes del ciel;
Par nule guise ne s'en volt esluiner." (ll. 178-180)

The statue replies, "He is the one, who is seated so near the portal;
He is close to God and to his kingdom of heaven.
Not in any manner does he wish to remove himself therefrom."

Divine proximity is corroborated by linguistic isolation: like God, Alexis may only be referred to in tangential fashion. Alexis' silence is thus an opening within which the divine becomes manifest. As a result, the abandoned *renes* of noble stature have been replaced by *regnes* of divine authority, a promise of future recompense for present sacrifice realized within the text's lexical echoes. Once more, then, we come up against a seemingly inescapable duality first signaled in the pseudo-prose synopsis. Even as it highlights the overt religious imperatives of a hagiographical manuscript, Alexis' silence is occasion for the covert linguistic acrobatics of poetic composition.

But regardless of this ambivalence, one thing is clear; silence in *La Vie de Saint Alexis* serves as the tacit trace of an estrangement that is inherent to language, the silent mark of a fundamental separation between the subject and his signifiers.⁴⁹ Nowhere in *La Vie de Saint Alexis* is this presented in more striking fashion than during Alexis' unanticipated return to Rome. Upon arrival,

⁴⁹ "Two lacks overlap here. The first emerges from the central defect around which the dialectic of the advent of the subject to his own being in the relation to the Other turns – by the fact that the subject depends on the signifier and that the signifier is first of all in the field of the Other....The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as a subject. There, strictly speaking, is the temporal pulsation in which is established that which is the characteristic of the departure of the unconscious as such – the closing." Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* 204-205, 207.

his first reaction is one of fright; in particular, he is wary of becoming ensnared by the coercive forces – both linguistic and physical – of his estranged family:

S'or me conuissent mi parent d'icesta terre,
Il me prendrunt par pri ou par poeste;
Se jo-s an creid, il me trairunt a perdra. (ll. 203-205)

If my family in this land now recognize me,
They will seize me by entreaty or by force.
If I believe what they say, they will drag me to perdition.

Despite these fears, the future saint chooses to seek shelter in his own home, a decision made all the riskier by his request to be lodged under a staircase (*degret*, l. 218), in plain sight of all who may pass. While he does not want to be recognized, Alexis does want to be seen: instead of the more common *lit* (bed), he requests that a *grabatum* (bed without curtains, l. 218) be placed in his new habitat. Of course, it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty whether or not this distinction was intentional, but the protagonist's ensuing behavior would seem to support this notion.

For even with this precarious public exposure, Alexis maintains his anonymity for another seventeen years, the transparent visibility⁵⁰ of his existence under the staircase sustained by – contrary to what one critic suggests⁵¹ – a complete refrain from verbal interaction:

Li serf sum pedre ki la maisnede servent
Lur lavadures li getent sur la teste.
Ne s'en corucet, net il ne-s en apelet.
Tuz l'encarnissent, sil tenent pur bricun
L'egua li getent, si moilent sun lincol.

⁵⁰ Cf. Jean-Pierre Bordier, "La Maison d'Alexis," *Et c'est la fin pour quoy sommes ensemble: Hommage à Jean Dufournet professeur à la Sorbonne Nouvelle: Litterature, histoire et langue du Moyen Age, I-III*, ed. Jean-Claude Aubailly et al. (Paris: Champion, 1993) 247.

⁵¹ While the rest of his article provides some useful insights, Ulrich Mölk is mistaken when he says that Alexis "sees and speaks with everyone" (*il voit et il parle avec chacun*) during his time under the staircase. Ulrich Mölk, "La Chanson de saint Alexis et le culte du saint en France aux Xie et XIIe siècles," *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale (Xe-XIIe Siècles)* 21 (1978): 339-56.

Ne s'en corucet giens, cil saintismes hom. (ll. 263-268)

His father's servants, who serve the household,
Throw their dirty water on his head;
He does not become angry, nor does he call them to task.
They all mock him, they hold him for a fool,
They throw water on him they drench his bedding;
He does not become angry in the slightest, this most holy man.

Like his pilgrimage, Alexis' silence has obvious christological inspirations: his refusal to give lip service the harsh treatment doled out by his aggressors is highly reminiscent of Jesus' forgiving behavior during the Crucifixion.⁵² Still, evidence of spiritual commitment is not the sole result of these silent evasions. Almost a parody of Alexis' earlier baptism (ll. 29-30), the imagery of this scene also points to a close rapport between silence and subjectivity. Replacing the "fine name" (*bel num*, l. 30) given to the saint by his parents, the verbal insults hurled by this unruly group of servants, emphasizes both their roles as speaking subjects and the importance of Alexis' place as symbolic other.⁵³ So, whereas the bodily sacrifice of Christ's crucifixion is focused on spiritual salvation, Alexis' has for aim a linguistic deliverance. As Jacques Lacan suggests, the true function of a saint like Alexis is not to give something to those around him, but to empty himself out so that others may realize the extent of their own subjectivity. Alexis

⁵² The Biblical corollary for this sentiment is Luke 23:34: "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'" For more on the rapport between Alexis and Christ, see Howard S. Robertson, "*La Vie de Saint Alexis: Meaning and Manuscript A*," *Studies in Philology* 67 (1970): 420-428.

⁵³ This linguistic otherness of sainthood is even perceptible in the vocabulary of beatification, which distinguishes between two different voices (*vox*). While some formal restrictions began to take shape as early as the eighth century, foundations for the contemporary process of canonization were not formalized until the eighteenth (under the reign of Pope Benedict IV). Before that time, the process of sanctification was by and large carried out on a local or regional level, and the decision to venerate a given individual was generally the result of popular opinion (*vox populi*), a public recognition of devotion and sacrifice that was almost systematically endorsed by clergy from the local church or diocese (*vox Dei*).

is here the quintessential other, a living repository for the fundamental deprivation – what Lacan would call *le manqué à être* -- of a subject's desire:

A saint's business, to put it clearly, is not *caritas*. Rather, he acts as trash [*déchet*]; his business being *trashitas* [*il décharite*]. So as to embody what the structure entails, namely allowing the subject, the subject of the unconscious, to take him as the cause of the subject's own desire. In fact, it is through the abjection of this cause that the subject in question has a chance to be aware of his position, at least within the structure.⁵⁴

Like silence, the saint is nothing, the tender flesh (*tendra carn*, l. 116) of his deprived body susceptible to the whims and words of those who drag him back into the world of substantive signification. But because of this, silence is no longer merely a linguistic placeholder for God: carrying within itself the possibility of both celestial devotion and terrestrial derision, it also opens up a linguistic space to an expression of desire.

Writing and the Will

As the preceding sections of this chapter have demonstrated, one of the recurring themes in *La Vie de Saint Alexis* is its protagonist's unfailing acquiescence to divine will. From the moment he first sets foot outside his father's room (v. l. 74), Alexis' actions all point to one very clear and common objective: spiritual union with God. Not even when brought face to face with the dolorous lamentations of his estranged family does he stray from his pious trajectory, convinced that all is somehow meant to be:

⁵⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Television* ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier et al. (New York: Norton, 1990) 15. The connection between this episode and Freud's famous *fort-da* case would be difficult to ignore. Indeed, Lacan's appraisal of it clarifies his own comments regarding the saint: "If the young subject can practise this game of *fort-da*, it is precisely because he does not practise it at all, for no subject can grasp this radical articulation. He practises it with the help of a small bobbin, that is to say, with the *objet a*. The function of the exercise with this object refers to an alienation, and not to some supposed mastery, which is difficult to imagine being increased in an endless repetition, whereas the endless repetition that is in question reveals the radical vacillation of the subject." Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1977) 239.

Soventes feiz lur veit grant duel mener,
 E de lur oilz mult tendrement plurer,
 E tut pur lui, unces nient pur eil.
 Danz Alexis le met el consirer,
 Ne l'en est rien, issi est aturnet. (ll. 241-245)

Many a time he saw them grieving deeply,
 And tears flowing from their eyes most tenderly:
 Always for him, never for anything else.
 Lord Alexis gives it due consideration,
 But it is of no concern to him, for thus it has been ordained.

Thus, like his deliberate avoidance of visual interaction with the *imagine* in Edessa, Alexis' silence in Rome is indicative of a willing submission to God. Never losing sight of its saintly destination, the hagiographical itinerary of Alexis' life seems the perfect illustration of what Paul Tillich describes as sainthood's defining characteristic:

The "saint" (he who is determined by the Spiritual Presence) knows where to go and where not to go. He knows the way between impoverishing asceticism and disrupting libertinism.⁵⁵

To be a saint is, in other words, to possess an inane awareness of the special ethical standards that ensure theological dedication and conformity.⁵⁶ Given the

⁵⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 3 vols, 270.

⁵⁶ While not universally accepted during the Middle Ages, the idea of saintly predestination was – with concerted support from the likes of Saint Augustine – part of official Church doctrine. During a twenty-five year period in the first half of the fifth century, St. Augustine and followers of the British monk Pelagius feuded over some of the basic tenants of Christian doctrine, including original sin and predestination. For the Pelagians, we are created without sin, and thus become sinners "in our actions, not by Nature." *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Theodore de Bruyn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 91-92. Following their logic, the inverse is also true: a pious individual can be so only when he or she has led a pious life. As simple as this may sound, it amounted to a terrible heretical affront for Augustine and the Church. For if man is no longer subject to original sin and salvation is his to win or lose, there is no need for divine grace (*L. gratia*). See Saint Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Catholic University of America Press: Washington DC, 1992) 262. Such ideas rattled Augustine who, in spite of his own checkered past, was unforgiving in his criticism of the Pelagians' ideas. Even after Pelagius was cleared of many charges leveled against him by one council, the Bishop of Hippo continued to hound the adversary and his followers, and one of the doctrinal points that he took particular care to uphold in defiance of Pelagius' theories was that of saintly predestination: "Let us, then, understand the calling whereby they become elected – not those who are elected because they have believed, but who are elected that they may believe." Saint Augustine, *On the Predestination of Saints* in *The Basic Writings of Saint*

methodical resistance to desire and peaceful suffering evident in Alexis' comings and goings, his receipt of this cherished title shortly after death (v. l. 372) would certainly appear to be a fitting end.

But another look at the events surrounding his homecoming suggests that all is not so straightforward. In fact, even before this fateful return to Rome, a rift begins to develop between divine *talent* and the individual will of *l'hume Deu*. Ironically, it all starts with God's decision to reward Alexis for devoted service by announcing the future saint's imminent entrance into Paradise (*paradis*, l. 173). Once the full spiritual import of his apophatic existence has been revealed, he is showered with salutatory praise from fellow inhabitants of Edessa:

Trestuit l'onurent li grant e li petit,
E tuit le prient que de els ait mercit. (ll. 184-185)

Everyone does him honor, both great and humble,
And they beg him to have mercy on them.

Yet what most would find pleasant the future saint can only abhor, since his severely ascetic approach to life and language is at conceptual odds with both this revelatory pronouncement and its abundant linguistic offerings. Driven by a memory of the encumbering *aveir* from which he had fled prior to taking refuge in Edessa, Alexis feels that he must once again pick up stakes:

Quant il ço veit, qu'il le volent onurer,
"Certes," dist il, "Ni mais ad ester,
D'iceste honor nem revoil ancumbren." (ll. 186-188)

When he sees that they wish to accord him honors,
"Surely," he said, "I can be here no longer:
With these honors I do not wish to burden myself.

Augustine, ed. Whitney J. Oates, Vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1948) 2 vols, 809. For Augustine, it is thus not the actions of a man that carve out his path to sainthood, but instead something he possesses at birth. In other words, a saintly path is one traced from the start: sainthood is (like the original sin) given, and not earned.

However, while Alexis hopes to make a hasty retreat on a boat to somewhere even further from Rome, the *senior celeste* has other, very different plans for the *hume Deu*:

Andreit Tarson espeiret ariver,
Mais ne puet estra : ailurs l'estot aler;
Andreit a Rome les portet li urez. (ll. 193-195)

He hopes to arrive straightaway in Tarsus,
But that cannot be; it is elsewhere he must go:
A storm carries them straight to Rome.

Pushing him away from the privative isolation of strange lands and back toward the familiar but dreaded materialism of Rome, this trip is not one he chooses to take.⁵⁷ For the first time in this narrative, the wills of *Deu* and *l'hume Deu* are not one and the same.

Thus, as was true of Saint Augustine in the *Confessions*, Alexis is caught between two contradictory representational imperatives that govern his existence.⁵⁸ On one side, there is silence, the linguistic trace of an ascetic religious devotion. On the other, there is an implicit need for public recognition of his suffering and sacrifice, essential if asceticism is to amount to anything more than the “disrupting libertinism” described by Tillich.⁵⁹ Such is the dilemma that so plainly confronts Alexis when, after seventeen years in Rome, he nears the end of his terrestrial journey:

Iloc converset eisi dis e set anz,
Ne-l recount nulls sons apartenanz,
Ne neüls him ne sont les sons ahanz
For sul le lit u il ad jeü tant:

⁵⁷ Odenkirchen 43. The Latin text of *Acta sanctorum* puts this quite plainly, stating that Alexis' return to his native city is “against his will” (*contra voluntatem*).

⁵⁸ See p.20 ff. as well as p. 35 ff.

⁵⁹ Tillich 270.

Ne puet muer n'i seit aparissent. (ll. 271-275)

In this manner he lives for seventeen years
Yet none of his people recognize him
Nor did any one know of his suffering
But there was the bed where he had lain so long:
There he cannot keep it from being quite apparent.

Although there is nothing to suggest that Alexis would either need or want to alter the silent nothingness that has become his only sign, he is pushed to do otherwise. Unable to suppress (*muer*) the tangible marks of his sacrificial suffering, he is left to choose between substantive symbols and their absence, between obedient acceptance of this new turn in his divinely ordained route and radical defiance of it.

The response to this conundrum is, like much of *La Vie de Saint Alexis*, decidedly equivocal, combining elements of both conceptual forces that now bear down upon its saintly protagonist. In what is perhaps the text's most surprising moment, Alexis breaks his thirty-four year silence just as death approaches, a rare verbal interjection that he uses to make one very special request:

"Quer mei, bel frere, ed enca e parcemin,
Ed une penne, co pri, tue mercit."
Cil li aportet, receit les Alexis. (ll. 281-283)

"Dear brother, find me ink and parchment,
And a pen, this I beg of you, if you will be so kind."
He brings them, and Alexis takes them.

Suddenly, the future saint embraces all that he had so long denied himself, employing both the audible and material components of linguistic signification. Yet like his voluntary rejection of visual interaction with the *imagine* in Edessa, Alexis' substantive use of language may also be read as a rejection of the same, for his rhetorical brevity intimates a continued commitment to the ascetic ideal.

Limited to just two short lines, Alexis' sudden foray into writing is just as restrained as his sparing use of spoken language:

Escrit la cartra tute sei medisme,
Cum s'en alat e cum s'en revint. (ll. 284-285)

In the letter he writes all about himself:
How he went away and how he came back.

Temperate application of the *penne* thus replaces verbal restraint and the physical punishment of his body (*Trente quatre anz ad si sun cors penet*, l. 276): instead of detailing his many laudable acts, he chooses to relegate them to a textual silence. In addition, this is a point upon which the *L* manuscript places special emphasis. Whereas other Old French versions of *La Vie de Saint Alexis* describe the *cartra* as a letter "in which he had written all that had happened in his life" (*Ou a escrit testot le suen convers*, l. 349), this verse is conspicuously absent from the Hildesheim *Alexis*.⁶⁰

Of course, it could be argued that the underlying motivation for this silence is not derisive, but devotional; that by striking some sort of balance between words and their lack, Alexis' compositional philosophy is not so different from that espoused by many medieval theologians, who conceived of the written word as a necessary but particularly insufficient tool, even more so than speech.⁶¹ Indeed, even after his death, Alexis takes steps to try and ensure a theologically acceptable chain of diffusion for his exceptional document. Thus,

⁶⁰ Odenkirchen 118. Odenkirchen substitutes this line from *P* and *A* in his translation of *L*.

⁶¹ Previously cited examples of this perspective have focused on the work of Saint Augustine, but similar ideas are found in the writings of other medieval theologians, including those of Saint Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas considers the possible reasons for which Jesus would not have written down his doctrine. In all, he give three reasons; writing was not dignified enough a means of teaching, it could not contain his teaching, and his doctrine would not have reached everyone in an orderly manner if committed to writing. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 22 vols. (London: Burnes, Oates, & Washbourne Ltd., 1920) 16:222-224.

before ceding it to the outstretched hand of the pope (v. ll. 371-374), the saint very flatly rejects his father's request for the *cartra*:

Il la volt prendre; cil ne li volt guerpir. (l. 351)

He wishes to take it; but the other refuses to give it up.

By denying his father's advances, Alexis also denies the text's most powerful symbol of human desire, his refusal to relinquish this document an implicit refusal to submit himself to anything but divine rule.

Yet if the pseudo-prose summary in *L* can so easily dissimulate verse, it could be asked how much faith can truly be placed in the piety of this abbreviated missive and its gaping narrative lacuna. In fact, I would argue that Alexis' sparse words belie a set of motivations altogether contradictory to those that had initially seemed to dictate his call for pen and parchment. First, as others have noted, the saint's representational minimalism is, particularly in this *Vie de Saint Alexis*, but an occasion for further narrative development:

Saint Alexis has signed his name, and the scene of writing has been closed in a perfectly accomplished manner – but only on the surface and temporarily. For the *mise en abyme* concerns only the first half of the text; the story that the saint lays out on parchment relates only his own narrative peregrination and accounts neither for the reception nor the publication of the double text.⁶²

In addition, the mechanism whereby this second text comes into being ties Alexis' writing to a realm other than that for which it was originally intended:

Lui la consent ki de Rome esteit pape.
Il ne la list ne il dedenz ne guardet;
Avant la tent ad un boen clerc e savie. (ll. 373-375)

He surrenders it to him who was the pope of Rome.
He did not read it, nor does he look inside;
He holds it out to a worthy and learned clerk.

⁶² Leupin, *Barbarolexis* 52.

Instead of remaining in the hands of a theological authority, Alexis' *vita* is redirected into the poetic domain, an unforeseen deviation that significantly alters the content of original document.⁶³ Embellished by this gifted clerk, the saint's *vita* balloons from two to eight lines and now includes detailed personal information.⁶⁴

Yet perhaps it is too easy to lay all the blame – or credit – for this posthumous textual expansion in the poetically skillful hands of the clerk. In fact, Alexis' own document even more suspect than the overtly “poetic” text that supplants it. Once again, the unique features of the *L* manuscript come into play, particularly its frontispiece. Earlier in this chapter, it was shown that these illuminated scenes of the saint's initial departure from Rome warrant careful attention for their pictorial representation of Alexis' ascetic impulses. What they do not show us also speaks volumes. In all other illustrated Alexis manuscripts, the frontispiece shows an image of the saint as he composes his autobiographical *cartra*.⁶⁵ By eliminating this pictorial counterpart to Alexis' compositional gesture, all attention is focused on the text produced in this episode, rather than on any interpretive symbolic embellishments; words alone carry the weight of Alexis' message.⁶⁶

⁶³ The misdirection this saintly document from Alexis to the pope to the poet is an interesting parody of the process of textual subjugation carried out with novitiates or underage children in the Benedictine orders. “He states his promise in a document drawn up in the name of the saints whose relics are there, and of the abbot, who is present. The novice writes out this document himself, or if he is illiterate, then he asks someone else to write it for him, but himself puts his mark to it and with his own hand lays it on the altar. [...] Then the novice prostrates himself at the feet of each monk to ask his prayers, and from that very day he is to be counted as one of the community.” Saint Benedict 269 (LVIII.19-23).

⁶⁴ Durling 461-462.

⁶⁵ Pächt 120-121, 140.

⁶⁶ Brian Stock explains that the charter is a document that has particular significance in regards to its communicative intent: “The new charter was smaller in dimensions and lacked many of the

In this light, Alexis' supposedly pious text takes on a new and more insidious hue. For, once the lines of his original work are taken *à la lettre* (at face value), the divine talent that had so completely controlled the saint's existence during this narrative pilgrimage is no more, confined to a silent gap between the two extremes of his narrative course: *Cum s'en alat e cum s'en revient*. Complemented by use of the reflexive verb *se revenir*, the ascetic *brevitas* of Alexis' writing changes the forced return voyage to Rome into a trip chosen by the saint himself. In this moment, it is not God's desire but the saint's longing for nothingness that becomes manifest, a rhetorical sublimation of divine *talent* within the textual silences of the saint's writing. As a result, silence is transformed from an absent mark of spiritual devotion into a linguistic space where personal will finds its first tentative expressions, an asceticism that no longer implies submission to divine power but, as Nietzsche suggests, the love of power itself:

Sometimes the saint exercises a defiance against himself, which is a close relative of the love of power, and which gives even the most solitary man a feeling of power; sometimes this bloated sensibility leaps from the longing to give his passions free rein, to the longing to make them collapse like wild stallions, powerfully driven by a proud soul...⁶⁷

Whether malicious or unwitting, Alexis' literacy leads to a heresy of sorts, for even with careful navigation of sainthood's linguistic paths, he is unable to avoid

traditional formulae. Eventually it was simply called *scriptum*, *pagina*, or *carta*, indicating that the text rather than its symbolic trappings constituted the message." Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983) 58.

⁶⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) 100.

the sinful snares of written expression.⁶⁸ Caught between the same contradictory forces at its origin, that to which *La Vie de Saint Alexis* ultimately attests is not religious and spiritual piety, but the impossibility to express this piety within language, the saint's devotion twisted and torn by a radical silence that is both the negation and nourishment of desire.

⁶⁸ Saint Benedict, for one, was very suspicious of this medium, and therefore did not allow the monks to possess any personal writing implements: "We mean that without an order from the abbot, no one may presume to give, receive or retain anything as his own, nothing at all [*nullam omino rem*] – not a book, writing tablets or stylus – in short, not a single item, especially since monks may not have the free disposal even of their own bodies and wills." Saint Benedict 231 (XXXIII.2-4).

Chapter Three: Silence and Sin in *Le Conte du Graal* (Perceval)

Homo sapiens tacebit usque ad tempus lascivus autem et imprudens non servabunt tempus.

Ecclesiasticus 20:7

Reading *Le Conte du Graal* can at times be difficult. Diverse historical and literary references, linguistically ambiguous passages, and an elaborate poetic style: all these factors contribute to what is an extremely enjoyable but challenging verse romance. While there are, as Chrétien de Troyes suggests, many fine *conjointures*¹ in his writing, there are also moments when this particular text seems disjointed, of which the most striking example is its final, enigmatic couplet:

Et quant la roïne le voit,
Si li demande qu'ele avoit.² (ll. 9233-9234)

When the queen saw her
she asked her what was the matter.³

¹ This is a term used by Chrétien de Troyes to describe his writing in *Erec et Enide*. Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1953) l. 14.

² Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*, ed. William Roach (Geneva: Droz, 1959) ll. 6514-6518. All references to the Old French manuscript are taken from this edition, which is based on MS Fr. 12576.

³ My translations are based on Roach's edition of the Old French text. Modern English translations of the *Graal* are available, including a fairly recent one by William Kibler: Rupert T. Pickens, ed. and William W. Kibler, trans., *The Story of the Grail (Li Contes del Graal) or Perceval* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990). However, Pickens and Kibler based their edition on a different manuscript (Bibliothèque Nationale f. fr. 794), so I have usually chosen to provide my own translation in order to maintain consistency within the present study. Passages that have been quoted from Kibler's translation include the appropriate page reference to his work. Other translated editions include: Nigel Bryant, trans., *Perceval / The Story of the Grail* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982); Ruth Harwood Cline, trans., *Perceval or the Story of the Grail* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985); Robert White Linker, trans., *The Story of the Grail (Perceval)* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952). Roger Sherman Loomis and Laura Hibbard Loomis, trans., *"Perceval, or the Story of the Grail by Chrétien de Troyes," Medieval Romances* (New York: Modern Library, 1957).

Grammatically, this sentence is altogether complete, but the person expected to answer the query (Dame Lore) never does, leaving the queen – as well as readers of the *Graal* – in a state of suspended anticipation.⁴ As a result, continuations and adaptations had already begun to appear in the latter half of the twelfth century, only a few years after Chrétien is thought to have composed the original. In fact, this dialogic void was so troubling that every effort was made to eliminate all textual evidence of it, the first continuation picking up exactly where the *Graal* left off:

Et qui si l’a espoëntee.
“Ha! franche roïne honoree”⁵

and who had frightened her so.
“Alas! Noble and honored queen

Spliced directly onto Chrétien’s last verse, the continuator’s opening words create a seamless transition between the two tales, paving the way for Dame Lore’s long-awaited answer and eventual rhetorical closure. Equally striking is the physical rendering of this poetic confluence: in all but one of the extant manuscripts containing both texts, the scribe has inserted the first verse of the continuation immediately after the *Graal*, without changing folios or otherwise signaling any narrative separation.⁶ Historically, then, there was a concerted

⁴ Here, I use the term “grammatically” in a purely relative sense: Old French manuscripts do not follow the basic rules of punctuation and capitalization to which we are now so accustomed. As a result, the parsing of a given passage into discrete sentences is largely dependent upon a contextual interpretation of its meaning.

⁵ William Roach, ed., *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949) ll. 1-2. The manuscript used for Roche’s edition of the *Graal* (MS FR. 12576) is the same from which the above quotation is taken. The English translation is my own.

⁶ Roach, *Continuations* xvi-xxxii. For further information regarding the contents and condition of extant manuscripts containing the *Conte du Graal* (there are a total of twelve that include the entire tale and three more with fragments of it) and certain of its continuations, see Alexandre Micha, *La Tradition manuscrite des romans de Chrétien de Troyes* (Geneva: Droz, 1966) 28-64.

attempt to retroactively eliminate any fictional and physical emptiness, to substitute the relative certainty of linguistic signs for an ambiguous silence.⁷

When considered in conjunction with narrative breaks between the stories of Perceval and Gawain (v. ll. 4812-4815, 6214-6216, 6514-6518), this premature ending does much to account for a certain critical tradition that, like the continuations, treats the work as unfinished or incomplete, its termination rationalized as the unfortunate result of Chrétien's precocious death.⁸ Of course, the idea that Chrétien de Troyes passed away prior to having completed his most celebrated work is – particularly in light of the practical and physical constraints on textual composition in the Middle Ages – a tenable one.⁹ At the same time, however, there is no real proof of such a poetically untimely demise, and although the complete absence of a conclusion is not typical of medieval romances, their closing verses are never as rhetorically prominent as their opening ones. In fact, the endings of vernacular texts are often very brief, consisting of a terse indication from the author or scribe that the tale is through.

⁷ Such medieval experiments in textual revision are instructive to the contemporary reader, reminding us that literary interpretation and criticism are supplementary to the text itself. Not surprisingly, continuators also did their best to tie up the romance's other loose ends, incorporating, for example, several return visits to the Grail Castle.

⁸ Another of Chrétien de Troyes' other Arthurian romances, the *Chevalier de la Charette*, has traditionally been associated with this same theory. While it does not appear to be 'missing' anything like the *Graal*, another writer claims -- within the text itself -- to have undertaken the task of completing Chrétien's unfinished work. Above all else, such claims are a visible symptom of the generally uncertain status surrounding the relationship between writer and text in the Middle Ages. Gregory B. Stone, "Chrétien de Troyes and Cultural Materialism," *Arthuriana* 6.2 (1996) 69-87.

⁹ All medieval manuscripts were produced entirely by hand. This included not only the written text and intricately colored illuminations, but also the physical preparation of vellum and binding of completed folios. Perhaps Ernst Robert Curtius is not far from the truth when he suggests that, "[t]he most natural reason for ending a poem in the Middle Ages was weariness. Writing poetry was such a strenuous thing." *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton UP: Princeton, 1983) 90.

Such is the case in *Yvain*, another of Chrétien de Troyes' most famous Arthurian romances:

Del chevalier al lion fine
Crestiens son romant issi.
Onques plus dire n'en oï,
Ne ja plus n'en orés conter
S'on n'i velt mençoigne ajoster.¹⁰

Thus Chrétien ends his tale
of the Knight on the Lion.
I never heard any more told of it,
nor will you ever hear anything further
unless some one wishes to add some lies.

Simple but effective, these few short lines accord *Yvain* the structural and fictional integrity that the *Conte du Graal* lacks.¹¹ Still, given all the other irregular starts and stops that punctuate this text, perhaps an abrupt ending is the only truly fitting way to bring it to a close. Indeed, Roger Dragonetti has suggested that, while internally fractured, the *Graal* is conceptually complete. For Dragonetti, Chrétien de Troyes' text maintains – from start to finish – a coherent poetic structure founded on the instability of the signifier. Thus, in his reading, the arcane ending is an appropriate – if somewhat puzzling – culmination for an *œuvre assomée* (completed work).¹²

¹⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au lion, ou, Le roman d'Yvain*, trans. David F. Hult (Paris: Livres de Poche, 1994) ll. 6804-6808. Translation is my own.

¹¹ Preemptively criticizing any potential continuations of his tale by labeling them as lies (*menchonnies*), the poet – while probably doing very little to impede future revisions of his work – lends his work additional cohesiveness. This rhetorical distinction between “truth” and “lies” is popular in medieval writing and is addressed in more detail on pp. 176 ff.

¹² Roger Dragonetti, *La Vie de la Lettre au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Seuil, 1980). This topic is an integral to Dragonetti's entire study, but is particularly developed in the last chapter, 241-264. Here, my English translation does not preserve the original expression's double meaning: the French word *assomée* suggests both a state of conceptual completion and physical submission or destruction. In the *Graal*, this term is used to describe Perceval's detailed description of Gornemans de Gorhaut's castle (l. 1889).□

The fact that this question continues to be an important source of intellectual reflection among scholars points to its broader significance: regardless of one's stance concerning the relative completeness of this romance, there is an inextricable link between what the *Conte du Graal* is – its identity as a text – and silence. Although new readers of the *Graal* will invariably fall on one side or other of the debate regarding completion, to do so prematurely is a mistake. This text can only be adequately appreciated by experiencing all of its complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities. For, along the wandering paths of his protagonists' knightly adventures, Chrétien de Troyes explores not only the fictional marvels of an enchanted Arthurian landscape, but also the marvelous possibilities and limitations of language, a quest whose supreme reward is a deeper understanding of how silence shapes and is shaped by individuals and their words. In the *Conte du Graal*, all roads lead to silence, but the ultimate topography of this destination has more to do with who we are than what silence is not.

Structure, *Semence* and *Sen*

Drawing on a theme popular to both ancient and medieval rhetoric, the prologue of the *Conte du Graal* intimates a metaphorical rapport between the acts of planting and writing.¹³ Chrétien de Troyes, however, goes beyond the merely illustrative properties of this figure, using it to cultivate an ethical model for

¹³ For further information on the occurrences and origins of this particular figure in classic and medieval literature, see Curtius 313-315, who notes that similar associations are found in Plato, while Isidore de Séville and other medieval poets substitute "ploughshare" for "stylus." Many readers have signaled that the first line of the *Graal* is a rather faithful adaptation of the Biblical proverb found in II Corinthians 9:6.

fictional writing.¹⁴ Specifically, the text's opening lines link literary productivity to a standard of compositional propriety, making the value of a given work dependent upon how well a poet uses the linguistic *semence* at his disposal:

Ki petit semme petit quelt
Et qui auques requeillir velt
En tel liu sa semence espanse
Que Diex a cent doubles li rande
Car en terre qui riens ne valt
Bone semence seche et faut. (ll. 1-6)

He who sows little, reaps little,
and he who wishes to reap plentifully
casts his seed in such a place
that God will increase his fruit a hundred fold;
for in worthless soil
good seed withers and dies.¹⁵

Writing thus becomes essentially a matter of placement, an organizational exercise in which the propitious location (*liu*) must be chosen for each word or idea.¹⁶ Such emphasis on poetic arrangement is not altogether surprising: the ancient rhetorical tradition upon which a good deal of medieval poetics is based ranks *dispositio* (arrangement) second only in importance to the capacity for *inventio* (invention).¹⁷ In the *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian even goes so far as to

¹⁴ St. Augustine, for example, says that the only valid interpretations of figurative language are those that conform to Christian doctrine. "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all." *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958) 36.

¹⁵ Kibler 3.

¹⁶ The etymological tie between the verb *semer* and linguistic signs is a well-founded one. As used by Homer, the Greek word *semata* denotes linguistic or symbolic evidence, as when Odysseus is asked by his father to provide proof of his identity (XXIV, 330-345). It is interesting to note that many of these proofs are themselves references to plants in Laertes' garden. As Martin Heidegger notes, this bond is also evident in the Latin word *signum*: "Most of us know the word "sign" only in its debased meaning – lines on a surface. But we make a design also when we cut a furrow into the soil to open it to seed and growth." Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1971) 121.

¹⁷ See, for example, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*. Ernest J. Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and Its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 54-55. In this case, what a word

claim that the latter would be useless without the former, comparing unordered *inventio* to, among other things, an unassembled pile of building materials.¹⁸ However, the underlying framework of the above model is neither rhetorical nor grammatical, but religious: distinguishing good poetic judgment from bad, God (*Diex*) acts as its arbiter, meting out punishments or rewards as he sees fit. Here, as in Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, linguistic rules are subsumed by divine laws, and grammatical errors or rhetorical excesses become tantamount to religious transgressions.¹⁹ For those whose work is structurally insufficient or unsound, the harvest is a bitter one, yielding nothing but the dry and shriveled remains of their own failure. Conversely, observance of this edict all but guarantees literary success, a compensatory poetic abundance from which Chrétien himself claims to benefit:

Crestiens semme et fait semence
D'un romans que il encomence
Et si le seme en si *bon leu*
Qu'il ne puet [estre] sanz *grant preu* (ll. 7-10, *emphasis mine*)

Chrétien sows and casts the seed
of a romance that he begins;
and sows it in such a *good place*

means – or what we understand it to mean – is dictated not by any inherent signification, but by how and where it is used.

¹⁸ Book VII, 1-2: "But just as it is not sufficient for those who are erecting a building merely to collect stone and timber and other building materials, but skilled masons are required to arrange and place them, so in speaking, however abundant the matter may be, it will merely form a confused heap unless arrangement be employed to reduce it to order and to give it connexion and firmness of structure." Other analogies include a disfigured statue and a boat with no helmsman. Marcus Fabius Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, 4 vols., trans. H.E. Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) 3: 3. Etymologically, this exercise is at the very heart of medieval metaphors, commonly referred to by its Latin moniker, *translatio* (translation, displacement).

¹⁹ Alain de Lille describes those who push the rules of grammar past acceptable limits as grammatical "barbarians," claiming that these linguistic faults reflect a defiance of both sexual normalcy and religious rectitude. *Plaint of Nature*, trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1980). See, for example, pages 69-70 where Alain describes the negative consequences of a conversion of subject (active) and predicate (passive). Incidentally, this passage furnishes yet another example of the planting-writing metaphor discussed above.

that it cannot be without *great value*.

Aurally reinforced by this rhyming pair of *bon leu* and *grant preu*, the structural mandate and proverbial tenor of the prologue's first lines transform poetry into a token of the divine charity (*carité*) described elsewhere by the poet (v. ll. 43-59), his words a terrestrial upshot of the generative power in the Word.

While not explicitly elaborated, sexual implications of his theopoetic imperative are quite clear. A stylized vision of the mechanics behind human copulation, the agrarian image of an organic union between seed (*semence*) and soil (*leu*) ties grammatically and rhetorically acceptable forms of representation to a Judeo-Christian vision of heterosexual normalcy.²⁰ Turning once more to the *De Planctu Naturae*, we see that a correspondence between proper use of language and natural (i.e., morally acceptable) sexual behavior is, there too, transposed into the agricultural register:

That man, in whose case a simple conversion in an Art causes Nature's laws to come to naught, is pushing logic too far. He hammers on an anvil which issues no seeds. The very hammer itself shudders in horror of its anvil. He imprints on no matter the stamp of a parent-stem: *rather his ploughshare scores a barren strand*.²¹

In other words, "the sexual pervert is a barbarian - he forgets the arts of fine speech, and destroys rhetoric in a fundamentally vicious figure, something exceeding even the limits of metaphorical translation."²² Like these sexually

²⁰ Here, the poet plays on yet another poetic tradition, one that represents the feminine as a fertile and potentially productive soil and the masculine as an active agent capable of exploiting the generative possibilities inherent in that *leu*.

²¹ Alain de Lille 69, *emphasis mine*.

²² Alexandre Leupin, *Barbarolexis: Writing and Medieval Sexuality*, trans. Kate M. Cooper (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 63. Leupin shows that these allusions to sexuality are not just gratuitous or coincidental, but an integral feature of Alain's writing and the text's exploration of the complex medieval web of relationships uniting writing, sexuality, and theology.

charged condemnations of linguistic irregularity, Chrétien's promise of poetic creativity assumes the viability of heterosexual copulation, a productive union between masculine and feminine. Imperfect language and, in the extreme, lack of poetic production – silence – would thus be unmistakable traces of sexuality's failure, its ultimate impossibility. Therefore, while Chrétien claims to offer up an example of religious, grammatical, and sexual perfection, one has to wonder – given the halting spasms of his narrative – if this is really the case.

But whether or not the poet lives up to the boastful promises of his prologue, one thing is clear: this bounty does not come without a cost, for it demands that creative power be ceded to God, who would alone possess the faculties necessary to transform finite units of language (*semence*) into something greater (*cent doubles*). Reproducing the implied hierarchical imperative of the Biblical proclamation *Deus verbum est*, Chrétien designates God as the sole active agent from which all creation necessarily flows, reducing his own role to that of a Platonic divine mouthpiece.²³ Though less common than feigned humility (*humilitas*), such exaggerated self-belittlement is another established feature of the *captatio benevolentiae*, that rhetorical preamble where the poet plays to his audience in order to garner their attention and goodwill. In this case, Chrétien's deference to authority extends to his benefactor Philip of Flanders, whose great generosity is praised (v. ll. 52-53) and on whose order the poet claims to compose his tale:

Crestiens, qui entent et paine,

²³ For the most part, Plato is not a great supporter of poetry and its purveyors. Nonetheless, in the *Ion*, he does concede that some poetry is of great value. However, such poetry is not the product of the poet's own art (*technae*), but of a divine inspiration, the poet merely a possessed terrestrial conduit for godly wisdom. Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 4th ed., ed. and trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1953).

Par le comandement le conte
 A rimoier le meillor conte
 Qui soit contez a cort roial.
 Ci est li Contes del Graal
 Dont li quens li bailla le livre

(ll. 62-67, *emphasis mine*)

Chrétien, who strives and aims
 by command of the count
 to rhyme the best story
 that has ever been told in royal court
 it is the Story of the Grail
 of which the book was given to him by the count.²⁴

If Chrétien is a vehicle for divine linguistic intervention, it is thus only by extension of a political affiliation with Philip, the source of his scribal *comandement*.²⁵ From this perspective, composition of the *Graal* would be no more than an act of obedience, the servile completion of an assigned task. If so, the authority of this ruler encompasses not only the political, but also poetic and linguistic domains. In fact, the book given (*bailla*) to Chrétien is but a thinly veiled reminder of the poet's symbolic subjugation to the count, the Old French verb *baillier* a judicial term implying both donation and domination.²⁶ This

²⁴ Kibler 5.

²⁵ One of the traits of the rapidly evolving political landscape of twelfth-century France – one that coexisted with the feudal system still present during that period – was a growing tendency to regard political power as divinely ordained, and the king as God's sovereign on Earth. In medieval literary criticism, this political shift has been explored by Peter Haidu who, in his impressive study of *La Chanson de Roland*, sees in the story of Roland's death at Ronceval and Charlemagne's eventual victory over the 'infidels' an ideological transformation of society, from the reciprocal yet vague system of feudalist obligation to the radical separation between king and citizens in a monarchical nation-state. Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993).

²⁶ Cazelles 5. This is one of the key mechanisms of the medieval *don*, a particularly important part of feudal society, especially for poets like Chrétien who depended on wealthy sponsors. While the word itself may be translated as "gift," this neglects an underlying sense of reciprocity inherent to the *don*. Within this system, every offering generates a debt for the one who accepts it. While Chrétien claims to benefit from *carité* – gifts without any 'strings' attached, as it were – he is nonetheless subject to the system of the *don*, an unpronounced obligation expressed in his acquiescence toward the count. Cazelles notes the cultural specificity of the word *bailla*, which has direct historical ties to Philip of Flanders: he created government agents called *baillis* to enforce rule throughout his land, maintaining political consistency throughout his disparate domains. Here, the legislative power of these agents is transferred to a text.

duality is reinforced by the homonymic play of *conte* (count, l. 63) with *conte* (story, l. 64), a linguistic conflagration that embodies the perceived inseparability of these two entities. Obeying the verbal and textual embodiments of Philip's (and, by association, God's) laws of proper representation, Chrétien appears to abandon all artistic control, assuming the lowly role of *versificator*, a sort of linguistic technician whose work is not creative, but manipulative, consisting only of the rhythmic arrangement of another's words.²⁷ For the second time in the prologue, poetic writing has been mechanized, stripped of its linguistic independence through the social matrices that dominate the poet and his work. So, although he continues to toil with words and sounds, Chrétien has, in effect, been silenced.

This textual alliance of authority and writing is by no means unique to the *Graal*, or even to vernacular composition as a whole. The same two concepts were, for example, theologically inseparable for the medieval Church: as tangible manifestations of a divine *verbum*, the Bible and other sacred writings were held up as infallible sources of sagacity and standards of linguistic artistry. Hence, St. Augustine asserts in *De Doctrina Christiana* that divine texts are infused with wisdom (*sapientur*) and eloquence (*eloquentur*); ultimate models of writing next to

²⁷ The *versificator* is quite often negatively portrayed as a sort of literary 'hack' who merely recycles the work of true *poeta*. In *De vulgaria eloquentia*, Dante implies something of a distinction between the best of poets (*excellentissime poetantes*) and a wider category encompassing all versifiers (*omnibus versificantibus*), whose privileges for using the vernacular should, he claims, be more restrained because "most of them write their verses without knowledge or intelligence" (*Sed optime conceptiones non possunt esse nisi ubi scientia et ingenium est*). Steven Botterill, ed. and trans., *Dante: De vulgari eloquentia* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 49. The same word is also used by George Orwell in 1984, where it refers not to a man, but a rhyming machine. "The tune had been haunting London for weeks past. It was one of countless similar songs published for the benefit of the proles by a sub-section of the Music Department. The words of these songs were composed without any human intervention whatever on an instrument known as a versificator. But the woman sang so tunefully as to turn the dreadful rubbish into an almost pleasant sound." George Orwell, 1984 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949) 115.

which all other works pale.²⁸ Theological texts were not, however, the only forms of writing granted such exemplary status in the Middle Ages. The seven liberal arts (*artes liberales*) at the foundation of medieval pedagogy were themselves based upon the work of a select group of *auctores* – writers like Virgil, Horace, and Cicero – whose secular works were the authoritative sources on select academic topics – attained an almost sacred status.²⁹ The extensive role of the Church in medieval education (it held a virtual monopoly until the advent of major secular universities in the thirteenth century) undoubtedly contributed to this situation, for instruction in both grammar and rhetoric – the most important of the seven liberal arts – was widely regarded as an indispensable prerequisite to scriptural interpretation.³⁰ Like the textual dogma of Judeo-Christianity, academic or institutional sacralization of classical authors is evidence of a more general anthropological conception of the text as origin, a repository of linguistic

²⁸ Such allusions may be found throughout *De Doctrina Christiana*, but especially in Book Two (II.ii.21), where Augustine closes his arguments with the following assertion: “And while everyone may find everything which he has usefully learned elsewhere there, he will also find very abundantly things which are found nowhere else at all except as they are taught with the wonderful nobility and remarkable humility of the Holy Scriptures.” □ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 78.

²⁹ The *trivium* included grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, while the *quadrivium* was made up of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Of course, not everyone would have agreed with this comingling of secular and sacred authorities. St. Augustine, for example, concedes that the work of secular writers may sometimes be instructive, but *only* when the lessons therein are directed towards a deeper understanding of God's word by the reader and *never* for their own sake (II.xl.60). “If those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as from unjust possessors and converted to our use.” St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 75.

³⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas explores the Biblical use of various rhetorical figures and poetic dissimulations in his *Summa Theologica* and, like St. Augustine, asserts that these linguistic deceptions are not harmful if a devout reader uncovers their hidden meanings since the exercise of textual interpretation reveals certain beneficial theological truths. Aquinas' fourfold system of interpretation would eventually be applied to fictional works by the likes of Dante (in the *Letter to Can Grande Della Scala*) and Boccaccio (in *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*).

and intellectual information whose value is chiefly supported by its archaic status.

To be sure, the role of sources was significant in vernacular literature of the Middle Ages, particularly during the genre's early stages, when most manuscripts were translations of celebrated texts in Latin or Greek. However, the distinguishing feature of medieval writing is not a faithful translation of source material, but a transformation of that content.³¹ Rather than accepting literary antecedents wholesale, medieval composition encourages an openly critical view of them, requiring a vision of the text markedly different from that which would appear to be at work in the *Graal* prologue.³² Interestingly, it was during the same period in which the *Conte du Graal* was composed that this vision textual development began to achieve a certain level of institutional acceptability. Often portrayed as a cultural forerunner to Italy and Europe of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, twelfth-century France was witness to its own cultural renaissance. And while the intellectual impulses of this renaissance are perhaps not as uniform as those of its more familiar predecessors, many do exhibit similar humanist tendencies. Chief among these is an attempt to evaluate and understand man's place within dominant theological, temporal, and ontological structures. One of the social institutions that came under this new scrutiny was the formerly untouchable pleiad of *auctores*, whose works were critically reappraised based on individual achievement and intellectual merit

³¹ For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see chapter 5.

³² Of course, an ambivalent attitude toward sources is not unique to the Middle Ages, but part of a much older intellectual antagonism known as the 'quarrel of the ancients and the moderns.' As Curtius and others have shown, examples of literary manipulation similar to that practiced during the Middle Ages may be found in classical Greek, Latin, and even Arabic sources. Curtius 251-255.

instead of religious conformity or mere tradition. John of Salisbury, one of the most celebrated thinkers of the period, makes it clear that an authority should be one whose ideas are viable, whether elucidated thousands of years ago or just the day before:

But these opinions of the ancients are admitted, simply because of their antiquity, while the far more probable and correct opinions of our contemporaries are, on the other hand, rejected merely because they have been proposed by men of our own time.³³

Further evidence of this trend is found in certain thirteenth-century indexes of *auctores*, where insightful works by contemporary thinkers are situated alongside those of more legendary counterparts, overturning any notion of a preeminent claim to intellectual authority.

One writer to benefit from this situation was Geoffrey de Vinsauf, whose *Poetria Nova* – a pedagogical manual for young poets – was included among the newer authoritative texts.³⁴ Replete with illustrations of major rhetorical and grammatical figures borrowed from some of the greatest *auctores*, his work is clearly descended from earlier models of poetic writing. At the same time, however, Geoffrey's advice hinges not so much on identifying linguistic examples as it does on playing with and transforming them, a process of linguistic and literary renewal that he depicts with his own agrarian imagery:

Noli semper concedere verbo
In proprio residere loco : residentia talis
Dedecus est ipsi verbo ; loca propria vitet
Et perigrinetur alibi sedemque placentem
Fundet in alterius fundo : sit ibi novus hospes,

³³ Daniel D. McGarry, trans., *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955) 145.

³⁴ See, for example, the didactic poem *Laborintus* by Aberhard the German to which Curtius refers. Edmond Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle; recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 1924) 358 ff.

Et placeat novitate sua

Do not always allow a word to reside in its usual place; such residence does not suit it; let it avoid its proper place and wander elsewhere, to find a pleasing seat in another's ground: let it be a new sojourner there and please by its novelty.³⁵

So, even if inspired by well-known rules of classical grammar and rhetoric, Vinsauf's poetics is not characterized by a slavish imitation of sources, but their novel modification. Based upon the deliberate redistribution of words from their proper place (*loca propria*) to another (*alterius fundo*), his model of linguistic regeneration subverts, to some degree, the aforementioned notion of a *bon leu* in poetic writing. In it, the poet's talent is not so much an inherited or derived power as it is a learned capacity for linguistic manipulation: by rearranging words in an innovative fashion, he is capable of cultivating his own redoubled harvest.³⁶

In light of this evolved perspective on textual revision and poetic innovation, Chrétien's deference to the secondhand *livre* of Philip is perhaps less certain than it first seemed. Indeed, another look at the *morales philosophias* of the *Graal* prologue suggests that its strict adherence to this intratextual model of writing is unclear:

Crestiens semme et fait semente
D'un romans que il encomence. (ll. 7-8, *emphasis mine*)

Chrétien sows and makes seed
Of a romans that he begins [for the first time]³⁷

³⁵ Gallo 54-55. I have taken both the Latin and English versions of the passage from this edition. Also, see Leupin, *Barbarolexis* 17-38.

³⁶ Leupin, *Barbarolexis* 17-38. In addition to providing enlightening analyses of a number of critical passages, Leupin shows that this doctrine of poetic transformation finds its inspiration not only in rhetorical slight-of-hand, but also in the theological doctrine of the Incarnation.

³⁷ Although "begins" is an adequate rendering of this word's root, the deliberate addition of the prefix *en-* suggests a more forceful connotation, a more absolute beginning.

Not a *conte* (the homonymic symbol of his benefactor) but a *romans*, Chrétien hints at the originality of his work with this delicate semantic distinction. The calculated addition of the suffix *en-* to the conjugated verb *commencer* in the second line of this rhymed couplet further solidifies the potentially radical character writing in the *Graal*: it is neither a beginning (*commencement*) nor a rebeginning (*recommencement*), but an innovative genesis (*encommencement*), propagated by Chrétien's pen. This same subversive linguistic germination is used again in the prologue's final lines, where, immediately after Philip has handed down his *livre* to be rhymed (*rimoier*), the poet brings his introduction to a close with a verse that simultaneously acknowledges and refutes its designated source:

Ci est li Contes del Graal
 Dont li quens li bailla le *livre*
 Oëz coment il s'en delivre. (ll. 66-68, *emphasis mine*)

It is the Story of the Grail
 Of which the *book* was given to him by the count.
 Hear how *he acquits himself of it*.³⁸

On the one hand, the verb *se délivrer* can be read as further proof of the poet's subjugation, denoting – as in the above translation – the simple completion of an assigned task. On the other, completion necessarily implies a sort of liberation (i.e., deliverance), another of the verb's more common meanings in Old French.³⁹ A simple yet defiant mark, the disjunctive prefix *de-* thus has important authorial implications, for it casts off the weight of symbolic authority embodied by the count's archetypal *livre*. In this sense, Chrétien's recitation of the *conte* is an

³⁸ Kibler 5.

³⁹ One of the definitions of the English word 'deliver' is equivalent to this second meaning of *se délivrer*, suggesting a freedom from oppression or suffering.

attempt not only to rhyme (*rimoier*) words, but also to take them apart (*rimoier*).⁴⁰ From within the oppressive realm of versification thus springs a cry of subjectivity (*ri-moi-er*).

Therefore, if the *Conte du Graal* seems disjointed, perhaps it is so by design, since this same poetic ‘spacing’ – manipulation of words, letters, and the silent gaps between them – is what allows new and different meanings to take root. Destroying to (re)create, Chrétien uses silence in the *Graal* to undo language, clearing a space for his own creative agenda. And, “[i]n the hands of a master, techniques become heightened means of expression. Artifice passes over into art and is absorbed in it.”⁴¹ As an expression of identity, poetic writing is thus closely related to silence, a bond whose weaknesses and strengths are explored in the tandem stories of Perceval and Gawain.

Perceval: The Silent Knight

Long recognized as a pivotal text within the Arthurian literary corpus, the *Conte du Graal* enjoys this privileged status at least in part thanks to its curious hero, the young Welsh knight Perceval.⁴² In fact, the narrative and this somewhat infamous protagonist have, over time, become virtually inseparable, such that every contemporary edition and translation of the tale includes his

⁴⁰ Both these meanings are common to the word *rimoier* in Old French.

⁴¹ Curtius 390.

⁴² This character provides yet another example of the persistent question of textual origins that was addressed earlier in this chapter. Many scholars believe that Perceval is based on the character Peredur, whose story – *Peredur, Son of Efraunc* – is part of a collection of ancient Welsh writings known as the *Mabinogion*. However, while the two personages have much in common, there is no conclusive evidence of either tale’s anteriority.

name as part of its revised title.⁴³ Many critical references to the text even go so far as to replace the name given by Chrétien (*li Contes del Graal*, l. 66) with, quite simply, *Perceval*. Of course, editorial manipulation of medieval titles is fairly common, and several of Chrétien's other works, including *Le Chevalier de la Charette* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, have endured similar modifications.⁴⁴ Not only convenient, but also fairly accurate, these abbreviations correspond to their narratives' respective foci. The fictional relevancy of the nominative supplement used for the *Graal* is, however, less certain: with nearly half of its 9,234 verses devoted to the story of another knight, it is not clear to what extent the *Graal* really is the *Perceval* (anymore than it is, say, the *Gawain*).⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the story of this decidedly different knight is clearly an integral component of both the *Conte du Graal* and the larger legend in which Chrétien's tale plays a founding role.⁴⁶ In some ways, his itinerant adventures evoke habitual themes of Arthurian knighthood, with repeated battlefield victories confirming his status – at least among members of Arthur's court – “as a proven knight of great prowess and beauty” (*Come chevaliers esprovez / De haute proëce et bele*, ll. 4593-4594). But

⁴³ Take, for example, the two editions of the *Graal* used in this study. In both cases, Perceval's name has been integrated into the revised title; *Le Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* (Roach), *The Story of the Graal (Li Contes del Graal) or Perceval* (Pickens and Kibler).

⁴⁴ Like *Le Conte du Graal*, *Le Chevalier de la Charette* is commonly referred to by the name of its protagonist (Lancelot), as is *Le Chevalier au Lion* (Yvain).

⁴⁵ Some of the first critical readings of the *Graal* treated Gawain's story as separate from that of Perceval, its inclusion in the grail legend seen as the result of clerical oversight or poor manuscript arrangement, but such ideas were dispelled quite early on. See, for example, Jean Frappier, *Autour du Graal* (Geneva: Droz, 1977) 169-210. Frappier acknowledges that there are some inconsistencies between the heroes' respective narratives, but suggests that these points of contention are ultimately outweighed by the tale's overall continuity.

⁴⁶ The *Conte du Graal* is the first known source of the grail legend in Arthurian literature. In addition to numerous continuations, it inspired a number of new stories in which this vessel – an increasingly sanctified version of Chrétien's spiritually ambiguous *graal* – becomes the central focus. See, for example, Robert de Boron's *Roman del Graal* and, the Vulgate cycle's *Queste del Saint Graal*.

Perceval's success and renown as a knight are mitigated by one specific failure, a shortcoming that is neither chivalric nor amorous, but overtly linguistic.⁴⁷ Like the *Graal* itself, Perceval is best known for what he does not say.

Given shelter for the evening by a mysterious king whose physical infirmity prevents him from participating in any activity apart from fishing in the waters just outside his castle, Perceval is witness to a procession that is as visually remarkable as it is puzzling. While dining with the aptly named Fisher King (*li Roi Pescheor*), he watches, intrigued, as several servants carrying extraordinary objects pass through the room. Chief among these items is a grail, whose physical features are nothing short of superlative:

Li graaus, qui aloit devant,
De fin or esmeré estoit;
Prescieuses pierres avoit
El graal de maintes manieres
Des plus riches et des plus chieres
Qui en mer ne en terre soient. (ll. 3232-3237)

The grail, which came first,
was of fine, pure gold.
Set in the grail were
precious stones of every kind
the best and costliest
to be found on earth or in the sea.

Like the equally remarkable lance that emits an unending trickle of blood from its tip (v. ll. 3197-3201), this brilliantly bejeweled chalice is a captivating example

⁴⁷ Perceval is not the only less-than-perfect knight created by Chrétien, but he is the only one whose fault lies so far outside the usual scope of chivalric activity. See, for example, the *Chevalier de la Charette*, in which Lancelot is tormented by his adulterous love for the queen (Guenivere), or *Le Chevalier au Lion*, in which Yvain fails in his promise to return to his wife, Laudine, thus losing her love and, to some extent, his sanity.

of a *merveille*,⁴⁸ an object that provokes not only visual excitement, but also a desire to know (*savoir*):

Par devant lui trespasser voit
Le graal trestot descovert,
Ne ne set pas cui l'en en sert
Et si le volroit il savoir. (ll. 3300-3303)

In front of him he saw pass
the grail, completely uncovered,⁴⁹
but he did not know who was served from it
and yet he wanted to know.

Perceval's fascination here recalls an earlier moment in the tale when he sees a group of knights for the first time (v. ll. 100-363): enthralled by the seductive luster of their various accoutrements, the young Welshman seeks to satisfy his curiosity with a rapid succession of interrogatives, asking for the name and use of each piece of armor. He is, in fact, so verbose that the party's leader gets nary a word in edgewise, a lack of politesse attributed to the young squire's ignorance of certain laws:

— "*Il ne set pas totes les lois,
Fait li sire, se Diex m'amant,
C'a rien nule que li demant
Ne me respont il ainc a droit,
Ains demande de quanqu'il voit
Coment a non et c'on en fait.*" (ll. 236-241, *emphasis mine*)

— "*He doesn't know all the laws,
so help me God,*" replied the lord,
for whatever I may ask him,
he will not answer straightforwardly,
but instead asks for everything he sees

⁴⁸ The Bleeding Lance, which also piques Perceval's curiosity, is referred to as *cele merveille* (this marvel, l. 3202). For a detailed study of this term and its varied meanings in the works of Chrétien de Troyes, see Lucienne Carasso-Bulos, *The Merveilleux in Chrétien de Troyes' Romances* (Geneva: Droz, 1976). For more on the *merveilleux* in the *Conte du Graal*, see p. 164 ff.

⁴⁹ This line contains what is probably one of the most discussed expressions in Chrétien's corpus. The basic translation of the phrase *trestot descovert* is itself fairly straightforward, but just what it means in this particular passage is less clear. For a brief, yet informative discussion of its possible significance, see Frappier 129-132.

its name and how it is used.

There is no elaboration on the precise substance of these rules, but the knight's remarks clearly imply that at least one aspect of proper (i.e., law-abiding) speech is that it adheres to a definite order, one in which straightforward answers follow questions and words are always placed in the right place (*bon leu*). Although well intentioned, Perceval's loquaciousness is thus an unmistakable sign of naiveté, for it reveals his ignorance of any such conventions.⁵⁰

Like the apocryphal maxim that introduced this section⁵¹, the knight's criticism of Perceval points to a correlation between intelligence and silence, of which the *Graal* offers several compelling illustrations.⁵² Arthur, for example, is repeatedly said to be silent (*mus*, l. 911) as a result of intense mental reflection (*li rois fort pense et mot ne sone*, l. 926).⁵³ Meanwhile, Arthur's seneschal Keu – described as one “who could never keep himself from saying treacherous things” (*Et Kex, qui onques ne se pot / Taire de felonie dire*, ll. 4274-4275) – serves as a negative proof of the same rule. Indeed, this would seem to be the motivation behind advice given to Perceval by Gornemans de Gorhaut, a knight who offers to tutor him in the ways of *chevalerie*. In addition to initiating his pupil to the use

⁵⁰ In several instances, Chrétien uses the Old French word *nice* (i.e., naive, stupid, ignorant) to describe Perceval and his actions.

⁵¹ See p. 86.

⁵² Quintilian affirms that it is the “duty of sagacity to decide what we should say and what we should pass by in silence or postpone” (VI, 4, v).

⁵³ Another, almost identical description of Arthur is found just two verses earlier: “The king was thinking and did not say a word” (*Li rois pensa et ne dist mot*, l. 924). Cf. Dragonetti 188. Dragonetti calls attention to the rapport between this portrayal of the king as silent and his name (*art-tu*).

of armor and weaponry, this *preudom*⁵⁴ suggests that the young knight not be too hasty to speak, claiming that such verbal precociousness has negative consequences:

Ne ne parlez trop volontiers:
Nus ne puet estre trop parliers
Qui sovent tel chose ne die
Qui torné li est affolie;
Car li sages dit et retrait:
'Qui trop parole, il se mesfait.'
(ll. 1648-54, *emphasis mine*)

Nor should you talk too readily
anyone who is too talkative
soon says something
that makes him look like a fool.
Thus the wise man says and declares,
'He who talks too much wrongs himself.'

The connection between wisdom and silence is frequent in medieval and Renaissance literature, the two characteristics sometimes becoming so intertwined that it is no longer clear just which one holds sway. By remaining silent, Perceval would thus create at least the illusion of a certain *savoir*, "for when he is silent, a foolish man differs not a bit from the wise."⁵⁵

At the same time however, verbal prudence is what ultimately prevents Perceval from asking about the grail, and thus from acquiring the knowledge that he so desperately wants. For when he awakens the next morning, the castle is empty, and the servants with whom he had planned to speak are nowhere to be seen. Granted, one of the things at which Perceval does not excel is following

⁵⁴ This word is used several times to refer to Gornemans. Usually translated as 'gentleman,' the content of the above passage points to its more literal denotation, an individual (*homme*) who possesses knowledge or wisdom (*preu*).

⁵⁵ "*Cum tacet, haud quicquam differt sapientibus amens.*" Andrea Alciati, *Emblematum liber*, trans. William Barker et al., November 1997, October 31, 2002, <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/f011.html>. Also well known for his legal and linguistic scholarship during the early sixteenth century, Alciati is perhaps best known today for this *Book of Emblems*, which eventually contained over two hundred small poems, each one accompanied by a corresponding illustration.

directions, and the effects of his selective memory are a source for some of the text's more humorous passages.⁵⁶ Yet in this case, Perceval seems to have followed the advice of his mentor to the letter, and the result is still far from desirable, a fact of which the young knight is often reminded:

Molt est maleüroux qui voit
 Si bel tans que plus ne coviegne;
 S'atent encor que plus biax viegne.
Che iez tu, li maleüreus,
Qui veïs qu'i[l] fu tans et leus
De parler et si te teiis;
Assez grant loisir en eiis. (ll. 4662-68, *emphasis mine*)

How miserable is one who recognizes
 such a wonderful and fitting time
 yet waits until a better one comes along.
Such are you, miserable one,
who saw that it was the time and place
to speak and you rested silent
even though you could well have spoken.

Like the unfortunate poets who cast their *semence* upon infertile ground, Perceval's error here is one of placement: having chosen to remain silent rather than speak, he misses the rhetorically *bon leu*. The rapport of this verbal miscue with the earlier poetic alignment of composition and cultivation is reinforced by a suggestion that Perceval poorly exploited (*exploitié mal*, l. 3555) his visit to the Fisher King's castle.⁵⁷ Then again, perhaps the situation itself is at fault. The grail was, after all, uncovered too early (*trestot decouvert*, l. 3301). Either way, both linguistic surplus and shortage – *gab* and silence – are condemned in the *Graal*,

⁵⁶ Before allowing her son to leave the familial *manoir*, Perceval's mother offers her son several pieces of advice, including just how to render service to needy ladies and under what conditions gifts may be accepted from them. Later, when he comes across a maiden left alone by the rest of her party, he seems to remember only the rudimentary features of this advice. For example, whereas his mother suggested that he might accept a ring if a lady were to offer such a gift (v. ll. 550-554), Perceval takes the maiden's ring by force (v. ll. 710-722).

⁵⁷ This connotation of *exploitié* is identical to one of the meanings for the English word 'exploited.'

their common lack of linguistic moderation making identification of the appropriate *leu* impossible.⁵⁸

A similar link between language and regulated temporal presentation is among the more fundamental components of ancient Greek rhetoric, which distinguishes between two different senses of time. The first – *chronos* – is concerned with linear time, or the chronological passage of events. The second – called *kairos* – is more akin to timing, or the relative disposition of events within *chronos*. A moment of *kairos* might thus be defined as “the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something.”⁵⁹ As such, it is closely related to the rhetorical conformity mandated in the *Graal* prologue, where linguistic *semence* (words) were said be placed at either the correct or incorrect rhetorical *leu* (place). The notion of linguistic and rhetorical propriety in *kairos* is thus tied to the temporal specificity of a given moment. Consequently, one of the offshoots of the basic definition of *kairos* is what may be called “loaded time,” where an implicit or explicit recompense makes one particular moment more opportune than another. As Dale Sullivan has shown, the most widespread use of this meaning of *kairos* is found in the New Testament, where a particular instant is frequently linked to promises of divine reward or fulfillment, either gained or lost.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ During the grail procession, Chrétien interjects that he is concerned that Perceval’s silence may have negative effects, since he has “heard it said that one can just as easily be too quiet as too talkative” (*Por che que j’ai oï retraire / Qu’ausi se puet on bien trop taire / Com trop parler a la foie[e]*, ll. 3249 – 3251).

⁵⁹ James L. Kinneavy, “*Kairos*: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning* ed. Jean Dietz-Moss (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1986) 80. While this definition is too brief to be complete, the basic notion of appropriateness it conveys is at the center of nearly all understandings of *kairos*.

⁶⁰ Dale Sullivan, “*Kairos* and the Rhetoric of Belief,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992) 321. “The other three meanings of *kairos*, which are rhetorical in their associations, can be distributed along

Here, the relation to Chrétien's prologue is unmistakable, and Perceval's visit to the Grail Castle offers many indications of its special status. For example, in addition to its otherworldly appearance, the grail later levitates in and out of the main chamber during dinner:

Et li graals endementiers
Par devant als retrespasa,
Ne li vallés ne demanda
Del graal cui on en servoit. (ll. 3290–3293)

And during this time, the grail
passed in front of them once more,
but the squire asked neither
about the grail nor whom was served from it.

Furthermore, the verses leading up to this scene suggest that the entire region is somewhat exceptional. Traveling through an area devoid of earthly life (*rien terriene*, l. 2977), Perceval is grateful when offered lodging by the Fisher King and so hurries off toward where the castle should be. However, when he arrives, the young Welsh knight finds nothing but a static landscape of sky and earth (*Si esgarde tot entor lui / Se ne vit rien fors ciel et terre*, ll. 3038-3039) and, thinking he has been duped, turns to leave. Then, to his great surprise, he sees one of the castle's towers appear, as if by magic, from the earth (*Lors vit pres de lui en [un] val / Le chief d'une tor qui parut*, ll. 3050-3051). Like Gornemans de Gorhaut's castle – which also materializes before Perceval's eyes – this one defies visual and geographical convention.⁶¹ In addition, the dwelling seems to be situated in a

a continuum of time lengths, from a single point to a season to a time of fulfillment, but they all suggest that there is an opportune time for something to occur, that there are special times determined by God, shown by God."

⁶¹ When Perceval first arrives at Gornement de Gort's castle, the towers are described as being "born" (*nestre*) from the rock. v. ll. 1326-1328.

sort of temporal no-man's-land, for upon hearing that Perceval departed from Beurepaire castle that same day, the monarch is nothing short of astonished:

Si m'ait Diex, fait li preudom,
Trop grant journee avez hui faite
Vos meüstes ainz que la gaite
Eüst hui main l'aube cornee." (ll. 3124–3127)

May God save me, said the gentleman,
you rode far too long today!
You must have left this morning,
well before the watchman had sounded the dawn.

Yet Perceval makes it clear that his departure actually occurred much later in the day, well after the first daily call to prayer had been given (*Ains estoit ja prime sonee / Fait li vallés, jel vos affi* ll. 3128-3129).⁶² When combined with the castle's striking beauty and spontaneous physical generation, "chronological flux" surrounding its *leu* serves as a clear signal of its kairotic significance.⁶³

So, although the young Welshman may have achieved a certain level of physical *proëce* as a knight,⁶⁴ his linguistic abilities fall well short of any similar mastery, largely because he is unable to recognize the symbolic importance of the rhetorical situation in which he is a player. In fact, it is only thanks to a maiden whom he meets on the road leading away from the castle that Perceval becomes aware of the *kairos* inherent to the grail procession. As chance would have it, the girl is also his cousin (*germaine cousine*, l. 3600), though it is not clear whether her actions are provoked by familial pity or pure spite:

⁶² Prime is the morning prayer service that begins shortly after dawn. A similar temporal disparity occurs upon Perceval's departure, when his *cosine germaine* wonders at the well-fed appearance of his horse, saying that there is not a castle to be found for forty leagues (v. ll. 3463-3482). The temporal displacement of the Fisher King's castle is reinforced by his own reference to it as a "house where I used to be" (*Une maison ou je estois*, l. 3033).

⁶³ Frappier 161.

⁶⁴ See p. 87.

Ha! Perchevax maleïrous,
 Come iés or mal aventurous
 Quant tu tot che n'as demandé!
 Que tant eüsses amendé
 Le buen roi qui est mehaigniez
 Que toz eüst regaigniez
 Ses membres et terre tenist
 Et si grans biens t'en avenist! (ll. 3583-3590)

Ah, miserable Perceval,
 how unfortunate you were
 when you did not ask all this,
 for you would have brought such relief
 to the good King who is maimed:
 he would have totally regained use
 of his limbs and ruled his lands,
 and so much good would have come of it!

Had Perceval spoken, his question would have provided demonstrable proof (*si grans biens*) of the *bon leu / grant preu* rapport of the prologue.⁶⁵ Instead, he finds only misery and misfortune, suggesting that one can, indeed, be too silent (*trop taire*, l. 3250). Yet if, linguistically speaking, Perceval reaps what he sows, the fact that this blunder occurs after he has supposedly rid himself of poor linguistic habits would overturn the aforementioned link between silence and *savoir*, the hyperbolic kairotic value placed upon this missed opportunity transforming silence into a negative linguistic entity incapable of producing anything of positive value.

The *dist*, *enseignement*, and the Law

Blame for the young knight's silence is thus placed quite squarely on the teaching (*enseignement*) that he receives from Gornemans de Gorhaut, the *preudome sage* (wise gentleman, l. 3247) whose advice loomed so large at this critical time. In fact, Perceval's entire development from *vallet galois* (l. 791) to

⁶⁵ See p. 74 ff.

noviax chevaliers (l. 1699) is a pedagogical passage that highlights a chasm between two very different lands and their opposing laws of representation. On the one hand, there is the *Gaste Forest* (Waste Forest), where all that Perceval knows is derived from what his mother has said:

Ma mere *m'enseigna* et *dist*
 Que les puceles *saluaise*
 En quel que liu que *jes trouvaie*. (ll. 684-686, *emphasis mine*)

My mother *taught me* and *said*
 that I should greet maidens
 wherever I might find them.

As in Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, maternal teaching in the Waste Forest is transmitted orally, with repeated citations similar to the one above clearly establishing this doxology as the region's linguistic authority.⁶⁶ The world of Arthurian knighthood, on the other, depends much more on visual instruction:

Li preudom par trois fois monta,
Par trois fois d'armes l'ensaigna
Itant come ensaignier l'en pot,
Tant que assez ensaignié l'ot,
Et par trois fois monter le fist. (ll. 1505-09, *emphasis mine*)

The gentleman mounted the horse three times
and three times demonstrated the weapons,
until he had shown him all he could,
such that he had taught him enough
and three times had the young man mount.

Separated by three different permutations of the verb *ensaigner* (i.e., to show, to demonstrate, to teach), the first and last lines of this passage are mirror images, a faithful textual rendering of the imitative nature of this teaching. If, as Chrétien

⁶⁶ Literary use of a certain form of this word in the later Middle Ages supports its fictional meaning here: although widely varied in their subject matter, the collection of medieval tales known as *dits* all proclaim to have a certain pedagogical or moralistic objective. For a detailed examination of the history of this genre, see Gloria K. Fiero, et al., *Three Medieval Views of Women* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) ix-xi, 1-3.

suggests, there is a connection between Perceval's silence and his teaching, it would thus seem to lie in this substitution of visual for oral input.

Despite the barren connotations of its name, the Waste Forest (*Gaste Forest*) where Perceval lives with his mother at the beginning of the tale is anything but desolate. Every part of its initial description points instead to a decidedly healthy abundance:

Ce fu au tans qu'arbre foilissent,
Que glai et bois et pre verdissent,
Et cil oisel en lor latin
Cantent doucement au matin
Et tote riens de joie aflamme. (ll. 69-73)

It was the season when trees flower,
that bushes and woods and meadows turn green,
and the birds, in their tongue,
sing sweetly in the morning
and everything is burning with joy.

Burgeoning plants, singing birds, green grass: all these images are standard components of a popular medieval literary *topos* that helps Chrétien to paint the forest of the *veve dame* as the textual locus of a pleasant, eternal plenitude.⁶⁷ This fertility is even reflected in the frontispiece of Ms FR 12576, where two large, bulbous green stems dominate a considerable portion of the illumination that depicts some of Perceval's initial adventures in the Waste Forest.⁶⁸ Its

⁶⁷ Similar imagery is frequent in vernacular texts of the Middle Ages, where it is often used to represent themes of both literary renewal and abundance. See, for example, the *Roman de la Rose*, where the narrator awakens (within his dream) in a garden where the trees and bushes are filled with *novelle feuille* (the pages of a flowering text) and singing birds. Terence Scully notes the connection between some of this imagery and the idea of *joie* in his article on *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, "The Sen of Chrétien de Troyes's *Joie de la Cort*," in *The expansion and Transformation of Courtly Literature*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980) 71-94.

⁶⁸ For more information regarding the illuminations of Ms FR 12576, see Sara Hindman, *Sealed in Parchment: Rereadings of Knighthood in the Illuminated Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994). It is also interesting to note that the lower half of the frontispiece, which contains depictions of Perceval's arrival at Arthur's court and his victory over the *chevalier vermeil*, is devoid of these growths, bordered instead by an elaborate frame. More general information about the manuscripts, including the illuminations and their physical

paradoxical plenitude is closely related to the mother's verbal system of transmission, an expressive rapport intimated by the rhythmic association of *joie* (joy) and *oie* (heard) in the narrator's opening description of the forest:

Et maintenant li cuers del ventre
Por le dolç tans li *resjoï*
Et por le chant que il *oï*
Des *oisiax* qui *joie* fasoient (ll. 86-89, *emphasis mine*)

And now his heart
Rejoiced for the pleasant weather
And for the song that he *heard*
From the *birds* who were making *joy*

Pleasure (*joie*) and audition (*oï*) go hand-in-hand in the mother's domain, alluding to a more profound textual link between femininity and linguistic abundance that will only become evident once it is out of reach, after the young squire's departure from the Waste Forest.⁶⁹

But, in spite of its omnipresent *joie*, the integrity of the mother's forest is really quite fragile. While out for the matinal stroll described above, Perceval is alarmed by a great noise (*noise*) of which he cannot espy the source. This disturbing clatter – really just the sound of shields, hauberks, and swords knocking against each other – strikes the young squire as decidedly sinister:

Par m'ame,
Voir se dist ma mere, ma dame,
Qui me dist que diables sont
Les plus laides choses del mont. (ll. 113-116)

My soul,
my mother, my lady spoke the truth
who told me that devils are
the ugliest things in the world.

condition is available in Keith Busby et al. eds., *Les manuscrits de Chrétien de Troyes / The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993).

⁶⁹ See p. 113 ff.

Satisfactorily identified and explained by his mother's *dist*, the strange and unpleasant noise of the advancing knights initially reaffirms her authoritative status as the dominant source of Perceval's knowledge. At this point, however, he has only heard and not seen the disturbance (*Li vallés ot et ne voit pas / Ciaux qui vers lui viennent le pas*, ll. 111-112), and his initial appraisal is quickly cast into doubt once he catches a glimpse of the cacophony's source:

Einsi a soi meisme dist
 Li vallés ains qu'il les veïst
 Et quant il les vit en apert
 Que du bois furent descovert,
 Et vit les haubers fremïans
 Et les elmes clers et luisans
 Et vit le blanc et le vermeil
 Reluire contre le soleil
 Et l'or et l'azure et l'argent
 Si li fu molt bel et molt gent,
 Et dist: "Ha! sire Diex, merci!
 Ce sont angle que je voi chi. (ll. 125-138, *emphasis mine*)

As he said this to himself,
 the squire then saw them
 and when he saw them in the clearing
 that was out of the woods
 and saw the gleaming hauberks
 and the clear, lustrous helms
 and saw the white and the red
 shining in the sun
 and the gold and the azur and the silver
 then they were very beautiful and pleasing
 and he said: "Ah! Thanks be to God!
 These are angels that I see here.

Fascinated by the shining and colorful appearance of the same objects that had before given him such a fright, the *vallet galois* now decides that the beings before him are not devils, but angels or, perhaps, even God (*Diex*, v. l. 174). And while both of these revised evaluations continue to rely on the mother's *dist*, Perceval's inability to assimilate what would normally be a rather common scene points to a fundamental weakness within the representational landscape of her *forest gaste*.

Ironically, the source of this *faiblesse* is the very foundation upon which the sustained *joie* of the mother's forest is founded. After his encounter with the wandering knights, Perceval returns home, and his mother is compelled to explain her son's troubled understanding of what he has just seen. This entails sharing certain hidden details of his genealogy rich in knightly tradition: both of Perceval's elder brothers and his father, were, says the *mere*, successful knights, but all died as a result of their chosen vocation. Like the Fisher King's wounds, those of Perceval's father took not only his life but also the physical and economic signs of his socio-political status:

Vostre peres, sin el savez
 Fu parmi la jambe navrez
 Si que il mehaigna del cors.
 Sa grant terre, ses grans tresors
 Que il avoit come preudom
 Ala tot a perdition. (ll. 435-440)

Your father, whom you did not know
 was injured between the legs
 such that his body was weak.
 His great lands, his great treasures
 that he held as a gentleman
 were all lost.

As her only remaining son, Perceval is thus the final – though somewhat faltering – symbol of sexual fertility and genealogical continuity in an otherwise devastated world:

Vos estiez toz li confors
 Que jou avoie et toz li biens,
 Car il n'i avoit plus des miens; (ll. 484-486)

You were all the comfort
 that I had, and the only thing of value
 for there were no more of my people left.

It was, in fact, to protect against the disappearance of this prized possession (*biens*) that she created her forest, eliminating from it all manner of reference to the lifestyle that had so afflicted her life with loss:

Biax dols fix, de chevalerie
Vos quidoie si bien garder
Que ja n'en oïssiez parler
Ne que ja nul n'en veïssiez. (ll. 408-411)

Fair sweet son, I had hoped
to keep you so far from knighthood
that you'd never hear tell of knights
nor ever see one.

So, like the real forests of medieval Europe, the Waste Forest is not wild, but cultivated, a fictional construction whose existence relies very squarely on language.⁷⁰ Sheltering Perceval from both the aural and visual knowledge of his knightly heritage, her endeavor quite literally suppresses the name of the father: governed by a strict representational schema that banishes from its borders all related signifiers of loss, the *Gaste Forest* is an attempt to (re)create a linguistic plenum by avoiding the Law, the Name-of-the-Father.⁷¹ Its name, therefore, is not a description, but a warning; *for est gaste* (outside there is loss).

The project is, nonetheless, doomed to failure, since the young squire ultimately forsakes the aural *dist* of his mother's teaching for the more seductive visual input he now associates with *chevalerie*. When Perceval returns from his encounter with the knights, his mother tries – in vain – to reaffirm the reliability

⁷⁰ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992) 69. In this excellent study of the historical and literary significance of forests Harrison notes that the earliest documented use of the word itself occur in twelfth-century France, where lands were given a special protected status in order to reserve their use for the king, especially for hunting purposes.

⁷¹ Lacan's Name-of-the-Father (*nom-du-père*) refers not to a real (physical) father, nor to an imaginary father, but to the symbolic father, whose appearance marks the beginning of lack and desire in the subject. See, for example, Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1968) 40-42.

and authority of her *dist*, claiming that angels and God are, indeed, the most beautiful things in the world:

Biax fix, encor le *di* je bien
Jel *di* por voir, et *di* encor (ll. 388-389, *emphasis mine*)

Beautiful son, again I *say* it
I *say* it truthfully, and *say* again

Despite these repetitive reassurances, Perceval lashes back with a stinging retort, affirming the superiority of his vision:

Taisiez, mere, ne vi je or
Les plus beles choses qui sont,
Qui par le gaste forest vont? (ll. 390-392, *emphasis mine*)

Silence, mother, for have I not just seen
the most beautiful things that exist
traveling through the waste forest?

Coupled with an angry silencing of his mother's voice, Perceval's departure from the forest will thus steer him toward another type of learning, a new *enseignement* based upon the exclusion of maternal authority and its *dist*.

The opposition between the *forest gaste* and *chevalerie* becomes even more striking when Perceval arrives at the castle of Gornemans de Gorhaut, the *preudome* who becomes his knightly tutor. Playing on subtle linguistic oppositions and the sexual connotations of his chosen imagery, Chrétien tells us that Gornemans' towering stronghold is positioned at the mouth of a bay (*gort*), where it is locked in a violent struggle against the surrounding sea (*mer*):

Enmi le chastel en estant
Ot une tor et fort et grant;
Une barbacane molt fort
Avoit tornee vers le gort,
Qui a la mer se combatoit,
Et la mers au pié li batoit. (ll. 1331-1334)

In the middle of the castle
was a large and strong tower,

and a strong rampart
that faced the bay and
fought against the sea
and the sea slapped at its moorings.

The last line of defense against an angry sea, the visibly phallic strength of the castle's fortified tower and its defiant resistance of the thrashings from the feminine *mer* are enticing symbolic representations of the pedagogical battle that will be waged inside the castle walls, pitting the mother's instruction against the visual *enseignement* offered by Gornemans de Gorhaut.⁷²

There is little doubt that Perceval could, at this point, use the training. For in spite of a swift victory over the *chevaliers vermeil* (v. ll. 1097 – 1099), this young Welshman seems ill prepared for his new vocation. He is, as text notes, *nice* (ignorant), a lack of refinement that was so glaring in his earlier unawareness of the laws of *chevalerie*.⁷³ Furthermore, as Perceval himself admits, all he knows how to do with his bright new outfit is put it on and take it off (*Jes sai bien vestir et retraire*, l. 1392), and even this fairly simple gesture did not come naturally:

Je quidoie de vostre roi
Qu'il meüst ces armes donees,
Mais ains avrai par carbonees
Trestot esbrahoné le mort
Que nule des armes en port,
Qu'eles se tiennent si au cors
Que dedans et defors
Est trestot un, si com mi samble (ll. 1134-1141)

I thought that your king
had given me these arms,
but I will have burned and
cut this dead man into pieces
before wearing a single piece of his armor,
for they cling so tightly to his body
that inside and outside

⁷² For an explanation of the connection between the mother (*mere*) and the sea (*mer*), see p. 114.

⁷³ See ll. 236 – 241.

are as one, it seems to me.

Unable to conceive of a difference between the body and its protective covering, the use and appearance of armor are, for Perceval, one and the same.⁷⁴ This superficial semiotic understanding is a legacy inherited from his mother, who taught him that “it is by the surname that we know man” (*Par le sornon connoist on l’ome*, l. 562).

The training offered by Gornemans focuses largely on moving Perceval away from such an oversimplified perspective. Among the things that his host demonstrates how to use is the shield (*escu*). One of many pieces in a medieval knight’s armor, the shield has a rather special status, for unlike the sword or the lance, it is simultaneously armorial and accessorial. Held in the hand during combat, it plays a direct role in the physical aspect of this violent encounter; the battle finished, the shield once again becomes part of the knight’s vestimentary ensemble, often hung around the neck, a practice emulated in the *Conte du Graal* (*si ot un escu a son col*, l. 4822). To these uses is added another, one that Gornemans de Gorhaut himself demonstrates to Perceval as part of his *ensaignement*:

Lors a desploïe l’ensaigne
Se li mostre et li ensaigne
Comment on doit son escu prendre. (ll. 1437-1439)

Then he unfurled his blazon,
and demonstrated and taught
how one must hold his shield.

⁷⁴ The same sort of misunderstanding occurs when Perceval comes across the knights in his mother’s forest. Admiring their armor, he asks if they “were born that way” (*Li dist: “Fustes vos ensi nez?”*, l. 282).

By repetition of the word *ensaigne* in this passage (first as a noun and then as a verb), the handling of the shield is related to, even confused with, the presentation of *l'ensaigne*, that is to say, the heraldry. "Like so many visible signs," the shield is an accessory via which one knight identifies himself to others, a nominative apparatus that signals both his status as a knight and his membership in a particular political or familial group.⁷⁵ Thus, Gornemans' lesson teaches his student that some objects are used to signify others, that signs are separate from things.⁷⁶

In fact, the whole of Gorneman's training is focused not on fighting, but on representation. Above all, what must be adhered to in *chevalerie* is a confrontational *mise-en-scène* that governs participants' activities. So, when Perceval suggests that he will resort to using his fists in the event his lance is broken (*Après che n'i avroit plus / Mais qu'as poinz li corroie sus*, ll. 1515-1516), Gornemans' advises a much different course of action:

— "Amis, ce ne feriez vos mie."
 — "Que ferai dont?" — "Par *escremie*
De l'espee le dois requerre." (ll. 1517-1519, *emphasis mine*)

"Friend, you shall not do this at all."
 "What, then, shall I do?" "By *fencing*
 you should pursue him."

Encouraging strict adherence to its representational traditions, improvisation is not allowed in Gornemans' version of *chevalerie*, a world that thrives not on innovation but imitation. The reason for this severity only becomes clear later in the tale, once the young knight has begun his chivalric adventures in earnest.

⁷⁵ St. Augustine recognizes the essentially linguistic nature of these objects, noting that "banners and military standards visibly indicate the will of the captains. And all of these things are like so many visible words" (II.iii.4). St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 35.

⁷⁶ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 8-9 (II.ii.2).

Before Perceval can leave Gornemans' castle, the *preudom* offers him several bits of last minute advice, including one final piece of information regarding knightly combat:

Se vos venez al desus,
Que vers vos ne se poïst plus
Desfendre ne contretenir,
Ainz l'estuece a merchi venir,
Gardez que merchi en aiez
N'encontre che ne l'ociiez. (ll. 1643-1647)

If you get the upper hand
and he can no longer defend himself
or hold out against you,
you must grant him mercy
rather than killing him outright.⁷⁷

Given the violence with which Perceval first acquired his armor, this clement attitude no doubt seems rather strange to the young knight.⁷⁸ He does, however, accept these terms and abides by them on several different occasions.

If one recalls that the apprenticeship that allowed Perceval to become a chevalier is described as an *enseignement* – a semiotic apprenticeship – then these aborted battles reveal the true reason behind the above interdiction. A knight manipulates signs (*les enseignes*) as well as weapons. Obviously, this rapport that surges from the language of the *Graal* would be much less interesting if Perceval's very gestures did not so convincingly resemble the production of a text. Curiously, most passages that relate Perceval's combats with other knights are not extensively commented by the narrator, who is always in a hurry to put an end to his descriptions of these confrontations. Rather, they are recounted later within the fictional framework of Perceval's knightly development. After

⁷⁷ Kibler 81.

⁷⁸ Perceval's defeat of the *chevalier vermeil* is especially bloody (v. ll. 1098-1119).

each of his combats as *noviax chevaliers*, Perceval sends back a defeated adversary to Arthur's court, where the unfortunate foe must present himself in the same state in which he was at the end of the battle, a practice that the text cites to us one of the most vital rules of *chevalerie*:

Costume estoit a cel termine,
Sel trovon escrit en la letre,
Que chevaliers se devoit metre
En prison atot son atour,
Si come il partoit de l'estour,
Come il avoit conquis esté,
Qu'il n'i eüst ja rien osté
Ne rien nule n'i mise.
Clamadeus tot en itel guise
S'aroute après Engygeron (ll. 2722-2731)

In those days it was custom –
as we find it written down,
that a knight has to render himself
prisoner with all his equipment
just as he left the battle
where he had been defeated,
without having removed anything,
nor having added anything.
In just this way, Clamadeu
set off after Engygeron

Splattered with blood from wounds inflicted by Perceval's lance and sword, these defeated knights become living texts of the combat: sent back to the Arthurian court, their assignment will be to recount the story of their own defeat.⁷⁹ For example, when Clamadeu arrives in Arthur's pavilion covered in blood (ll. 2764-2765), his seneschal (himself already a prisoner in Arthur's court) recognizes his lord immediately and knows exactly what happened to him just by looking at his armor:

"Seignor, seignor, veez merveilles.

⁷⁹Curtius 302-347. Curtius discusses this fictional "blood writing" in his chapter "The Book as Symbol."

Li vallés as armes vermeilles
Envoie cha, si m'en creez,
Cel chevalier que vos veez.
Il l'a conquis, j'en sui toz cers,
Por che qu'il est de sanc covers. (ll. 2767-2772)

My lord, my lord, behold this wonder.
the squire with the red armor
sent this chevalier that you see,
you can believe me.
He defeated him, I'm completely sure of it,
because he is covered in blood.

So, the swordplay that Gornemans counsels as a substitute for direct physical contact and the obligatory *merchi* that preserves the wounded adversary transform orchestrated scenes of combat into ones of writing. In this sense, the knight's activity is resolutely poetic, with physical combat just the necessary means to a literary end.

Still, indoctrination into this realm of visual signification comes at a loss, for it forces the *vallés* to renounce his mother's teaching. When Perceval defeats the *chevalier vermeil*, he readily dons his defeated foe's armor but scoffs at Yvonet's suggestion that he also wear a luxurious silk chemise underneath the mail:

Voldriiez vos que je laissasse
Ma cotele ou aigue ne passé
Por cesti qui n'en tenroit goute?
Maldite soit la gorge tote
Qui cangera n'avant n'après
Ses bons dras por autres malvés. (ll. 1167-1172)

Do you want me to leave
my jacket which lets no water pass
for this one that wouldn't hold a drop?
Cursed be the throat
of he who would ever exchange
his good clothes for other poor ones.

Here, it is not a matter of keeping water (e.g., *aigue, eve, mer*) out, but in. Hoping to sustain her symbolic presence through a vestimentary keepsake, Perceval refuses to give up the rough canvas shirt because it was made by his mother (*Que ma mere me fist l'autr'ier*, l. 1163). However, having tricked the Welshman into pledging to obey all his advice, Gornemans de Gorhaut is able to impose this switch upon the youth.⁸⁰ While he believes that the garment offered by his host is worth much less than his own, Perceval will not allow himself to transgress Gornemans' commands (*commandemens*, l. 1618):

-- "Et je si ferai,
Fait li vallés, ja n'en ferai
Encontre vos de nule chose."
As dras vestir plus ne repose,
Si a les sa mere laissez. (ll. 1619-1623)

-- "And so I will,
said the squire, I will never
oppose you in anything."
He no hesitated no longer in putting on the clothes
and left aside those his mother had made him.

Fulfilling his own curse, Perceval's change in appearance is followed almost immediately by Gornemans' admonishment for the student to control his tongue (v. ll. 1648 - 1654). In addition, the *preudom* orders him to expunge any references to his mother and her teaching (*dist*) from his vocabulary:

-- "Or *ne dites jamais*, biax frere,
Fait li preudom, que vostre mere
Vos ait appris rien, se je non. (ll. 1675-1677)

-- "Now, *never say*, dear brother,
said the gentleman, that your mother
taught you anything.

⁸⁰ l. 1416 ff.

Instead, he suggests that the *noviax chevaliers* use a new allusion when pushed to designate the source of his teaching:

“Li vavasors, ce porrez dire,
Qui vostre *esperon* vos caucha,
Le vos aprist et ensaigna.” (ll. 1686-1688, *emphasis mine*)

“You can say that the vavasor
who attached your *spur*
taught and instructed you.”

The symbol of Perceval’s new chivalric identity, this spur carries a trace (*es-per-on*) of the same paternity from which his mother had fought so hard to shelter him. Gornemans’ chivalric ensaignement is thus indeed the imposition of a law, one that places the edenic fullness of the mother and her *forest gaste* under the sign of silence and out of reach.

Silence, God, and the Mer(e)

Nonetheless, Perceval is convinced that he will relocate his mother if only he can cross the seemingly interminable stream that runs through the fictional topography of the *Graal*:

Et dist: “Ha! Sire toz puissans,”
Se ceste eve passer pooie,
Dela ma mere troveroie,
Mien escient, se ele est vive.” (ll. 2990 - 2993)

And he said: “Alas! All powerful lord,
if only I could cross this water,
over there I would find my mother,
I do believe, if she is alive.

Sadly, Perceval is never able to make this crossing, and his mother remains *dela*, always ‘over there’ on the other side, ever present in memory yet just out of reach. Separating the world of *chevalerie* from that of the mother, this water is, like the silence that engenders Perceval’s misfortune at the Fisher King’s castle, a

sort of conceptual and linguistic filter that both impedes and facilitates the successful and fulfilling use of language.⁸¹

While riding through a “naked and deserted land” (*terre nue et desertee*, l. 1750), the young squire happens upon a castle named Beaurepaire and, taken aback by the desolateness of the surrounding area, hastens to gain entry inside the castle walls. Unfortunately, like the mother’s forest, this place does not live up to its name.⁸² For once inside, he realizes that the interior is equally bare, a uniform emptiness that the narrator associates with a specific sexual lack:

Car tot par tot ou il ala,
Trova degastees les rues
Et les maisons vit decheües,
C’ome ne *feme* n’i avoit. (ll. 1752-1755, *emphasis mine*)

For everywhere he went,
he found the roads deserted
and the saw houses in ruin,
as though not a *woman* were there.⁸³

There are, of course women in the castle, including the one who later becomes Perceval’s *amie*, the maiden Blancheflor. However, this imagery links more tangible signs of loss (e.g., collapsed houses, deserted streets) to an abstract conception of femininity as the sexualized symbol of a missing plenitude.⁸⁴ The

⁸¹ Once more, the frontispiece of the *Graal* manuscript seems to bear this idea out, its rather sparse visual cues a nonetheless precise depiction of the tales’ fictional and poetic structures: positioned on the opposite side of a bridge from Perceval and the group of wandering knights, the mother, although visible, is already isolated within the scene, confined to an area *dela* (beyond) the rest of the fiction.

⁸² Literally, “Good Rest,” a name that should denote a comfortable lodging.

⁸³ This line differs depending on the manuscript consulted. For example, in the manuscript used by Kibler for his translation (MS Fr. 794), it finishes with *home et feme* (men and women), whereas another (Bern 354) contains the variant *fame*. While Méla translates this as *âme* (soul) in modern French, I am inclined – given the commonality between the other two manuscripts -- to treat it as a variant spelling for woman.

⁸⁴ Here, it would be impossible to ignore echoes from Lacan’s notion of *la femme* (the woman), which he writes with the definite article crossed out not to imply that women cannot speak, but to suggest that words are incapable of fully describing them, that they have within their beings

nominative disruption between the surname (*Beaurepaire*) and the castle's appearance can be read as a result of this lack.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Chrétien's use of the words *degastees* and *decheües* recall the now-absent *veve dame*, whose forest was *gaste* and who appeared to collapse dead (*cheüe morte*, l. 625) upon Perceval's departure. Meaning (*sen*) has vanished along with the Perceval's mother, a loss not unlike the *sorplus* that she strictly prohibits her son from accepting from anyone but herself:

S'ele le baisier vos consent,
Le *sorplus* je vos en desfent,
Se laissier le volez por moi. (ll. 548-549, *emphasis mine*)

If she grants you a kiss,
I forbid you to take the *surplus*
For you should leave this to me.

This maternal injunction, one of the last prior to Perceval's exit, contrasts maternal language, which has something *en plus* – its *sorplus* – to the language of exterior world where, as the mother explained, people are defined by the *sornon*, a negation of this signifying excess.

Given their already sorry state, the castle's residents are soon driven to the point of starvation when the knight Clamadeu des Iles redoubles his efforts with a new siege. Then, just as they are about to lose both physical strength and any hope of resisting the opposing army's demands, a chance arrival turns the tables in their favor:

something that escapes the world of things and, thus, language. Lacan calls this something a *jouissance supplémentaire*. "Il n'en reste pas moins que si elle est exclue par la nature des choses, c'est justement de ceci que d'être pas toute, elle a, par rapport à ce qui désigne de jouissance la fonction phallique, une jouissance supplémentaire." Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XX* Encore, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 68.

⁸⁵ Perceval himself encounters a similar problem when the maiden Blanchefleur asks him where he was the night before arriving at Beaurepaire. For, although the young Welshman is able to provide a multitude of details regarding the appearance of Gornemans de Gorhaut's castle, he does not know its name (*Si sai tote l'oeuvre assomer / Mais le chastel ne sai nomer*, ll. 1884-1890).

Cel jor meïsme[s] uns grans vens
 Ot par mer chachie une barge,
 Qui de forment porte grant charge
 Et d'autre vitailles ert plaine (ll. 2524 - 2527)

That very day a powerful wind
 had driven across the sea a barge
 heavily laden with wheat
 and filled with other provisions

A divine gift from the sea (*mer*), this strategic shipment is also by homophonic liaison a gift from the mother (*mere*), no doubt gathered from the bountiful fields of her *gaste forest*.⁸⁶ In fact, fluidity and femininity are closely linked, both in the *Graal* and in medieval writing in general: though etymologically distinct, poets often play on the visual and sonic resemblance of the Old French terms for water (*eve*) and woman (*eve*). This practice – called echolalia – is particularly noticeable in the *Conte du Graal*, where the narrative pursues an imaginative, incessant string of analogous linguistic figures.⁸⁷ In this particular passage, the *mer-mère* correlation becomes even more pronounced after the arrival of the barge, for with it comes renewed linguistic congruity:

La sale ne rest mie coie
 Ainçois i a joie et grant bruit.
 Par le mengier font joie tuit
 Que molt l'avoient covoiitié (ll. 2578-2581)

The hall was no longer silent
 but filled with joy and great sound.
 Everyone was overjoyed by the meal
 for which they had so longed.

⁸⁶ When Perceval meets the knights passing through the forest, he leads them to a team of harrowers (*herceor*, l. 300) who are preparing the land for planting.

⁸⁷ Cf. Roger Dragonetti, *La Vie de la lettre au Moyen Âge* 176. "L'acte de narrer est un *passer*, un *trespasser*, un *retrespasser* des mêmes figures que l'écrivain accouple toujours différemment et souvent avec d'autres plus en retrait qui échappent à l'attention du lecteur."

Filled with all the expected signs (e.g., food, happiness, laughter) of a good lodge (*beau repaire*), the castle now truly lives up to its name. Gone but not forgotten, the maternal *sorplus* nourishes the otherwise barren relationship between word and thing from *dela*, her continued influence acting as “an umbilical cord of the symbolic.”⁸⁸

Thus, despite her physical absence, the *veve dame* maintains a linguistic presence throughout the tale, and nowhere is this more apparent than during the final lines of Perceval’s story. Occurring after a hiatus of nearly 1,500 verses, this episode would seem to signal his return to a former state, one more akin to the ignorant Welsh squire who roamed Waste Forest than to the proven knight so cherished by Arthur and his court. Still, when we rejoin the *noviax chevaliers*, he has wandered the countryside for five long years, encountering numerous strange adventures (*estranges aventures*, l. 6627). This dogged pursuit of fanciful exploits has, however, retarded the young knight’s spiritual development to such a point that even the most fundamental theological concept is now erased from his mind:

Perchevax, ce nos dist l'estoire,
Ot si perdue la miemoire
Que de Dieu ne li sovient mais. (ll. 6217-6219, *emphasis mine*)

Perceval, so the story tells us
had lost his memory so completely
that he no longer remembered God.

While the precise cause of this most severe case of catechistic amnesia is never identified, the implication is clearly that *chevalerie* and religion are two mutually

⁸⁸ Alan Sheridan, trans., *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1977) 280. These are not Lacan’s own words, but they do offer an interesting illustration of the relationship between the Real and the Symbolic.

exclusive pursuits. Indeed, when Perceval encounters a group of pilgrims returning from Good Friday services at the home of a saintly hermit (*saint hermite*, l. 6303), the party is astonished to see him in full knightly regalia on a day when such activity is strictly forbidden:

Tot cil qui en lui ont creance
Doivent estre hui en peneance;
Hui ne deüst hom qui Dieu croie
Armes porter ne champ ne voie (ll. 6297-6300)

All those who believe in him
must be penitent today;
today no man who believes in God
should carry arms in field or trail.

Accompanied by a brief summary of the Incarnation and Jesus' resurrection, their scolding is apparently enough to mend Perceval's mnemonic rift, for he turns immediately toward the hermitage and, upon arrival, dismounts, shedding his religiously offensive garb (*Et quant il vint a l'ermitage / Si descent et si se desarme*, ll. 6334 – 6335). Welcomed by the hermit, Perceval is absolved of his divine forgetfulness and learns to what end the grail is used, filling the informational hole created by his earlier silence.⁸⁹ With his formal acceptance of Christian doctrine (v. ll. 6509-6512), Perceval thus frees himself from the slavery of "one who uses or worships a significant thing without knowing what it signifies."⁹⁰

Ultimately, God and the mother are confused in this text: the "saintly hermit" is also Perceval's maternal uncle and God's own surname (*Damedieu*, ll. 6383, 6405) speaks to a sacralization of the feminine (*dame-dieu*). Indeed, the

⁸⁹ See p. 21.

⁹⁰ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 84 (III.v.9).

young knight's religious atonement also allows him and his mother to be symbolically – and, to some extent, physically – reunited:

Perchevax se met a jenous
Tantost qu'il entre en la chapele,
Et li buens hom a l[u]i l'apele,
Qui molt le vit simple et plorant,
Que dusques el menton colant
L'eve des oex li degoutoit. (ll. 6348-6353, *emphasis mine*)

Perceval knelt down
as soon as he entered the chapel,
and the good hermit called him forward,
for he saw he was humble and penitent,
and saw the water flowing from his eyes.

Flowing forth from the very organs that provoked the downfall of the mother's *dist*, this water (*eve*) is a visual indication of what is portrayed as Perceval's return to the maternal sphere. Furthermore, the hermit's doctrinal teachings are, like those of his mother, an oral *enseignement*:

Et li hermites li conseille
Une oroison dedans l'oreille,
Si le ferma tant qu'il le sot. (ll. 6481-6483)

And the hermit whispered
a prayer into his ear,
repeating it until he knew it well.

Yet instead of getting rid of the hierarchical silence imposed by Gornemans, the hermit's *oroison* merely transposes it from the mother to God:

Et en cele oroison si ot
Assez des nons nostre Seignor,
Car il i furent li greignor
Que nomer ne doit bouche d'ome,
Se por paor de mort nes nome. (ll. 6484-6488, *emphasis mine*)

And in this prayer he heard
many of the names of our Lord,
all the best and holiest,
which man's mouth should never utter

*except if he fears death.*⁹¹

The only thing that should now remain unsaid – that should be passed over in silence – is God. But whether it is called God, the mother or femininity, we are dealing with the same *sorplus*, a linguistic excess that Lacan calls *jouissance*.⁹² The silence that was a mark of loss and separation from the mother is not eliminated, just deified, assimilated to the nominative impossibility of the Other. By forbidding Perceval from speaking these secret *nons*, the hermit accords a positive value to silence, for instead of signaling linguistic impotence, it is the accurate expression of all that surpasses the linguistic, all that remains *dela*.

⁹¹ The Biblical reference for this passage is II Corinthians 12:24.

⁹² “Cette jouissance qu’on éprouve et dont on ne sait rien, n’est-ce pas ce qui nous met sur la voie de l’ex-sistence? Et pourquoi ne pas interpréter une face de l’Autre, la Face de Dieu, comme supportée par la jouissance féminine?” Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XX: Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1978) 71.

Chapter Four: Silence and *semence* in *Le Conte du Graal* (Gawain)

Est autem tacens non habens sensum loquellae et est tacens sciens tempus apti temporis.

Ecclesiasticus 20:6

Apart from the ambiguity of its final verses, one of the most puzzling features of the *Conte du Graal* is its bipartite structure, which divides the tale into the stories of Perceval and Gawain. The transitions between these two tales are usually rather brusque:

De Percheval plus longuement
Ne parole le contes chi,
Ainz ansez molt ançois oï
De monseignor Gavain parler
Que rien m'oiez de lui conter (ll. 6514-6518)

Of Perceval no longer
does the tale speak at this point.
You will have thus heard a great deal said
about my lord Gawain
before I talk of Perceval again.

Like other narrative shifts, this one marks an abrupt change in the fictional trajectory, suddenly and almost inexplicably diverting our attention from one protagonist to the other. The haphazardness of this arrangement no doubt contributed to earlier theories that the two 'halves' of the *Graal* were really two separate texts placed into a single manuscript by a scribe who would not have been known for his attention to detail.¹ One of the first to argue against this notion was Jean Frappier, who acknowledges that there are striking differences between the Perceval and Gawain episodes, but asserts that these are

¹ See, for example, Martín de Riquer, "Perceval y Gauvain en *Li Contes del Graal*," *Filologia Romanza* 4 (1957) 119-147.

outweighed by similarities between the two tales.² This appraisal is refined by Roger Dragonetti, who says that the story of Gawain serves as a “double counterpoint” to that of Perceval by mirroring much of its fictional schema while at the same time moving in different conceptual directions.³ If so, it would be an example – albeit on a different scale – of Chrétien’s attempt to *rimoier* (to rhyme; to take apart) his own tale.⁴

One of the rare moments at which these two stories seem to be in perfect concordance is during Perceval’s return to the Arthurian court. Meeting each other for the first time, the two knights are instantly taken with each other, a fact to which the young Welshman’s words clearly attest:

“Sire, bien ai oï
De vos parler en plusiors leus,
Et l’acointance de nous deus
Desirroie jou a avoir,
Se ce vos doit plaïre et seoir.” (ll. 4488-92, *emphasis mine*)

“My lord, I have heard good things
said of you in many places
and I have been very eager for
the two of us to join together,
if this would be pleasing to you.”

This *conjointure* of the two protagonists is, however, short-lived. After celebration of Perceval’s return has begun, two new characters arrive with news that shatters the festive atmosphere, pointing once again to the protagonists’ parallel yet

² Jean Frappier, *Autour du Graal* (Geneva: Droz, 1977) 155-224. Delbouille, whom Frappier quotes in support of his arguments for a unified narrative, echoes this claim when he says that “Il existe d’ailleurs entre les deux parties du *Conte* des rappels et des correspondances qui permettent d’apercevoir les liens qui les unissent en un tout cohérent et même de discerner le sujet unique du roman.” *Les Romans du Graal aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Strasbourg, 29 mars - 3 avril 1954) (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1956) 84.

³ “L’aventure de Gauvain se situera donc, par rapport à celle de Perceval, dans la relation d’un double contrepoint en ce sens qu’elle progresse vers la fiction scripturale tout en doublant, d’un semblant narratif, l’aventure de Perceval.” Roger Dragonetti, *La Vie de la Lettre au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) 180.

⁴ See p. 78 ff.

ultimately divergent paths. The first, *la Damoiselle aux Tresses Noires* (a hideous maiden with twisted black braids and yellow eyes), reminds Perceval of the grave consequences of his silence during the grail procession.⁵ This scolding dispensed, she goes on to provide the court with information about several potentially rewarding chivalric exploits (v. ll. 4685-4717), including one that would accord some brave knight the hyperbolic “prize of the whole world” (*prix del tot lo mont*, l. 4701-4702). The effect of these announcements on the narrative is immediate, as Perceval and Gawain turn away from celebratory activities to ready themselves for their first communal *aventure*. However, just as they are ready to leave, a second visitor addresses the court, this one with a message for Gawain. Identifying himself as the knight Guiganbrésil, he accuses Arthur’s nephew of a serious offense:

Gavains, tu oceïs
 Mon seignor, et si le feïs
 Issi que tu ne desfias
 Honte et reproce et blasme i as,
 Si t’en apel de traïson. (ll. 4759-4763)

Gawain, you killed
 my lord, you struck him
 without issuing a challenge.
 Shame and disgrace and blame is yours,
 thus I accuse you of treason.

Although Gawain killed Guiganbresil’s lord, he is not accused of murder, for the law he transgressed is not judicial, but linguistic. Having neglected to signal his combative intentions, Gawain, like Perceval, remained silent when he should have spoken. Citing a desire to protect his personal *honors* and an obligation to

⁵ For these verses, see p. 92.

abide by the laws of knightly conduct, Gawain is therefore left with little choice but to accept his accuser's challenge:

Et je, fait Gavains, te plevis,
Que je te sivrrai orendroit
Et la verrons qui ara droit. (ll. 4794-4796)

And I, said Gawain, swear
that I will follow you at once
and there we will see who is right.

So, just as the two heroes seemed poised to follow the same path, they are torn apart once more: kept from pursuing the narrative's customary search for *merveil* and *estranges aventures*, chivalric activity and the fiction itself seem doomed to stagnate, mired in the legal uncertainty of Gawain's alleged linguistic omission. However, if Perceval's verbal abstinence is repeatedly condemned, the text never really passes final judgment on Gawain's. In fact, while the timing and substance of these two accusations are very similar, what each story says about silence is ultimately quite different.

Shields and Silence

Despite his good intentions, Gawain cannot immediately make good on his promise to Guiganbrésil, for there is no straight (*droit*) road between Arthur's court and Escavalon. Rather, one who wants to make the trip must pass by or, more precisely, through the castle at Tintagel, a circuitous trail that makes arrival at Escavalon less than *orendroit*:

Et mesire Gavains chemine;
D'errer vers Tintagueil ne fine,
Que ne pooit aillors passer. (ll. 4883-4885)

And my Lord Gawain rode off,
heading directly toward Tintagel,
for there was no other way to pass.

Later in the same passage, we learn that there is, in fact, another path that would not force this deviation, but the narrator says it is too far away (*a set grans liues*, l. 4913) for Gawain to bother taking it.⁶ Besides, such a detour would normally be of great interest to our hero, since a tournament between Thibaut and the knight Mélians de Lis is in full swing. However, Gawain is prevented from fulfilling a great desire (*grant talent*) for knightly adventures because of his pledge to defend himself against the aforementioned allegation:

Et por che qu'il ert en redout
 Qu'il fust affolez ou prix,
 Ne s'est del tornei entremis
 Et si'n a il molt grant talent
 Car il voit le tornoiement
 Qui toz jors efforce et amende. (ll. 5102 – 5107)

And since he was afraid
 that he would be injured or captured,
 he did not enter the tournament,
 even if he was very eager to do so,
 for he saw that the tournament
 was growing in size and prestige with every passing day.

Ironically, then, it is Gawain's strict adherence to chivalric law that keeps him from participating in the tournament, almost as if Guiganbrésil's charge of treason forced him to temporarily renounce his symbolic title of *chevaliers*.

In fact, when Gawain arrives at Tintagel, it is this very title that is called into question, a crisis of identity resulting from the unorthodox nature of his knightly *ensaignes*. While preparing to leave Arthur's court for Escavalon, Gawain outfits himself with additional men and weaponry:

Set escuiers maine avec lui
 Et set chevax et *deus escus*. (ll. 4804-05, *emphasis mine*)

⁶ Although Gawain claims to be against any sort of back-tracking or circuitous movement (*Je ne vieng pas por retorner*, l. 6617), his actions prove otherwise. See Keith Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 1980) 121-144. This is not the central feature of Busby's study, but he does include a detailed summary of Gawain's movements in the romance.

Seven squires he took with him,
and seven horses and *two shields*.

Given the often violent portrayal of knightly combat in romance narrative, this excess is perhaps reasonable: replete with broken helms, shattered swords, and pierced shields, the availability or loss of a particular weapon is often the deciding factor in pivotal confrontations. This is, for instance, the case during Perceval's confrontation with Orgueilleus de la Lande and Gawain's confinement in the castle tower at Escavalon.⁷ However, as became clear in the story of Perceval's tutelage under Gornemans de Gorhaut, the shield is a very special part of the knight's arsenal, serving to both protect *and* identify its holder.⁸

Therefore, it is not surprising that Gawain's heraldic surplus creates some serious reading comprehension problems for Thibaut's entourage. The first person to see the wandering knight and his two shields is an old lord who, claims the text, is *molt dote et sage* (very gifted and wise, l. 4923). Still, all his wisdom does not allow him to correctly interpret the shadowy symbols that appear when he perceives Gawain from afar:

Je ai, mien escient, veü
Des compaignons le roi Artu
Deus chevaliers au caiens viennent,
Dui preudome molt grant liu tienent,
Que neïs vaint un tornoi. (ll. 4933-37, *emphasis mine*)

⁷ See ll. 3926a-3926t. Having just received a new sword as a gift from the Fisher King, Perceval is betrayed by his new weapon, which shatters during the battle. Luckily, the sword taken from the Red Knight is still at his side, and he manages to defeat Orgueilleus despite this setback. Gawain himself also benefits from the availability of his trusted sword Excalibur during the fight against the inhabitants of Escavalon, where he had no other real weapons (v. ll. 5899-5904).

⁸ This association, originally discussed in relation to Perceval's *enseignement* at the hands of Gornemans de Gorhaut, is also evident later in the text. For example, when Gawain catches sight of an unknown knight, he inquires about the identity of this *chevalier* by referring not to his physical appearance but to his shield: *Mais s'il vos vient a volenté / Venez jusqu'a ceste fenestre / Et si me dites qui puet estre / Une pucele qui vient chi / S'a un chevalier avec li / Qui porte un escu de quartier*, ll. 8304-8309.

I have, to my knowledge, seen
companions of King Arthur,
two knights coming here.
Two brave men would be of great value,
for even just one could win a tournament.

So, although he is able to discern the political affiliation denoted by these approaching forms, even his great *escient* (knowledge, intelligence) does not provide him with the intuition required to grasp the full meaning behind Gawain's confusing double signal. Instead, he interprets the two shields as a clear indication of the arrival of two knights, the certainty of his conviction emphasized in the alliterative repetition of the leading words *des* (some), *deus* (two), and *dui* (two).

He is not, however, alone in his faulty appraisal. Unable to enter the castle, Gawain sets up camp beneath a tree, where he ties his horse and hangs the *deus escus*. Noticing these signs of knightly presence, several young maidens gather on the castle walls, hoping to watch two knights (*deus chevaliers*, l. 4967) get dressed but are disappointed to find only one knight stationed below the shields. For these observers, the scene is something of an oddity, for it contradicts all familiar images of a knight. As she contemplates this bizarre display, one of the maidens – Thibaut's eldest daughter – exclaims:

Que fera il de deus escus?
Ainc chevaliers ne fu veüs
Qui portast deus escus ensamble: (ll. 4975-4977)

What will he do with two shields?
Never have I seen a chevalier
who carried two shields at the same time.

This representational excess provokes an entire series of speculative interpretations regarding the profession of this otherwise lauded knight. At first,

the maidens refer to Gawain as *chevalier*, but once they recognize the inequality of the linguistic equation before their eyes (2 ecus ≠ 1 chevalier), their nominative vocabulary changes:

*“Marcheans est. Nel dites mes
Qu’il doie a tornoier entendre;
Toz ces chevax maine il a vendre.”
— “Ains est changieres, dist la quatre;
Il n’a talent qu’il departe
As povres bachelers anqui
Cel avoir qu’il porte avec l[u]i.
Ne quidiez pas que je vos mente;
C’est monioie et vaisselemente
En ces forriax et en ces males.”* (ll. 5060-69, *emphasis mine*)

*“He is a merchant. Don’t say any more
about his planning to participate in the tournament;
he has brought along all those horses to sell.
“No, he’s a money-changer,” said the fourth.
“He doesn’t have any desire to share
with the poor knights today
all this stock that he has brought with him.
Don’t think that I’m lying to you;
it’s money and dishes
that he has packed in those bags.*

A victim of the women’s visual confusion and misunderstanding, Gawain is transformed from an object of desire into one of spite, no longer a knight but now a merchant or money changer, any practical justification for the two shields rendered meaningless by his inability to participate in the tournament.⁹ Throughout this episode, problems of reading stem from an incompatibility between differing approaches to signification. One – that of the wise *vavasor* and castle maidens – is really nothing more than a code, relying on “fixed correlation

⁹ Robert Sturges contrasts Gawain’s misfortunes at Tintagel with Perceval’s own linguistic difficulties: “Whereas Perceval consistently interprets other people’s signs, or fails to interpret them, by applying to them inappropriate social codes learned in other circumstances, that is, by ignoring the context, Gawain himself is consistently misinterpreted by others, who inappropriately apply to him their own inflexible codes and semiologies...”. *Medieval Interpretation: Models of Reading in Literary Narrative, 1100-1500* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

of signs to the reality which they signify.”¹⁰ The other – that of Gawain – shows evidence of a much more flexible relation between these two semiotic poles.¹¹

Yet even more surprising than the varied interpretations of Gawain’s identity is his refusal to actively contradict any of them. While he very clearly hears all of the aspersions being cast upon him, Gawain remains speechless, a verbal quietude attributed to his continued adherence to the binding *lois* of knighthood that require his safe arrival at Escavalon:

Mesire Gavains clerement
Ot ces ramprosnes et entent
Que les dames dient de lui,
Si a grant honte et grant anui;
Mais il pense, si a raison,
C’on l’apele de traïson,
S’estuet que desfendre s’en aille (ll. 5091-5097)

My lord Gawain clearly
heard these mockeries and listened to
what the ladies were saying about him,
and was thus very ashamed and upset.
but he thought, and rightly so,
that he had been accused of treason,
and must go to defend himself.

Hoping to maintain his honor by avoiding all jousting – verbal or otherwise – Gawain allows his confusing display of chivalric *ensainges* to stand without comment. Once more, silence in the *Graal* – like Perceval’s cautious

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) 61. Lacan, however, is not the only thinker to make the distinction between codes (e.g, birdsongs, bee flight patterns, etc) and human language based on the inability of codes to accept more than one meaning for any single sign.

¹¹ Here, Chrétien seems to call attention to what Ferdinand de Saussure terms the “arbitrary nature of the signifier.” Because of it, both the signifier and signified are mutable, and changes in either “always result in a shift in the relationship between signifier and signified.” *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959) 71-78. Indeed, the knight is rather indifferent about his choice of shield in the *Conte du Graal*, even fashioning one from a chessboard while under siege in a castle tower. Refusing a replacement, the knight implies that this somewhat banal object is, in fact, a suitable representational fit (*Mais que tant de meschief i ot / Que d’escu point avoir ne pot / Si fist escu d’un eschequier / Et dist: “Amie, je ne quier / Que vos m’ailliez autre escu querre*, ll. 5891-5895).

speechlessness at the Fisher King's castle – is portrayed as the regrettable result of laws beyond the hero's control. Or so it would seem. Actually, just a few verses later, this silent knight suddenly breaks out of his vocal stupor, driving away a young squire sent by the maidens to plunder his excess material. When asked why he has not participated in the tournament, Gawain lashes out, asserting his right to reticence:

— “Di va! fait il, a toi qu’ataint?
La chose por coi il remaint
Espoir savras tu bien encor;
Mais par mon chief ce n’ert pas or,
Que dire nel te daigneroie. (ll. 5147-5151)

— “Hey!,” he said “what is it to you?
just why I’ve stood aside,
you can still hope to learn;
but by my head, it won’t be now
that I will deign to tell you.

Gawain will, it seems, explain his actions and the story behind his *deus escus*, but only when he is ready. So, despite initial appearances to the contrary, his silence at Tintagel is not the result of an inexperienced reaction to unknown stimuli, nor the unfortunate result of contradictory doxologies, but a deliberate and calculated rhetorical act.

Above all, Gawain seems to be waiting for the right moment – a window of opportunity that will allow him to reenter the chivalric fray while preserving his precious honor and abiding by the code of conduct to which he is bound. However, before he can do so, his first challenge is to gain entry into the physical confines of Thibaut's castle: its walls are not just highly fortified but impregnable, for all its entries have been sealed shut (*S’ot bien fait murer et enduire / Del chastel totes les entrees*, ll. 4896-4897). This hermetic insulation is

complete, save for one very small door so sturdy that forced entry seems unthinkable:

Li huis fu por toz jors durer,
De coivre, fers a une barre;
En l'uis ot de fer une charre,
Tant com une charrete porte. (ll. 4904-4907)

The door, built to last forever,
was made of copper and locked by a bar;
in the door there was such a load of iron
as would weigh down a cart.

The same obstruction that has blocked Gawain's progress toward Escavalon since his arrival at Tintagel, this lone passage into the castle is a physical manifestation of the narrative's impeded progress. But instead of trying to force his way through the barrier, he simply waits until a group from the tournament returns to the castle and then deftly inserts himself within their ranks:

Puis rentrerent el chastel tuit
Cil qui en estoient issu.
Et mesire Gavains i fu,
Qui aprez le route i entra (ll. 5166-69, *emphasis mine*)

Then returned to the castle all
those who had left it.
And my lord Gawain was there,
who entered the castle after the others.

Here, the key to success is being *there*, or being in the right place at the right time. It was precisely because Gawain was there (*i fu*) when he needed to be that allowed him to pass this otherwise impassable obstacle. This opportune physical penetration into the fictional milieu of *chevalerie* is also an important moment of rhetorical *kairos*.¹² Whereas Gawain had earlier refused to expound on the circumstances surrounding his combative abstinence, he does not hesitate to

¹²See p. 93 ff.

divulge this same information to the *preudom* who offers him lodging within the castle's walls (v. ll. 5185-5199). Thus, if his puzzling sojourn in front of Tintagel initially raises some of the same concerns as Perceval's fateful evening at the Grail Castle, a closer look reveals that Gawain's silence bears witness to his linguistic *aptitude* rather than *ineptitude*. Tolerating ridicule and confusion only insofar as they will bring him later glory, this knight knows how to manipulate the voids of language to his favor, transforming seemingly useless silence into "a state that leads to a generative condition, an emptiness that is paradoxically full."¹³

In fact, this recognition of a fullness within silence is what sets Gawain apart from other characters. In the moments before his return to the court, Perceval is lost in thought over three drops of blood on a snow-covered ground. Enchanted, he resists two separate attempts to tear him away from silent contemplation of this sight, defeating a pair of prominent knights. In each case, his attacker's physical strikes are accompanied by equally aggressive verbal assaults. Sagremor is the first to try:

Et dist: "Par Saint Pierre l'apostre,
Vos i venrez ja mal gre vostre. (ll. 4249-4250)

And he said: "By Saint Peter the apostle,
you'll come now whether you like it or not!

Having failed miserably, he is followed by the bombastic seneschal Keu, who makes it very clear that young knight's submission will be both physically and verbally acknowledged:

¹³ Kalamaras, George, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension: Symbolic Form in the Rhetoric of Silence* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994) 81. Kalamaras' study focuses on the mystical conception of silence in Eastern philosophy, but his description is an accurate description of its poetic significance in this section of the *Graal*.

Et je l'en amenrai sanz faille
Tot a force, ou il veille ou non,
Si li ferai nomer son non. (ll. 4286-4288)

And I will bring him back without fail
by force, whether he wants to or not,
then I will make him say his name

After these two rather brutish – and ineffective – efforts to lead Perceval to the king's tent, Gawain offers to try his hand at bringing back the pensive knight. He will do so, however, by using weapons quite different from those already tested:

Diroie and prieroie li
Qu'il venist a vos jusqu'a cha (ll. 4368-4369)

I would say and would request that
he come here to you

It is thus neither sword, nor lance, nor even verbal command that Gawain would employ to win Perceval's accord, but *words* and *prayers* – the polished, shining tools of rhetoric.¹⁴ At the same time, this diplomatic proposal prompts the sarcastic scorn of Keu, who claims that Gawain uses his linguistic weaponry to abscond with victories and prizes that rightfully belong to other knights:

Quant li *chevaliers* est lassez
Et il fait d'armes assez,
Lors doit *preudom* le don requerre,
Et bien li loist aler conquerre. (ll. 4377-80, *emphasis mine*)

When a *knight* is tired
and has fought all he can,
then the *gentleman* comes to take the prize
and he truly knows how to battle.

¹⁴ Gawain's placating tone is reinforced by his use of the conditional tense of the verbs *diroie* and *prieroie*, a grammatical humility that is repeated later in the same passage when he addresses Perceval in the field: And he said: "Sir, I would have saluted you, had I known your heart like my own." (*Et dist: "Sire, je vos eüsse / Salüé, s'autretel seüsse / Vostre cuer com je sai le mien."*, ll. 4435-4437).

With graceful words that he “knows how to sell well” (*Bien savez vos paroles vendre*, l. 4384), Gawain is said to profit from the toil of others, not unlike the troubadour Arnaut Daniel.¹⁵ For Keu, this deceptive and manipulative use of language is the essential difference between a *preudom* (gentleman) and a *chevalier* (knight). A *preudom* would thus no longer denote an exceedingly wise or brave individual, but a linguistically adept *jongleur* or *versificator*, someone who is able to bend language and rhetorical situations to his unfair advantage.¹⁶

One of the keys to this ability is an acknowledgment of the potentially positive value of what remains unsaid. Thus, whereas Keu treats the young knight’s silence as something that must be forcefully eliminated by making him name his name, Gawain has quite a different perspective on these silent thoughts:

“Certes, fait mesire Gavains,
Cist penses n’estoit pas villains,
Ainz estoit molt cortois et dols□ (ll. 4457-4459)

Certainly, said sir Gawain,
this thought was not cruel,
but rather very courtly and sweet

¹⁵ This *vida*, a short poem which masquerades as an autobiographical vignette from the life of Arnaut, recounts the troubadour’s somewhat specious victory in a poetic competition. Instead of composing his own rhyme, Arnaut steals one from his opponent (also a *jongleur*) by eavesdropping on his nocturnal rehearsals. Having committed it to memory, he then offers to sing first the next morning. Thus, “Arnaut not only mimics his rival, this other, but rather becomes him: Arnaut himself becomes a *jongleur*, one who does not compose his own songs but rather appropriates another’s words.” Gregory B. Stone, *The Death of the Troubadour: The Late Medieval Resistance to the Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) 64.

¹⁶ It would also explain why, even after having trained Perceval in the ways of *chevalerie*, Gornemans de Gorhaut – described as a *preudom* – was able to fool him with such ease. See p. 103 ff.

For Gawain, silence is not a threatening void, but a fullness that, like his own language is aesthetically pleasing.¹⁷ It is this more tolerant attitude toward the place of silence within linguistic exchange that helps him to succeed where both Sagremor and Keu failed, as Perceval readily identifies himself to Gawain and, later, to Arthur.¹⁸ Yet this revelation only occurs after Gawain's intervention, a vestimentary exchange that allows him to deliver (*bail*, l. 4553) the silent knight to the court under a new guise:

Et uns suens chamberlens li trait
 Une robe hors d'un sien coffre;
 A vestir li presente et offre.
 Quant il fu vestus bien et bel
 Et de la cote et del mantel,
 Qui buens li fu et molt li sist,
 Au roi, qui devant son tref sist,
 S'en vienent andui main a main (ll. 4538-4545)

And one of his chamberlins brought
 Perceval a robe out of his trunk
 which Gawain presented to him to wear.
 When he was well-dressed
 in the cloak and the mantle,
 which suited him and fit perfectly,
 the two of them came hand in hand
 to the king, who was seated in front of his tent.

His traditional knightly armor replaced by the "costly garments" of Gawain's deftly fashioned words, Perceval's ensuing declaration of his name attests to a mutually dependent relationship between silence and poetic language.¹⁹ It is

¹⁷ Just before Gawain attempts to lead Perceval back to the court, Arthur describes his nephew's language as *cortois* (l. 4415).

¹⁸ The latter passage reads as follows: By my faith, I'll hide nothing from you / fair king, said Perceval / I have the name of Perceval the Welshman (*Par foi, ja nel vos celerai / Fait Perchevax, biax sire rois / J'ai non Perchevax li Galois*, ll. 4560-4562).

¹⁹ This is another image used by Geoffrey of Vinsauf to describe the poetic process of linguistic rejuvenation: "In order that the matter may adopt costly garments, if the words are old, be a physician and rejuvenate them." Gallo 55. The Latin root *textus* (fabric, sewn) of the Old French word for text (*teste*) explains the frequent figurative association of these two images in medieval literary texts.

only thanks to Gawain's (re)presentation that what had been unsaid is now able to be heard by others.²⁰ At the same time, this quietude is also the opening within which such fabulous *paroles* may be displayed; "everything spoken stems in a variety of ways from the unspoken, whether this be something not yet spoken, or whether it be what must remain unspoken in the sense that it is beyond the reach of speaking."²¹ Silence and poetry in the *Graal* thus go, quite literally, hand-in-hand.

Silent Progress and the Law

His own identity called into question at Tintagel by others' misreading of the *deus escus*, Gawain's predicament is really similar to the one endured by Perceval. And, like the *vallés galois*, Gawain gets some help. For among the disparaging voices in the castle is one opposed to pessimistic interpretations of Gawain and his extra equipment. Unlike the other maidens gathered on the castle walls to marvel at the *deus escus*, Thibaut's youngest daughter is not troubled by their problematic duplicity. Rather, among this confusing symbolic

²⁰ As Lacan suggests, truth is capable of being revealed only in a fictional structure. See, for example, Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1977) 31-37. Furthermore, this is consistent with medieval views on truth. In the twelfth century, a distinction was made -- in large part thanks to the availability of Arabic translations of Aristotle's most important writings -- between two types of truth, one philosophical (based upon medieval interpretations of Aristotealian philosophy) and the other 'religious,' a more readily accessible representation of similar truths. Understood in this way, truth is not a matter of forensic discovery and scientific certainty, but of symbolic invention and spiritual belief, a distinction that brings it close to the domain of poetry. Averroes -- the period's principal interpreter of Aristotelian texts is thus able to assert that "the excellence of poetic narration and what brings to it the fulfilling of its goal is when the poet in his stories and narratives writes so vividly that the audience considers what is narrated almost before its mind and eyes, so that it both understands what is narrated, and also does not fail simultaneously to understand things which are not narrated." O.B. Hardison, Jr., trans., "The Middle Commentary on the *Poetics* of Aristotle," 109 IN O.B. Hardison et al., eds., *Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1974) 89-122.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1971) 120.

surplus, she detects what would appear to be an unmistakable symbol of Gawain's knightly vocation:

– “Voir, trop avez langues males,
Fait la petite s'avez tort.
Cuidiez vos que marcheanz port
Si grosse lance com cil porte? (ll. 5070-5073)
.....
Chevaliers est il, bien le samble.” (l. 5079)

Truly, you have wicked tongues,
said the little one, and you're wrong.
Do you really believe that a merchant carries
a lance as huge as his?
.....
He is indeed a knight, it seems to me.

Though still quite young, this child demonstrates a burgeoning rhetorical prowess, for with a single word (*males*), she calls into question the validity of the older girls' earlier interpretation: the *males* that were thought to contain Gawain's commercial supplies (l. 5069) are but an erroneous fantasy fabricated by the malevolent chattering of a few *males langues*. Such linguistic artistry seems to be part of this child's heritage, for its traces are visible upon her body, a corporeal textuality that belies her precocious symbolic acuity:

Avec l'ainsne[e] fu la mendre,
Qui si cointement se vestoit
Des bras qu'apelee en estoit
La Pucele as Mances Petites,
Car es bras les avoit escrites. (ll. 4986-90, *emphasis mine*)

With the older daughter was the younger,
who dressed herself in such fetching sleeves
that she was called
the Girl with Small Sleeves
for they were written on her arms.

Thanks perhaps to this close physical tie to writing, the Girl with Small Sleeves is able to see past superfluous signifiers that only confuse others, demonstrating an

innate ability to see beyond language's rhetorical packaging, to catch "the scent of true meaning."²²

Each firmly convinced of the accuracy of her reading, the analytical opposition between Thibaut's oldest daughter and the Girl with Small Sleeves is transposed onto an opposition between Gawain and Mélians de Lis, the *ami* of the older maiden and chief of the forces fighting against her father. After a heated debate between the young ladies over which of the two knights is the most handsome (*le plus beau*, l. 5392 ff.), the contradictory voice of the Girl with Small Sleeves eventually pushes her sister to physical violence:

Lors li fiert si que toz ses dois
Li a ens el vis seelez. (ll. 5048-5049)

Then she slapped her such that all her fingers
left their stamp upon her face.

Like the openhanded blow that incites Perceval to undertake his chivalric wanderings as the *chevalier vermeil*, the physical traces left by this aggression become the painful foundation of new narrative *aventures* for Gawain's character.²³ Supported in her complaint by this obvious bodily evidence, the Girl with Small Sleeves asks that Gawain avenge not just her physical injury, but also the shame she suffered on his behalf:

A vos di je, biax sire,
Qu'a vos de ma seror me claim,

²² Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. 4: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press; Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953) 142. Here, Freud is referring to the meaning that is occluded in dreams by the psychic censorship.

²³ The seneschal Keu, enraged by a girl (*pucele*) who proclaims that there will be no better knight than Perceval, lashes out violently (*Et Kex saut / Cui la parole anuia molt / Si li dona cop si estolt / De la palme en la face tender / Que il le fist a terre estendre*, ll. 1048-1052). In Perceval's case, this loss is replayed each time he defeats another knight. In exchange for his life, the vanquished foe is sent to Arthur's court where he not only tells of his own misfortune but recalls the injustice done to this young girl.

Que je n'ai chiere ne ne l'aim
Car por vous m'a hui fait grant honte. (ll. 5344-47, *emphasis mine*)

I tell you, fair sir,
that I lay claim before you against my sister,
for whom I have no love or affection
because today she caused me great shame on your account.

While the laws of knighthood as outlined elsewhere in the *Graal* clearly dictate that he honor her request, this pseudo-legal obligation is really not what pushes Gawain to accept the young girl's proposal.²⁴ Rather, he is enchanted by her advanced linguistic abilities, yielding to her demands because of their pleasing rhetorical presentation:

*Ains a trop bone enfance dite
Come pucele si petite,
Ne ja ne l'en refuserai,
Mais quant li plaist, demain serai
Une piece ses chevaliers.* (ll. 5377-81, *emphasis mine*)

*She has spoken so well
for such a little girl,
so I'll not refuse her request.
Instead, since it pleases her,
I will be her knight for a while tomorrow.*

Despite Thibaut's claims to the contrary – he says that his daughter is *niche* and *fole* (ignorant and foolish, l. 5358) – Gawain accords her a favor, which she uses to ask for his participation in the tournament against Mélians de Lis. Playing the laws of *chevalerie* against each other, Gawain's acknowledgment and adept handling of another rhetorically significant situation thus once again turns the

²⁴ One of the rules quoted by each of Perceval's three tutors -- his mother, Gornemans de Gorhaut, and the hermit -- is a requirement to help and honor ladies (ll. 533-542, 1657-1662, 6465-6470).

fictional tables in his favor, an acute linguistic finesse that is the distinguishing mark of *kairos*.²⁵

This favor accorded, Thibaut instructs his young daughter to offer her knight a gift before the tournament, suggesting one of her sleeves or a wimple. Such an idea, however, does not please the young girl, given their minuscule size (ll. 5415-5425). Instead, Thibaut offers her one of his own as a replacement:

Et il fist un vermeil samit
D'un suen coffre maintenant traire,
Et si en fist taillier et faire
Une mance molt longue et lee
Et si a sa fille appelee. (ll. 5450-5454)

And he had a piece of red samite
taken from one of his coffers
and from it had tailored
a long, wide sleeve
and then he called his daughter.

Within the vestimentary substance of this offering lay crucial poetic implications. Not only a token of support and alliance, but also a literary fabrication, this *mance noeve* (new sleeve, l. 5458) provides Gawain with the textual material necessary to resume the poetic games of Arthurian knighthood and reaffirm his title of *chevaliers*.²⁶

Given Perceval's figurative role in the *Graal* as a writer of courtly 'texts', it remains to be seen how divergences in rhetorical style between the two heroes might transform the linguistic productions of *chevalerie*. Before venturing a

²⁵ A wider definition of *kairos* encompasses not just an knowledge of when to speak and when to remain silent, but an general awareness of all possible factors influencing the situational aspect of speech, including one's location, the audience, and even the weather. See, for example, the Gorgias, who is generally seen as *kairos*' first and greatest supporter. His theories, including those found in his most famous works -- the *Encomium of Helen* and *On What is Not* -- are explored in detail by Robert Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and their Successors* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

²⁶ See footnote, p. 133.

response to this question, we should recall that Perceval's 'texts' – the bloodstained knights sent back Arthur's court – are covered not with signifiers, but with signs: there is nothing to separate what one sees from what should be understood.²⁷ So concrete, literally attached to their source, the meaning of these symbolic images is altogether evident, their veracity of the type Quintilian describes in the *Institutio Oratoria* as inartificial (*inartificiales*):

To begin with it may be noted that the division laid down by Aristotle has met with almost universal approval. It is to the effect that there are some proofs adopted by the orator which lie outside the art of speaking, and others which he himself deduces or, if I may use the term, begets out of his case. The former therefore have been styled *inartificial* proofs, the latter *artificial*.²⁸

Like the blood-spattered armor worn by the defeated knights, an inartificial proof tells its own story, graced with a visual appearance and meaning that are one and the same. Perceval's 'writing' is thus of a relatively simple sort, producing texts filled with readily understood and unambiguous symbols, ones that the residents of Tintagel would surely recognize.

Even before Gawain manages to gain entry inside the walls of Thibaut's castle, it is quite obvious that his approach to representation is altogether different. Specifically, the confusion surrounding his identity in this part of the romance shows that the *deus escus* and Perceval's defeated knights do not belong

²⁷ In the previous chapter, see page 106 ff. for a discussion of Perceval's "blood-writing." In contemporary linguistics, the first to articulate the difference between signifier and sign -- although somewhat cryptically -- was Ferdinand Saussure. He recognized that both the mechanics and structural forms of linguistic signification were based on a separation and *perceived* connection between words and their referents. For a discussion of this and other related topics in the specific context of the Middle Ages, Eugene Vance's book *Marvelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) is an excellent reference.

²⁸ H.E. Butler, trans., *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) 2: 157. Augustine makes the same distinction, but substitutes "natural" for inartificial and "conventional" for artificial. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 34-35 (II.i.1 – II.ii.3).

to the same linguistic category. Whereas the story told by Clamadeu's armor is immediately obvious to the audience at Arthur's court, no one, including Thibaut's wise *vavasor*, is able to understand the sense of the *deus escus* without the help of Gawain's own explanation. Conceptually detached from any readily accessible meaning, Gawain's symbolic creations are artificial (*artificiales*) proofs, their substance and signifying authority coming not from within, but from without – from the rhetoric in which they are awash.

Just how this new mode of signification modifies the linguistic context of knighthood is illustrated by Gawain's battle against Mélians de Lis. From the start, it is clear that much more than just honor or pride is at stake, for in addition to being a talented member of *chevalerie*, Mélians is, as Thibaut's eldest daughter claims, the representative of its *status quo*, its law:

Ainz dist: "Dames veez venir
Celui qui de chevalerie
a le los et la seignorie."(ll. 5510-12, *emphasis mine*)

Then she said: "Ladies, come see
he who has of knighthood
the law and lordship."

Despite the potential fictional significance of the battle between these two knights, it is – like those between Perceval and his various adversaries – only sparsely commented by the narrator, occupying a scant seven verses. Gawain is victorious in this contracted confrontation, unseating Mélians from his mount with surprisingly little effort (ll. 5513-5519). However, after having defeated his foe, Gawain does not offer up the bloodied knight as fictional compensation for the text's brevity. Instead, he opts for an alternate symbol of his triumph:

Et tent a son cheval la man,
Sel prent au frain et si li baille
A un vallet et dist qu'il aille

A celi por cui il tornoie
Si li die qu'il li envoie
Le premier gaaing qu'il a fait
Le jor, qu'il velt que ele l'ait. (ll. 5520-5526)

Then he held out his hand to Méliant's horse,
took it by the bridle and gave it
to a squire and told him to go
to the one for whom he participated in the tournament
and tell her that he sent her
the first prize that he had won
that day, for he wanted her to have it.

Although Mélians could hardly have denied a request to appear in front of the court as did Clamadeu, he is left on the ground, flipped off his horse and onto his back by Gawain's lance. Instead of using what would be the incontestable inartificial proof of his victory, Gawain supplants Mélians with the knight's horse, a metonymic displacement whose meaningful tie to the combat will have to be indicated by a squire who delivers the novel prize (ll. 5520-5528). Like the knights defeated by Perceval, this *gaaing* (gain; prize) has something to tell its reader, serving as a tangible symbol of his battlefield exploits. However, unlike Perceval's living texts, the *gaaing* cannot recount anything on its own, but instead requires a measure of rhetorical assistance to bring its signification within the conceptual reach of an audience. Detached from their direct referents, Gawain's knightly symbols are rhetorical creations that spring forth from the tacit gap between signifier and signified, between *ensainge* and knight. This separation paves the way for multiple readings of the same event, with four different *gaaings* dispatched to four separate people after Gawain's victory. The new law of *chevalerie* is thus founded on lack: indeed, it is because it is lacking "that allows

it to signify something, that is to say that it can be read in an infinite number of ways.”²⁹

Healing Old Wounds

However, the above episode is just one of many that draws readers’ attention to the “double counterpoint” between the stories of these two heroes.³⁰ And while Gawain is not entirely sheltered from the blatant ridicule and shame that haunts Perceval throughout the text, much of his story can be read as an attempt to right the wrongs of his less experienced colleague, as if the fiction itself needed to do penance for its younger knight’s errant ways. As mentioned in the previous chapter, his wandering is typified by the physical distancing from the maternal *manoir* toward the world of *chevalerie*, an estrangement that is explicitly associated – by Perceval himself, nonetheless – with a geographical division in the landscape:

Se ceste eve passer pooie,
Dela ma mere troveroie (ll. 2991-2992)

If only I could cross this water,
over there I would find my mother

Bolstered by the homonymic femininity of not just one, but two Old French words for water (*eve* and *mer[e]*), this linguistic identification of the maternal as a region beyond (*dela*) the normal sphere of knightly pursuits transforms Perceval’s desire for familial reunion into a errant quest for sexual unity, an attempt at geographical and linguistic *rapprochement* to a feminized Other.³¹

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire livre XX: Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1971) 37. Translation is my own. The original text reads: “C’est au titre de lapsus que ça signifie quelque chose, c’est-à-dire que ça peut se lire d’une infinité de façons différentes.”

³⁰ Dragonetti 180. See p. 120.

³¹ See p. 111 ff. of the previous chapter for a more complete examination of this material.

Paradoxically, this symbolic dislocation constitutes what is perhaps the most compelling evidence of continuity between the two 'halves' of the *Graal*; the same theme is also central to Gawain's knightly *aventures*. Granted a temporary reprieve from his confrontation with Guiganbrésil following a brief imprisonment in the castle of King Escavalon, Gawain sets off about the countryside, presumably to search for the Bleeding Lance, which he has pledged to deliver to his accuser in exchange for continued freedom.³² Yet this obligation is very quickly forgotten, and Gawain forges ahead, apparently with no particular destination in mind (*Mesire Gavains tant erra*, l. 6519). But like the well-defined *chemin* that leads Perceval to the cave of the *saint hermite*, this seemingly aimless path has its own unique sort of trail markers, *entresaignes* that guide the way, albeit toward *chevalerie* rather than away from it.³³ Arriving at a wide valley, Gawain hastens toward a tree in which he notices what would appear to be obvious signs of a knightly presence:

Au chaisne vit *un escu pendre*
Et dalez *une lance droite*. (ll. 6526-27, *emphasis mine*)

Hanging in the oak he saw *a shield*
and beside it, *a straight lance*.

Ironically, the representational unity of this pastoral scene is thrown into doubt for Gawain by the sight of a *palefroi norrois petit* (small Norwegian palfrey, l. 6530) next to the same tree, a horse whose presence he considers to be an

³² Having mistakenly welcomed Gawain into the castle as his guest, Escavalon is obliged to offer Guiganbrésil's adversary a reprieve, allowing the knight to profit yet again from the often contradictory laws that govern *chevalerie* in this romance (ll. 6092-6128).

³³ The pilgrims who encounter Perceval on horseback on Good Friday explain that the path to the hermit's cave is, unlike the featureless desert that the hero has just traversed (l. 6239), easy to follow and well-marked with hand-knotted signposts placed among the greenery of the thick and dense forest (*le bos espés et menu*, l. 6324): "We fashioned such signs so that no one who going to see the saintly hermit goes astray." (*Tels entresaignes i feïsmes / Por che que nus n'i esgarast / Qui vers le saint hermite alast*, ll. 6328-6330).

absurdly utilitarian supplement to the otherwise unequivocal symbols of *chevalerie* displayed nearby. Thus, just as the *deus escus* fascinated and puzzled the residents of Tintagel, this arboreal *merveille* both shocks and intrigues Gawain, forcing him to question if this confusing collection of signs really belongs to a knight. In this case, however, the narrative does not dwell on the symbolic oddity of the sight as it did earlier, for before Gawain has a chance to reflect on possible explanations for such a display, an answer comes into view:

Qua[nt] mesure Gavains l'aproche,
Si voit le chevalier blechié,
Qui le vis ot tot depechié,
Et ot une plaie [molt] grief
C'une espee parmi le chief,
Et d'ansdeus pars parmi les flans
Li coroit a grans rais li sans. (ll. 6550-6556)

When my lord Gawain approached her
he saw that the knight was wounded
and that he had a very serious wound
from a swordblow in the middle of his head,
and to both sides along his flanks
blood was flowing in great streams.

Nearly identical to the dolorous scene that greets Perceval on the road leading away from the Fisher King's Castle (ll. 3431-3482), this second sighting of a severely injured *chevaliers* and his saddened *amie* points to an inescapable loss at the center of *chevalerie*. The intratextual repetition of this scene is further evidence of a damning fictional legacy that exists – that stands *beyond* –these knights' individual stories. Like the blow that maimed Perceval's father between the legs (*Fu parmi la jambe navrez*, l. 436), this knight's gushing cranial hemorrhage is but one in a long series of corporeal manifestations of sexual loss in *chevalerie*, the blood that flows forth from it staining not only his head and neck, but also his flanks (*flans*, l. 6555). So, in spite of his superior ability to

capitalize on the kairotic moments of *chevalerie*, Gawain's winding path also follows traces of an original absence that taints the entire *Graal* with its dark, sanguine hue.

Yet whereas physical marks of separation and loss are for Perceval immutable (*les mors a mors, les vis a vis*, l. 3630), Gawain's perception of similar categorical divisions is decidedly less rigid. Thus, when the weeping maiden says she is convinced of her *ami's* impending death (v. ll. 6564-6566), Gawain refuses to accept the imminence of his passing. Instead, spurred by his desire for information (*noveles*, l. 6569) about the land into which he has erred, Gawain wakes the almost-dead by using a special chivalric gesture:

Lors torne devers l'arestuel
Sa lance et un poi l'en adoise
A l'esperon; ne pas n'en poise
Au chevalier s'il lesveilla
Car si soavet li crolla
L'esperon que mal ne li fist (ll. 6582-6587)

He then turned the tip of
his lance and pushed it carefully
against the spur; not causing any harm
to the knight but waking him up,
for he knew how to touch
the spur so that it did not hurt.

Bringing together two of this text's most potent symbols of knightly identity, Gawain manages to coax this *chevaliers* from his painful slumber.³⁴ The substance of this secret knowledge – how to touch the *esperon* without inflicting pain – implies that Gawain is aware of a way around the linguistic loss that inflicted

³⁴ As was true for the Girl with Small Sleeves in the story of Gawain's *deus escus* at Tintagel, the lance is a clear indicator of knightly identity in this passage. Elsewhere in the narrative, the spur (*esperon*) serves a similar function: for Gornemans de Gorhaut, it is the visual proof of Perceval's membership in the order of *chevalerie* (ll. 1686-1688).

Perceval after his acceptance of this symbolic accessory from Gornemans de Gorhaut.³⁵

Indeed, once Gawain has carried out this special therapy, the injured knight awakens, a resurrection highlighted by the rhythmic return of his voice (*L'esperon que mal ne li fist / Ançois l'en mercia et dist*, ll. 6587-6588). However, the news that he gets from his revived interlocutor is far from pleasant. In fact, the injured knight implores Gawain to turn back immediately, claiming that all who cross from this land into the next do so at an immense risk to their personal safety:

Car c'est la bosne de Galvoie,
Que chevaliers ne puet passer
Qui jamais puisse retorner (ll. 6600-6603)

for this is the frontier of Galvoie:
no knight can ever cross it
and return.

It was, claims the knight, his own foray into this dangerous no-man's-land that brought him to his present state. Nevertheless, Gawain insists that he must continue forward in spite any credible warnings of the danger involved. To do otherwise would, he suggests, be conduct unbecoming a knight:

L'en le me devroit atorner
A trop laide recreandise,
Quant jou ai or la voie emprise,
Se je de chi m'en retornoie. (ll. 6618-6621)

One could take it as
the worst sort of cowardice
if after having chosen this road
I were to decide to turn back.

³⁵ The receipt of the *esperon* is coupled with an explicit request that Perceval no longer mention his mother. See p. 110 ff.

But while his desire to follow the most direct (*droit*) route is admirable, the notion seems more foolhardy than honorable since the path will ostensibly lead not to knightly glory but certain demise. Ever worrisome to protect his precious *honors* regardless of the cost, Gawain is thus poised to enter into an exploit whose inherent futility points to the semantic suitability of his given name (*Gau-vain* in Old French).³⁶

Therefore, it is not surprising that, while on the other side of this frontier, he encounters a maiden whose violently malevolent disposition toward knights garners her the less than flattering moniker of *malvaise pucele*, or Cruel Maiden. But as the giant knight (*grans chevaliers*) from whom Gawain retrieves this maiden's horse explains, she is much more than just unpleasant:³⁷

Ainc chevaliers ne l'osa prendre
 Issi com tu prendre le vels
 Qui n'en avenist si grans doels
 Que la teste en eüst trenchie[e]. (ll. 6806-09, *emphasis mine*)

There is no knight who has ever
 dared take it like you want to now
 who has not suffered dearly for it
by having his head chopped off.

Recalling the cranial injury of the wounded knight, this threatening proclamation designates the *malvaise pucele* as a harrowing source physical loss, and nowhere is the extent her hatred more evident than when Gawain attempts to, as chivalric law dictates, come to her aid. Having recovered the maiden's horse, Gawain

³⁶ Dragonetti 184. "Quant à la reconquête du palefroi, annoncée comme périlleuse, Gauvain en sortira sans coup férir. En somme tout est comme signé par la vanité qui affecte le nom même de *Gauvain*."

³⁷ Similar warnings are proffered by the knight Guriomelant (v. ll. 8599-8604), who claims that the maiden only wishes to see Gawain drown in the deep water of the river separating the region's two shores and the ladies of the castle at Caguin, who also remind Gawain of her penchant for endangering the lives of *chevaliers* (v. ll. 8305-8322).

offers his hand to help her back into the saddle, only to be berated for his gallantry:

— “Ce ne te laist ja Diex conter,
Fait ele, en cort ou tu me maingnes,
Que tu entre tes bras me taignes.
Se tu avoies rien tenue
Qui sor moi fust, de ta main nue
Ne manie ne sentie,
Je quideroie estre honie. (ll. 6840-6846)

— “May God never let it be told,”
she said, “in the court where you are taking me
that you held me in your arms.
If you had held anything of mine
with your bare hands
or touched it or felt it,
I would considered myself sullied.”

Refusing to concede to any physical contact, the maiden's tirade is a not-so-subtle rejection of sexual intimacy, horseback riding a common metaphor for intercourse in medieval literature.³⁸ This interdiction is taken to incredible, almost ridiculous lengths, as the servile Gawain is even forbidden from picking the maiden's wimple up off the ground (ll. 6880-6894).³⁹ For all his courage and efforts, Gawain has thus received the rather dubious prize of a female companion who denies any and all companionship, her contrariness a far cry from the openly affectionate attitude of King Escavalon's sister.⁴⁰

³⁸ See, for example, the lyric poem “Companho farai un vers qu'er covinen” by the Provençal troubadour Guillaume IX d'Aquitaine, where the poet laments his inability to choose between his two 'horses.' Jacques Roubaud, ed. and trans., *Les Troubadours: Anthologie bilingue* (Paris: Seghers, 1971) 66-69.

³⁹ The wimple (*guimpe* in Old French) was a rather intimate part of the feminine vestimentary ensemble in the Middle Ages. A loose piece of cloth draped over the top of the head and covering the neck and ears, it is similar to veils worn by some of today's Catholic nuns.

⁴⁰ While a guest of Escavalon, Gawain is left in the company of the king's sister, with whom his relationship consists of not just friendly conversation, but also physical interaction: *Mesire Gavains le requiert / D'amors et prie et dist qu'il iert / Ses chevaliers toute sa vie / Et ele ne refuse mie, / Ainz l'otroie molt volontiers. / Une vavasors endementiers / Entra laiens, qui molt lor nut, / Qui monseignor Gavain conut, / Si les trova entrebaisant / Et molt grant joie entrefaisant.* (ll. 5827-5836) (My

Although Gawain shows no bodily evidence of this negative encounter, the maiden's denial of physical and sexual contact have the same secondary effect on him as they did on the injured knight. On two separate occasions, the wildly truculent rants directed at him by the *malvaise pucele* are met only with complete silence – an unusual response for the normally verbose Gawain:

Mesire Gavains tot escoute
Quanques la damoisele estolte
Li dist, c'onques mot ne li sone (ll. 6869-6871)

My lord Gawain listened to everything
that the maiden said to him,
but did not make a sound.

Et mesire Gavains se taist,
C'onques un mot ne li respont. (ll. 6902-6903)

And my lord Gawain was silent,
and did not say a single word to her in reply.

Like the sirens in classical mythology, this malevolent maiden draws in her admirers only to revel in their suffering, an inflicted malaise that reveals itself not only in painful physical contusions, but also in linguistic loss. As was true of Perceval's visit to the Grail Castle, silence here is the verbal vestige of an absence, the lack of sexual rapport.⁴¹

lord Gawain implored her / and asked for her love and said he would be / her knight for his whole life / and she did not refuse him / but gladly honored his requests. / In the meantime, a vavasor / who was to bring them sorrow entered / he recognized my lord Gawain / and found them kissing each other / and bringing one another much great joy.)

⁴¹ The idea of a "lack of sexual rapport" is a recurrent theme in Lacan's writings. In part, it stems from a physical loss that occurs at the level of the subject, in the sense that by entering into the game of sexual reproduction he not only opens himself up to life (in the form of genetic descendents) but also to death: "This lack takes up the other lack, which is the real, earlier lack, to be situated at the advent of the living being, that is to say, at sexed reproduction. The real lack is what the living being loses, that part of himself *qua* living being, in reproducing himself through the way of sex. This lack is real because it relates to something real, namely, that the living being, by being subject to sex, has fallen under the blow of individual death." *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1978) 205. Onto this lack is tacked on another, one which is revealed in the symbolic gaps of language, gaps which attest inability of the subject to fabricate a continuity, either out of his physical dalliances or symbolic manifestations: "C'est bien en relation avec le par-être que nous

Were the *Graal* itself to fall silent here instead of almost 3,000 verses later, any suggestions of a fundamental difference between its two heroes would have to be revised, since Gawain's trip to the realm of Galvoie leaves him in a state nearly identical to that of Perceval following his night at the Grail Castle. However, only a few verses after he and his new companion cross back over the previously impassable frontier, the narrative reverses its fatalistic course. Returning as promised to the injured *chevalier* and his worrisome maiden, Gawain once again demonstrates the extent of his great knowledge (*savoir*). Ignoring the *malvaise pucele's* caustic words, Gawain notices a grass whose special powers will, as the narrator suggests, be of particularly great value to the wounded knight:

Et mesire Gavains savoit
 Plus que nus hom de garir plaie,
 Et voit une herbe en une haie,
 Trop bone por dolor tolir
 De plaies; il le va queillir. (ll. 6910-6914)

And my lord Gawain knew
 better than any man how to heal a wound
 and he saw a plant in a bush,
 one that was good for relieving the pain
 of wounds, so he went to cut some.

Based on a mythological conception of the cosmos as one great, interconnected totality stretching from the sublunar (earthly) world to its supralunar (celestial) firmament, the medieval study of medicinal or magical powers contained within various rocks, plants, and animals was part of a pseudo-scientific tradition

devons articuler ce qui supplée au rapport sexuel en tant qu'inexistant. Il est clair que, dans tout ce qui s'en approche, le langage ne se manifeste que de son insuffisance." *Séminaire livre XX: Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 44.

whose popularity endured well into the Renaissance and even beyond.⁴² Albertus Magnus – Catholic saint, alchemist, and avid ‘scientific’ researcher – wrote one of the most well known books of the genre, the *Liber aggregationis*⁴³ or *Book of Secrets*. Believed to have been written in the late twelfth century, the work is a compendium that explains the supposed magical attributes of otherwise mundane organic specimens. Although nearly all allude to various far-reaching effects and sources of their power, the powers of a plant or other organic entity are, in certain cases, associated with a specific planet and deity, its hidden physical attributes tangible manifestations of supra-lunar influence on earthly matter and events. Such is the case for Vervain, a plant related to the planet Venus.⁴⁴ Encouraging optimal performance in “veneral pastimes,” the plant is an obvious extension of the generative powers and responsibilities of the mythological goddess for whom it was named. However, this is only one of a great many uses, its potential therapeutic effects covering an almost impossibly wide spectrum of ailments. And though today’s ever-increasing market for

⁴² A quick glance at the great number of dietary supplements available in today’s pharmacies suggests that even the advent of modern science was unable to efface these ancient beliefs entirely: some make claims that are not so different from those made by medieval herbologists and alchemists.

⁴³ Literally, an anthology.

⁴⁴ “The root of this herb put upon the neck healeth the swine pox, impostumes behind the ears, and botches of the neck, and such as can not keep their water. It healeth also cuts, swelling of the tewel, or fundament, proceeding of an inflammation which groweth in the fundament; and the haemorrhoids. If the juice of it be drunken with honey and water sodden, it dissolveth those things which are in the lungs or lights. And it maketh good breath, for it saveth and keepeth the lungs and the lights. It is also of great strength in veneral pastimes, that is, the act of generation. If any man put it in his house or vineyard, or in the ground, he shall have abundantly revenues, or yearly profits; moreover the root of it is good to all them which will plant vineyards or trees. And infants bearing it shall be very apt to learn, and loving learning, and they shall be glad and joyous. It is also profitable, being put in purgations, and it putteth aback devils.” Albertus Magnus, *The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus of the Virtues of Herbs, Stones and Certain Beasts*, eds. Michael R. Best and Frank H. Brightman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 21-23. The translated English manuscript used by Best and Brightman for their edition is from a sixteenth-century source, although it is adequately faithful to earlier versions in Latin and other tongues.

similar products suggests that some of Magnus' rather extravagant claims could conceal a certain measure of truth, even casual examination of this and other passages from *Secrets* points to the essentially non-scientific nature of this 'science.' In addition to the exceedingly great variety of therapeutic effects associated with each stone or plant, several have identical functions and, apart from Magnus' vague affirmation that one secret or another "hath been proved in his time," no examples of their efficacy are provided. In fact, as the above citation suggests, the real function of Vervain and other plants, rocks, or animals believed to have magic forces is not medicinal, but symbolic: healing cuts, reducing hemorrhoidal swelling, aiding in respiration, encouraging mental activity, promoting sexual fecundity, and combating evil powers, Magnus' secrets are really talismans used to ward off diverse secondary symptoms of a common ailment whose catalyst is the inescapable, primal loss that is death.

Similarly, Gawain's magical herb is simply a cure for the physical rift of the injured chevalier, but a symbolic reunion of the text's now disparate signifiers of sexuality. As Gawain prepares to apply his miracle cure to the wounds of the injured knight, he asks for a very special contribution from his *amie*:

N'avra puis garde de morir,
Ma damoisele, vostre amis,
Que de l'erbe li arons mis
Sor ses plaies et bien liee;
Mais une guimple deliie
Por bende faire i covendrait." (ll. 6944-6949)

"My lady, your friend will
no longer have to fear death
once we have placed this plant
on his wounds and bound it tightly.
But I'll need an untied wimple
to make a bandage."

Whereas the Cruel Maiden forbade Gawain from touching both her body and her clothes, this weeping maiden stationed at the injured knight's side readily accedes to such contact, quickly removing the desired object and handing it over. Chrétien takes special pains to establish the link between the maiden's body, this piece of clothing, and Gawain, and her response to his request denotes its specific provenance:

— “Je vos bailleraï orendroit,”
 Fait cele qui n'est mie grief,
 “Celi meisme de mon chief,
 Qu'autre n'ai je chi aportee.” (ll. 6950-6953)

— “I'll give it to you immediately,”
 said she who was no longer disheartened,
 “this very one that's on my head,
 for I have brought no other.”

Joining this vestimentary metonym for female sexuality together with Gawain's magic *erbe*, the maiden helps to restore the symbolic possibility of sexual rapport that was lost in the biting words of the Cruel Maiden.

In fact, the great force (*grant force*, l. 6937) of this plant functions not only on the physical plane, but also the linguistic, a secondary function to which Gawain alludes in his explanation of its therapeutic benefits:

Que la rachine reprendroit
 Et li arbres teus devendrait
 Qu'il porroit foillir et florir. (ll. 6941-6943)

It will regain its roots
 and the entire tree will once more
 be able to leaf out and flower.

Recalling both the bountiful *cent doubles* described by Chrétien in the prologue and the idyllic plenitude of the Waste Forest, the leaf harvested by Gawain is also a written page (*feuille*) that promises a return to a lost state of linguistic fullness.

Indeed, when the injured knight comes to, he thanks Gawain not because he has saved his life, but because he has saved his voice:

Diex li mire
Qui la parole m'a rendue (ll. 6964-6965)

May God watch over
the one who restored my speech

Here, then, the return of speech is the linguistic manifestation of a reunification of masculine and feminine, two sides initially torn asunder by Perceval's departure from the maternal forest. The appropriate antidote for a *teste trenchie* (divided text), Gawain's bandage would seem to cover over repeated manifestations of silence and loss that have plagued this narrative almost since its beginning.

However, as was the case during Perceval's deceptively triumphant return to the Arthurian court, this *joie* is relatively short-lived. After coming to, the knight asks Gawain to capture the nag of an approaching squire so that he and his *amie* might ride away and find a priest to whom the knight can confess his sins. Ever the obliging *chevaliers*, Gawain does so, and then agrees to help the maiden onto the Norwegian palfrey and the knight himself onto the newly acquired nag. However, just as the maiden gets a leg up, the knight who had seemed so weak suddenly springs to life, absconding with Gawain's own steed:

Li chevaliers son cheval prist
Et monta sus, sel comencha
A porsalir et cha et la. (ll. 7072-7074)

The knight took his horse
and mounted, then began
to make it leap all around.

In fact, the knight whom Gawain so selflessly serves is not a complete stranger, but another enemy. Like Guiganbrésil, he spoils this fleeting moment of fictional

harmony by exacting his revenge for a past injustice just when all faults seem to have been erased. Identified as one Greoras, he claims to have suffered great shame (*grant honte*, l. 7110) when Gawain forced him to eat with dogs for a month, with the hands tied behind his back (*Avec les chienz mengier un mois / Les mains liies triers le dos*, ll. 7114-7115). Once again, defeat is associated with a lack of *parole*, only this time it is the gullible Gawain who falls silent, ridiculed by his enemy:

Gavains, tais t'en.
Pren le ronchin, si feras sen,
Que au cheval as tu failli. (ll. 7085-7087)

Silence, Gawain!
You would be wise to take the nag,
for you've lost your horse.

An exact duplicate of the tableau he had found so confusing and unchivalric just a short time before, Gawain has now assumed, albeit to his great disappointment, the role of *chevaliers blechié*.⁴⁵ Indeed, after falling victim to this trick, his quotation of the following proverb draws attention the irony of the situation:

De bien fait col frait (l. 7100)

He who sticks his neck out for someone will break it.

Writing and lack are thus inseparable in the *Graal*, as Gawain's textual dressing reopens the very wound it had tried to cover, suggesting that everything written does indeed "stem from the fact that it is impossible to write sexual rapport as

⁴⁵ See p. 143 ff.

such."⁴⁶ Instead of eliminating silence, Gawain has only managed to make it that much more noticeable.

The *oltre* and the Great *dela*

This sudden, adverse turn of events could explain the fantastic but somewhat repetitive theme of the text's final episode. Like the passages commented above, those that follow have – both explicitly and implicitly – a great deal to do with bridging gaps, with eliminating the fundamental traces of separation and difference that scar the narrative landscape. Accompanied by the ever-acerbic Cruel Maiden, Gawain ambles through a region whose organic emptiness and isolation are none too subtle reminders of the humiliating defeat suffered at the hands of the vengeful Greoras:

Ensi s'en va sor le ronchin
Par *forés gastes et soutaines*,
Tant que il vint a *terres plaines* (ll. 7224-26, *emphasis mine*)

Thus he rode along on the nag
through *dark and empty forests*,
until he came upon *flat plains*.

Once again, Gawain's pursuit of *chevalerie* is headed toward nowhere in particular, if not its own tragic end, a fictional infertility reflected in the linguistic vacuity of the surrounding landscape. This poetic stagnation is reinforced by the deplorable physical condition of the nag upon which the normally flamboyant knight now rides:

Les oex ot trobles et obscurs,
Les piés crapeus, les costez durs,
Toz despechiés a esperons. (ll. 7167-7169)

⁴⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire livre XX: Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 36. "Tout ce qui est écrit part du fait qu'il sera à jamais impossible d'écrire comme tel le rapport sexuel. C'est de là qu'il y a un certain effet de discours qui s'appelle l'écriture."

The eyes were cloudy and dark,
the hooves cloven, and the flanks hard
and worn thin by spurs.

Recalling the gaunt physique of the *palefroi* ridden by the Tent Maiden, the scarred hide of this horse is, like the recycled vellum upon which so many medieval romances were composed, a worn surface that fails to conceal telltale marks of its eventful past.⁴⁷ With Gawain unable to advance on the back of this sorry beast, the *Graal* itself seems incapable of moving beyond the failure and loss that, with Perceval's story, became its most distinguishing marks.

But if at first blush Chrétien's language is uniformly negative, more careful examination of its highly resonant internal echoes – the same *sen* that fuels his covert poetic rebellion in the prologue – points to a world that, like the *Gaste Forest* of Perceval's mother, conceals a paradoxical abundance behind its desolate appellations. Indeed, the geographically flat lands (*plaines*) of this area are, at the same time, full (*plaines*).⁴⁸ Such homonymic assonance is more than just simple linguistic coincidence, for beyond the deep river that bisects these *terres plaines* lies a mysterious edifice that, like other castles in the *Graal*, surpasses all known aesthetic standards:

Le chastiax sor une faloise

⁴⁷ After the brief encounter with his *cosine germaine* on the road leading away from the Fisher King's castle, Perceval is reunited with the Tent Maiden who, along with her horse, was punished by her *ami* for Perceval's amorous indiscretions. Her abused and emaciated body concealed only by tattered garments, the maiden's appearance jibes well with her horse's, a creature that appears to be no more than a skeletal assemblage of skin and bones (*Qu'il n'avoit se le cuir non / Tant solement desor les os*, ll. 3710-3711). Such images are common representations of rhetorical, linguistic, or intellectual degradation. See, for example, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, where Philosophy is portrayed as a woman in rendered garments who complains of man's inattention to her teachings.

⁴⁸ Others, including Kibler, who opts for the more common translation of "flat plains," might not agree with my interpretation of this line. Though it is true that the more standard Old French spelling of "full" is *plein*, I believe that the passages to follow will more than justify this choice. Furthermore, there are other occurrences of *plaine(s)* in the *Graal* where the meaning is clearly tied only to a sense of abundance (l. 2527, l. 7465, l. 8006).

Fu fermez par si grant richece
C'onques si riche fortereche
Ne virent oeil d'ome qui vive (ll. 7238-7239)

The castle, seated on a cliff,
was fortified by such great wealth
that such a fine fortress
had never before been seen by the eyes of a living man.

Still, it is not so much the building's ostentatious architecture or exterior decoration that attracts our hero's attention, but its other visual *richece*:

El palais fenestres overtes
Ot bien cinc cens, totes couvertes
De dames et de damoiseles (ll. 7243-7245)

The palace easily had
five hundred open windows, all filled
with ladies and damsels.

The same geosexual alterity that was a factor of Gawain's earlier crossing into Galvoie is here made even more explicit: the land *dela* to which he aspires is the textual locus of a feminine presence. Inhabited by seemingly endless scores of women, this miraculously plentiful region also reinforces earlier allusions in the *Graal* to a symbolic connection between femininity and fullness, a sexualized excess (*surplus*) that is diacritically opposed to the divisive and pervasive sentiment of loss in the text's masculine world of *chevalerie*.

Blame for this division often falls on Arthur, whose ascension to the throne of his father is cast by other characters in the text as a tragedy. Perceval's mother, for instance, paints a resolutely bleak picture of his efficacy as a monarch:

Apovri et deshiredé
Et escillié furent a tort
Li gentil home après la mort
Uterpendragon qui rois fu
Et peres le bon roi Artu.
Les terres furent escillies

Et les povres gens avillies,
Si s'en fuï qui fuïr pot. (ll. 442-449)

Unjustly impoverished and disinherited
and sent into exile were nobles after the death
of Uterpendragon who was king
and father of the good King Arthur.
Lands were parceled out
and the poor were mistreated,
such that those who could flee, fled.

In spite of a passing reference to Arthur as the good king (*le bon roi*), these lamentations clearly assert that his arrival failed to stem the social disintegration provoked by Uterpendragon's death.⁴⁹ Indeed, several passages in the *Graal* hint at the kingdom's precarious condition, including the one that describes Perceval's first arrival at the court. Anxious to be knighted, he is puzzled to find the king speechless:

"Par foi, dist li vallés adonques,
Cis rois ne fist chevalier onques.
Coment porroit chevalier faire,
Quant on n'en puet parole traire?" (ll. 927-930)

"By my faith, said the squire,
this king does not make knights after all.
How could he possibly make a knight
when one can't get a single word out of him?"

While Perceval is often criticized for his ignorance, his remarks here are, like those of the Girl with Small Sleeves, profoundly insightful.⁵⁰ Perceval's chivalric mentor Gornemans de Gorhaut is also surprised to hear that Perceval received his arms from Arthur:

Ces armes, qui les te bailla?
— "Li rois, fait il, le mes dona."

⁴⁹ Shortly after the *veve dame* relates this story to Perceval, she becomes the next victim of its legacy of privation, as her son leaves the *gaste forest* for good, depriving her of the only remaining symbol of familial wealth and sexual productivity. See p. 101 ff.

⁵⁰ See p. 134 f.

– “Dona? Coment?” (ll. 1377-1379)

These arms, who gave them to you?

– “The king, he said, he gave them to me.”

– “Gave them? How?”

Like Philip and his *livre*, Arthur’s status as a ruler turns on his ability to maintain authority through symbolic representations of his power. Rendering the necessary promotion of *chevaliers* impossible, lack of linguistic production is here directly linked to the political decline of his realm,⁵¹ a silence that, we are told, has been provoked by the *contredite* (contradiction, l. 947) leveled at him by the Red Knight:

Et tant diras al *mauvais roi*,
Que s’il ne velt tenir de moi
Sa terre, que il le me rende,
Ou il envoit qui la desfende
Vers moi qui di que ele est moie. (ll. 889-893, *emphasis mine*)

And tell this to the *bad king*;
if he doesn’t want to pay me homage
for his land, that he return it to me
or send someone to defend it
against me, for I say it is mine.

Even more direct than the *veve dame*, this disenfranchised member of the kingdom clearly designates Arthur as the *mauvais roi*, a criticism of his refusal to acknowledge the feudal status of his subject. So, within the fictional history of this romance, the passing of Uterpendragon is the catalyst of a devastating chain reaction that spreads a ripple of loss throughout the tale, stifling linguistic production and, consequently, social stability.

⁵¹ Cf. Dragonetti 188. “*Artu* (art-tu?) est désigné comme le roi *infans* (étym. « sans parole ») par Ygerne, ici même. Le référent, fût-il mythique de ces noms se dissout dans l’*oïr* qui les désagrège tout en instaurant des relations lointaines avec le secret de ces silences d’*Artu*, le roi *qui mot ne sone* (v. 926), le roi souvent représenté *mu* et *pensis* (« □muet » et « pensif », v. 911) ou « muet et sourd » (v. 9198).

It is thus nothing short of remarkable that the construction of the castle in that attracts Gawain's attention in the *terres plaines* coincides with the seminal moment in the fictional heritage of Arthurian romance:

Quant Uterpendragons [...]
Fu mis en terre, issi avint
Que la roïne Ygerne i vint
En cest país, si aporta
Tot son tresor et si frema
Sor cele roche cel chastel (ll. 8740-8745)

When Uterpendragons
was buried, it happened that
Queen Ygerne came here
to this land, carrying with her
all her wealth, and had erected
on this rock this castle

Like Perceval's mother, Ygerne is physically displaced following Uterpendragon's death. However, whereas the *veve dame* claims that this fateful event left her poor and disinherited (*apovri et deshiredé*, l. 442) the King Arthur's mother arrives in her new lands laden with treasure, which includes not only the surplus of ladies and damsels that Gawain espies in the palace but also a wealth of squires:

Mais il i a vallés assez,
De maintes terres amassez,
Qui por armes servent laiens;
Bien en i a plus de cinc cens (ll. 7563-7567)

But there are many squires there
who have come from many lands
to serve here and win their arms.
There are easily more than five hundred

Their numbers corresponding perfectly to the quantity of *dames et damoiseles* at the castle windows, the presence of these masculine inhabitants further strengthens the image of the *terres plaines* as a region excluded from the loss that afflicts the realm of Arthurian *chevalerie*.

Marvelous Metaphors

Nonetheless, as the perfect ambiguity of the word *plaines* suggests, the great abundance of this netherworld exists only in potential. A ferryman (*notonier*) who shuttles passengers between the two shores tells Gawain that, in spite of its appearance, the land is cursed by its own special lack:

Qu'eles atendent qu'il i viegne
Uns chevaliers qui les maintiegne,
Qui rendeas dames lor honors
Et doinst as puceles seignors
Et des vallés chevaliers face. (ll. 7585-7589)

They are waiting for a knight to come there
who will protect them,
who will restore to ladies their inheritances
and give lords to the maidens
and make knights out of squires.

Flush with the physical and economic components of a sexually productive and politically active society, the land awaits a legendary progenitor, someone who would effect the subtle linguistic transformation from *plaine* (flat) to *plaine* (full). All these activities – restoring inheritances, performing marriages, and knighting squires – cast the much sought-after *chevaliers* as an imaginary embodiment of the master-signifier that would ensure continuity between otherwise disparate sexual and feudal entities.⁵²

Though fleeting, Gawain's previous success at healing the wounds of sexual separation suggests that he has once again positioned himself in the right place (*bon leu*) at the right time. Yet while the ferryman admits that these women were unjustly deprived of their inheritances (*desiretees a grant tort*, l. 7577), he

⁵² Different from blood relations, which are based upon unalterable biological links, a feudal tie like the one between Arthur and his subjects is founded uniquely upon signifiers. Without this linguistic enunciation to designate a relationship, there is no actual basis for the existence of the feudal tie or the authority of the people in question. See p. 188 ff.

derides the notion that an appropriate chivalric guarantor for the region might be found, calling such wishful thinking an enormous folly (*une grant folie*, l. 7583).⁵³ For if safe passage across abysmal waters to the *oltre rive* (other riverbank, l. 8933) is guaranteed, the castle itself is a formidable impediment to any visual intimacy between the *puceles* and Gawain:

Einsi as fenestres s'esturent
 Les puceles, et si parurent
 Li chief luisant et li gent cors
 Si que on les vit par defors
Des les çaintures en amont. (ll. 7253-57, *emphasis mine*)

Thus at the windows were stationed
 the maidens, and so appeared
 Their lustrous heads and gentle bodies
 and thus, from outside, one could see them
from the waist up.

Simultaneously exposing and concealing their occupants, the strategically placed windows of the castle are poetic frames that reveal only the most prosaic images of an idealized female body.⁵⁴ Like the idyllic *donna* lauded by the Provençal troubadours, these female residents of the *oltre rive* are themselves *oltre* (other), partial visions of an otherwise absent femininity, incomplete manifestations of scopis desire.⁵⁵

⁵³ Indeed, Gawain's present challenge does seem considerably more daunting than his earlier foray into Galvoie. See p. 147 ff.

⁵⁴ Similar descriptions of female physical characteristics are common to medieval literature, especially in poems of troubadours and *trouvères*. "Le portrait de la dame manque de relief et de couleur; de plus, les rares gestes qu'elle fait paraissent vagues et généraux. Certaines expressions se figent en clichés, donnant l'impression d'un style facile et monotone." Glynnis M. Cropp, *Le Vocabulaire courtois des troubadours de l'époque classique* (Genève: Droz, 1975) 158.

⁵⁵ Lacan associates this effect of the gaze with the *objet petit a*, the metonymical displacement of desire: "Generally speaking, the relation between the gaze and what one wishes to see involves a lure. The subject is presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see. It is in this way that the ey may function as *objet petit a*, that is to say, at the level of the lack (—□)." Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* 104.

By visually sequestering the one part of the maidens' bodies that would attest to their sexual identity, this description transforms them into sexualized vestiges of the region's own enigmatic excess. They are, like the land itself, *plaines*, faintly visible relics of an ephemeral plenitude that escape language's grasp.⁵⁶ Indeed, the specular desire that incites Gawain to try and gain entry to the castle is focused only in part on these *gent cors*. Nor is it – despite his demonstrated affinity for the tangible gains (*gaaing*) of chivalric activity – centered on any material wealth within its walls. Rather, the economic and corporeal lure of this locale are but fictional declensions of another, more esoteric mystery:

Ains m'en irai, si m'aït Dex,
 Veoir les puceles lamont
 Et les merveilles qui i sont. (ll. 7616-18, *emphasis mine*)

Thus, with God's help, I will go
 to see the maidens up there
 and *the marvels* that are there.

Linked with the inherent anti-categorical connotations of the word *merveilles*, femininity, or at least that part of it that exists beyond the normal faculties of human perception and linguistic identification, is placed within the realm of the impossible, the fantastic, the mystic. The common etymological heritage of *merveille* and the Old French verb *mirer* (to see; to look upon) is further evidence that Gawain's desire for a visual encounter with these maidens is really an

⁵⁶ As Jacques Lacan says, “la femme n’est pas-toute.” Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XXII Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 34. This phrase, which is usually translated as “a woman is not-all” is not an effort on Lacan's part to marginalize women or exclude them from participation in the symbolic order - he never makes any such accusation -- but rather his attempt to show that some aspect of femininity always lies outside the confines of human discourse, an absent excess that he terms the “supplementary jouissance” of women.

attempt to connect with a much greater unknown, one that is not sexual, but symbolic.

As Lucienne Carasso-Bulow notes, *merveille* and *merveilleux* describe many different people, places, and things in Chrétien's tales, from the mildly provocative to the wildly sensational.⁵⁷ All occurrences must, therefore, be explored on an individual basis. However, to structure her investigation of this term and its myriad examples from the poet's rich corpus, Carasso-Bulow distinguishes between two general categories of the *merveilleux*, a "lower" and a "pure." Within this schema, the "lower" *merveilleux* is generally limited to isolated examples or small clusters of descriptive marvels (e.g., giant beings, magical objects, exceeding beauty, etc.) whereas the "pure" includes the additional distinction of incorporating a textual sphere "governed by magical time or space."⁵⁸

In the case of the *Roche de Canguin* – the name of this land of *merveilles* – poetic prestidigitation of the temporal and spatial is inseparable from larger textual connotations of this highly significant word. Eventually, Gawain learns that some of the castle's residents are not generic depictions of femininity like those who had first caught his eye, but important members of Arthurian lore. In addition to Ygerne, the distinguished cast even includes his very own mother:

L'autre roïne, l'autre dame,
La grant, la bele, qui fu fame
Le roi Lot et mere celui
Qui males voies tiegne ancui,
Mere Gavain. (ll. 8749-8753)

⁵⁷ Lucienne Carasso-Bulow, *The Merveilleux in Chrétien de Troyes' Romances* (Geneva: Droz, 1976). Carasso-Bulow offers several examples of each type of *merveilleux*, using it as the foundation of her investigation of this important word. For her introduction to this framework, see pp. 35-63.

⁵⁸ Carasso-Bulow 65.

The other queen, the other lady,
the great and beautiful who was the wife
of King Lot and mother of he
whom I so despise,
Gawain's mother.

The *merveilles* of the *oltre rive* are thus phonetically linked to the *mères* of Arthurian romance that inhabit its shores, a revelation that does more than just renew the fertile homonymic play of *mer* and *mère* that was an important element in Perceval's adventures.⁵⁹ But as Gawain's startled reaction to this news shows, the truly marvelous thing about it is that his mother died well over twenty years ago (*Bien a passé vint ans al mains*, l. 8756), a fate shared by other castle inhabitants. Here, "the proper succession of the ages of man is no longer a concrete representation of chronological time. Instead, it has become stuck in a here-and-now that hints at the atemporal."⁶⁰ Caught midway between life and death, growth and decline, past and future, these women are indeed a fitting populace for empty-full lands where even great wealth amounts to naught, rendered useless by the region's stunted productivity. Dead but somehow alive and awake (*éveillées*), the paradoxical presence of these mothers (*mères*) reflects poetic language into a set of mirrors that fuels the creation of linguistic associations and contradictions in the narrative.⁶¹

⁵⁹ See p. 114 ff.

⁶⁰ Paul le Rider, *Le Chevalier dans le Conte du Graal de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris: SEES, 1978) 261. The translation is my own. Le Rider also notes that other details of the castle's description, including five-hundred squires whose facial hair grows at varying speeds and lengths and in different shades of gray or white (ll. 7563-7573), reinforce the non-linear temporality of this location.

⁶¹ While there is no suggestion that Perceval's mother is also present at this castle, she definitely would fit the etymological mold. The saint hermite asserts that his nephew was saved from further harm only thanks to his deceased mother's continued intervention, her beautiful words counteracting somewhat the tragic effects of Perceval's silence. (*Mais sa parole ot tel vertu / Que Diex por li t'a regardé / De mort et de prison gardé*, ll. 6405 - 6408).

The fictional stage is thus set for Gawain's greatest and potentially most rewarding *aventure*, since success at piercing the mystery of the castle's *merveilles* would restore the social equilibrium and linguistic authority lost when Arthur became king. This, however, will not be an easy task, given the extreme defensive measures involved, of which the most formidable are not the physical barriers that impeded view of the maidens, but those created by linguistic trickery (*Par art et par enchantement*, l. 7545). In fact, the edifice is so fraught with danger that, after accompanying Gawain within its walls, the ferryman laments what he maintains will be his new companion's certain death:

Et dist: "Sire, de vostre mort
 M'anuie et pose molt tres fort,
 Que unques chevaliers ne sist
 En cel lit qui vis en issist,
 Car c'est li Lis de la Merveille (ll. 7801-7805)

And said: "My lord, your death
 upsets and saddens me greatly,
 for no knight has ever sat
 on this bed and lived,
 because it is the Bed of Marvels

Recalling the *litier* upon which Perceval's injured father was carried back to the Waste Forest (ll. 451-454) as well as the one used by the Fisher King, this bed transforms a traditional location of physical copulation into yet another symbol of the sexual division and loss. Indeed, once Gawain is left alone on the bed, he is almost immediately witness to the destructive potential of the *merveilles* that he had so longed to see. For if, as he had wished, they are revealed to him (*Et les merveilles se descovrent / Et li enchantement aperent*, ll. 7826-7827), these arrows (*arbalestes*, l. 7839) and hungry lion (*lions toz fameilleus*, l. 7853) bear no resemblance to the gentle bodies or lustrous heads of the maidens he saw in the windows.

Nevertheless, Gawain survives the attacks and the natural plenitude of these *terres plaines* is instantly restored:

Et mesure Gavains remire
La riviere et les terres plaines
Et les forés de bestes plaines (ll. 8004-8006)

And my lord Gawain looked again
at the river and the full lands
and the forests full of animals.

Clarifying the ambiguous use of *plaines* in *terres plaines* with the more resolutely positive image of a forest teeming with fauna (*de bestes plaines*), Chrétien subtly signals that the region's curse has been lifted. Thus, just a few moments after Gawain recovers from the attack, the castle's queens and maidens salute him as the one whom they so anticipated and desired (*celui que nos avomes molt attendu et desirré*, ll. 7890-7891). And nowhere is the aim of this desire more evident than when Ygerne, seeing their new lord seated peacefully on the Bed of Marvels speaking with her granddaughter, exclaims:

Et pleüst Dieu que il l'eüst
Espousee, et tant li pleüst
Come a Eneas pleut Lavine. (ll. 9057-9059)

May it please God that he
Marry her, and that she please him
As much as Lavinia did Aeneas.

Designating Gawain as the source of renewed sexual productivity and social prosperity for her family and kingdom, the old queen's intertextual reference to the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid* soon comes to fruition,⁶² as he jolts the land out of its atemporal sterility by converting the five-hundred lowly squires into knights:

⁶² Having allied himself with the King Latinus, Aeneas is betrothed to the king's daughter, Lavinia. However, Lavinia's former suitor, Turnus, is insanely jealous and declares war against him. Eventually, Aeneas is victorious, killing Turnus in single combat. Afterwards he weds Lavinia and goes on to create the city of *Lavinium*.

Par matin mesure Gavains
Chauça a chascun a ses mains
L'esperon destre et çaint l'espee
Et sil lor dona la colee.
Lors ot tel compaignie viax
De cinc cens chevaliers noviax. (ll. 9183-9188)

In the morning my lord Gawain
used his own hands to place on each of them
the right spur and belt their swords
and dubbed them all.
Afterwards he had a company
of five hundred new knights.

So, in stark contrast to his uncle, Gawain is wholly unafflicted by the linguistic impotence that prevented appointment of new knights at the Arthurian court. Showering his new subjects with all the texts' symbolic tokens of chivalric identity, the new monarch multiplies the signifiers of his linguistic finesse.

Not one for a tidy ending, however, Chrétien spoils the momentary bliss by drawing the reader's attention to a renewed sexual fissure at the foundation of this chivalric dynasty. Even as Ygerne and Gawain's mother muse about the prodigious pairing of Gawain and their female progeny, we find out that the girl with whom he is seated on the Bed of Marvels is actually his sister:

Cele ne reconnoist son fil
Come frere et suer seront il,
Que d'autre amor point n'i avra
Quant li uns de l'autre savra
Qu'ele est sa suer et il ses frere
Et s'en ara joie la mere
Autre que ele n'en atant (ll. 9067-9071)

She did not recognize her son.
They will be like brother and sister,
and will have no other kind of love.
When they have learned from each other
that she is his sister and he her brother,
their mother will experience a joy
other than the one she expected.

The *joie* of anticipated sexual copulation replaced by the somewhat less joyful pleasure of familial presence, the dark scepter of incest threatens to plunge the region back into a sterile *joie* like that of the Waste Forest. In fact, the only way that the fiction avoids collapse is by way of a rhetorical machination not unlike that used by the *veve dame*. Before learning the identity of the castle's queens, Gawain makes what at that time seems a strange request to Ygerne:

Mais un don vos demant et ruis,
S'il vos plaist et vos comandez,
Que vos mon non ne demandez
Devant set jors, si vos griet." (ll. 8348-8353)

But I ask and request of you a boon,
if you are willing to grant it,
that you not ask my name
for seven days, if you please.

Like all other words in the *Graal*, proper names are themselves open to revision and "can be contested at any moment in the tale."⁶³ For Gawain, his name is also a harbinger of loss or discord: on no less than four separate occasions (three of which occur prior to his arrival at this castle), he is accused, attacked, or criticized because of it.⁶⁴ With this opportune request to Ygerne, Gawain shows once again that he is able to use silence to his tactical advantage. Some things are, indeed, better left unsaid, for this tacit exclusion is the very condition of his continued reign as *sire*.

In his monumental study of the *Graal*, Roger Dragonetti suggests that the texts' symbol of this royal usurpation is the undelivered *message* that Gawain

⁶³ Dragonetti 27-28.

⁶⁴ These episodes include: Guiganbrésil's accusation of treason, the attack of Gawain at Escavalon's castle, Greora's deceitful trick, and Guiromelans' allegations of murder.

sends back to Arthur's court with a squire from Canguin.⁶⁵ Though the messenger completes his journey, the contents of this letter never divulged, for it is at this moment that the narrative makes its enigmatic halt, a textual caesura marked by Arthur's renewed silence:

Cist vient a grant besaing.
 Je quit qu'il aporte de loing
 Noveles et message a cort.
 Molt trovera ja mu et sort
 Le roi, tel chose puet il *dire*,
 Qu'il est molt plains de doel et *d'ire*. (ll. 9195-200, *emphasis mine*)

This squire is on an urgent mission:
 I think he comes from far away
 News and a message for the court.
 But he'll find the king deaf and dumb
 no matter what might be *said*,
 for he is full of grief and *anger*.

His ability to speak lost in the apostrophic elision that distinguishes *dire* from *d'ire*, Arthur's final collapse is both a sign of the linguistic weakness and power of silence, which Dragonetti calls the true lord of the tale, "a lack of speech that puts the narrative in motion and forces it to interrupt itself."⁶⁶

The *message* sent to Arthur's court is not, however, the only symbolic representation of Gawain's new role as the sovereign of fictional *merveilles*. Having returned across the river from the castle, Gawain encounters the knight Guiromelans, with whom he enters into a dialogue reminiscent of the one Perceval was unable to grasp during his first encounter with knights. All goes well in this exchange until Gawain makes the following request:

⁶⁵ For his entire argument regarding the valet and his message, see Dragonetti 223-239.

⁶⁶ Dragonetti 239. The original passage reads as follows: "Il s'agissait donc de comprendre que l'acte d'usurpation, beaucoup plus encore que la violence faite à une parole par une autre, c'est fondamentalement la substitution abusive de la parole au silence, le vrai seigneur du récit, à savoir ce manque de dire qui met en branle la narration et la force à s'interrompre."

“Et coment a non li chastix,
Qui tant est haus et bons et biax
La d’outre dont je ving jehui,
Et s’i menjai ier soir et bui.” (ll. 8649-8652)

“And what is the name of the castle
that is so tall and good and beautiful,
there from where I came here
and where last night I dined and drank.”

Yet Guiromelans refuses to believe that such a trip was ever made, for it seems too fabulous (*trop me merveil*, l. 8674) and Gawain does his best to convince his counterpart by recounting the entire story of his adventure on the Bed of Marvels – including details of the attack by invisible castle archers and the ferocious lion – but to no avail. Frustrated, he thrusts out his shield, still pierced with arrowheads and the bloody paw of the lion, and asks:

De ces ensaignes que vos samble? (l. 8712)

What do you think of these signs?

An obvious question, since it is the same that every metaphor – coming from elsewhere (*méta-*) and striking us with its singularity, its strangeness, its *merveille* – asks. A metaphor displaces a thing, signifiers, a text to somewhere else, but it also presents (*phero*) this thing, these signifiers, or this text under a form other than one which a reader would readily understand.⁶⁷ According to Richard Rorty, the effect of this gesture is interpretation itself:

The literal use of noises and marks are the uses we can handle by our old theories about what people will say under various conditions. Their metaphorical use is the sort which makes us get busy developing a new theory.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ In this light, the Gawain *deus escus* constitute another example of a metaphor, for the strangeness of this sign, as well as its placement just beside a castle where a powerful lord and a law of signification rather strict rule, provoked a varied collection of theories on the part of the young maidens.

⁶⁸ See Richard Rorty, *Objectivism, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, vol 1* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press) 162-172.

It is only when Gawain stops using words, when he reverts to the silent display of his shield that he succeeds in proving his new status as *sire*. Just because one is no longer speaking does not mean he is not Saying something.⁶⁹ The metaphor is thus what takes hold within this verbal *plaine* of silence, a linguistic clearing that allows the writer to *semme et fait semence*, to bring forward a sense of that which normally escapes our grasp. The unanswered question at the end of the *Conte du Graal* is not a mistake nor an aberration, but a source poetic growth, the textual vestige of that marvelous *leu* where Chrétien sows his linguistic seed.

⁶⁹ Martin Heidegger distinguishes between what he calls speaking and Saying: "They [speech and what is spoken] reveal themselves even now as that by which and within which something is given voice and language, that is, makes an appearance *insofar as something is said*. To say and to speak are not identical. A man may speak, and speak endlessly, and all the time say nothing. Another may remain silent, not speak at all and yet, without speaking, say a great deal. *On the Way to Language* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1982) 122.

Chapter Five: Being Silent and Silent Being in *Le Roman de Silence*

*I do not ask anyone questions, for my questions have no answer.
I know this because I live on both sides of the mirror.*

— Ahmed, in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de Sable*

Echoing Chrétien de Troyes' boisterous pledge to rhyme the best tale ever told in royal court,¹ the opening lines of *Le Roman de Silence* attempt to seduce readers by lauding the precision of the poet's versification:

[M]aistres Heldris de Cornuälle
Escrist ces viers trestolt a talle. (ll. 1-2)

Master Heldris of Cornwall
wrote these verses [strictly to measure].²

As in the *Graal* prologue, this introductory rhetorical posturing signals more than just an attempt to gain the *benevolentia* of an audience.³ A nominal form of the verb *tailler* (to cut, to attach), *talle* is the measurement of both a subtraction and an addition.⁴ Therefore, the narrator's claim that Heldris' verses have been written *a talle* assigns a paradoxical status to his composition, for within it reside

¹ The lines in question are as follows: *Crestiens, qui entent et paine / Par le comandement le conte / A rimoiier le meillor conte / Qui soit contez a cort roial* (ll. 62-65). See p. 78 ff.

² Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence*, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1972). All references to the original Old French manuscript are taken from this edition. Two English translations of the manuscript have been published, one by Regina Psaki, and the other by Sarah Roche-Mahdi. For the majority of passages, I have chosen to use Psaki's translation. However, I have found it necessary in certain instances to offer alternative translations, which I signal with brackets.

³ This, in spite of the fact that Quintilian asserts that, "the sole purpose of the *exordium* is to prepare our audience in such a way that they will be disposed to lend a ready ear to the rest of our speech." (IV.1.v) *Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, trans. H.E. Butler, 1921, Vol 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) 4 vols.

⁴ Indeed, as Martin Heidegger notes, this double meaning is at the very heart of language: "The 'sign' in design (Latin *signum*) is related to *secare*, to cut – as in saw, sector, segment. To design is to cut a trace." Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz and Joan Stambaugh (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1971) 121.

both separation and unification, difference and sameness. Functionally speaking, writing in the *Roman de Silence* attempts to cover its own absence, the poet trying to tailor a text to the measure of that lack created by his own initial graphic stroke. Poetic composition becomes a process of supplementation, an effort to, as R. Howard Bloch has suggested, fill in the holes of language.⁵ So, whereas Chrétien de Troyes exploits the fragmented, open format of his text, what Heldris prizes is quite the opposite. His ultimate desire is to begin without beginning, to name his object without subjecting it to the divisive, discordant boundaries of language:

E or revenrai a mon conte
 De mon prologhe faire point,
 Car moult grans volentés me point
 De muevre rime et commencier,
 Sans noise faire, et sans tenchier. (ll. 102-106, *emphasis mine*)

But now I will return to my story
 and put an end to my prologue,
 for great desire spurs me on
 to begin my rhyme and proceed,
without discord [making noise] and without dissension.

If, as suggested earlier, language is dependent upon an alternance between silence and speech as its organizing force, this seems like an impossible wish.⁶ How could one speak without making noise, write without leaving a trace? Such are the troublesome questions that the *Le Roman de Silence* tries to answer. Even if the attempt ultimately meets with failure, its failure reveals something profoundly important about how language and its lacks affect us all.

⁵ R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The Roman de Silence and the art of the Trouvère." *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986): 81-99. This description could be extended to the text's contemporary audience. While modern critics refer to the text by its accepted title, Lewis Thorpe notes that the 6,706 lines of verse which make up what is now known as *Le Roman de Silence* actually have no title whatsoever. Rather, this appellation appears to be the work of Heinrich Gelzer, who was the first to discuss the romance in any great detail.

⁶ See p. 1 f.

Romance and Truth

The Old French word *romanz* (or *romans*) refers first and foremost not to a literary genre, but to a language. Beginning with some of the first vernacular texts written in France during the twelfth-century, it was an accepted practice to offer translations of works previously available only in the learned tongues of Latin or Greek. Thus, *romanz* was initially used to signal employment of the vernacular instead of one of these other languages, and it is within this practice that the poet Heldris de Cornuälle situates his work:

Comence chi tels aventure
C'ainques n'oïstes tele en livre.
Si com l'estoire le nos livre,
Qu'en latin escrite lizons,
En romans si le vos disons. (ll. 1658-62, *emphasis mine*)

Here begins such an adventure
as you have never heard in a book.
As the story gives it to us,
which we read in written Latin,
*we tell it to you in romance [romans]*⁷

While the story of Silence is being told in *romans*, it is perhaps in some respect a re-telling, since the poet states that it comes from a story in *latin escrite*. Some of the earlier and more renowned examples of this type of literary activity are *Le roman de Thèbes* and *Le Roman d'Enéas*, translations of Latin works by Statius and Virgil, as well as *Le Roman de Troie*, an adaptation of the purportedly historical accounts of the Trojan War credited to Dictys and Dares.⁸ Obviously, because of

⁷ Regina Psaki, trans., *The Roman de Silence by Heldris de Cornuälle* (New York: Garland, 1991) ll. 1658-1662. All accompanying English translations of quotations from the *Roman de Silence* will be taken from this translation. Line numbers are identical in this book to those in Thorpe's edition. Psaki's translation is generally good, although I sometimes disagree with specific word choices. Such differences will be noted as appropriate.

⁸ Guy Raynaud de Lage, ed., *Le Roman de Thèbes*, 2 vols., *Classiques français du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Champion, 1966, 1968). J.-J. Salverda de Grave, ed., *Enéas, roman du XII^e siècle*, *Classiques*

their reliance upon antecedent textual matter, these compositions cannot be considered as wholly original.

Yet nor are such texts entirely unoriginal, since modifications were often made to their fictional matter during translation. Paul Zumthor has cautioned that the term translation “must be understood in a broad sense,” since these translations were often altered somehow, whether combined, shortened, or simplified.⁹ For *Le Roman de Troie*, this is particularly relevant, since a single text contains a synthesis of two works. In the prologue of this text, Benoit de Sainte-Maure explains the motivation behind its composition: it is written for *cil qui n’entendent la letre* (those who do not understand the letter). For this reason, he states that the work must be put into *romans* (*en romanz metre*).¹⁰ As suggested, however, this ‘written-for-the-masses’ version is not completely faithful to its precursors, a fact to which Sainte-Maure calls attention:

Le latin sivrai e la letre,
Nule autre rien n’i voudrai metre,
S’ensi non com jol truis escrit.
Ne di mie qu’aucun bon dit
Ni mete, se faire le sai,
Mais la matire en ensivrai.

I will follow the Latin and the letter
and I would not add anything
to that which I find written.
I do not say that I will not add some good discourse
if I have the talent for it,
*but I will follow the matter of the text.*¹¹

français du Moyen Âge (Paris: Champion, 1925-1929). Benoit de Sainte-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, 6 vols., (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1904-1912). All references to this work are taken from this edition, with citations indicated according to their line numbers (vols. I-IV). The English translations of these citations are my own.

⁹ Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Phillip Bennett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 32.

¹⁰ Benoit de Sainte-Maure ll. 36-37.

¹¹ Benoit de Sainte-Maure ll. 139-44, *emphasis mine*.

Following the original to the letter thus does not impede the writer from adding *bon dit* where he sees fit. A translation is, in this sense, also a modified version, a re-writing of another text. These reflections on textual composition show that, as Jean-Charles Huchet so succinctly observes: “La littérature naît de la littérature.”¹² Literature, in the case of medieval writing in the vernacular, is indeed born from literature.

It is within this tradition of literary *renaissance* that *Le Roman de Silence* has its genesis: while the text’s precise date of composition is not known, most critics place it sometime in the latter half of the thirteenth century.¹³ Consequently, it is not surprising that the narrative contains allusions to other vernacular texts of the period and adapts a significant portion of the prose *l’Estoire Merlin* as part of its own fictional matter.¹⁴ In this sense, the *latin écrite* mentioned by the poet is perhaps a more general reference to any adapted fictional matter, irrespective of its language of composition. Furthermore, the poet alludes to his writing as a sort of conjunction (*conjointure*)¹⁵, in this case between truth and lie:

Jo ne di pas que n’i ajoigne
 Avoic le voir sovent mençoigne
 Por le conte miols acesmer: (ll. 1663-65, *emphasis mine*)

I don’t deny that I have *joined*

¹² Huchet 10-11.

¹³ Cf. Kelly xxi and Thorpe 1-17. In a chronology that he advises can only serve a general guideline and not a precise catalog of dates, Kelly places the composition of *Silence* in the period of 1270-1280. No specific justification is given for this choice. However, this estimate coincides with Thorpe’s, which fixes *Silence* in “the second half of the thirteenth century” (17). Thorpe bases this date on various data, including the handwriting and miniatures of the manuscript, language of the scribe, and the dates of composition given for other works contained in the same manuscript.

¹⁴ Thorpe 28.

¹⁵ This is a term used by Chrétien de Troyes to describe his writing in *Erec et Enide*. Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1953) l. 14.

*many a fiction [lie] along with the truth
to arrange the story better.*

Like the *bon dit* of Benoit de Sainte-Maure, Heldris claims to add a *mençoinge* only to create a more coherent tale, to improve upon the work of those who came before him. Now, if the lines that precede those above are considered, the *mençoinge* of the poet's writing becomes even more important.

Comence chi tels aventure
C'ainques n'oïstes tele en livre (ll. 1658-59, *emphasis mine*)

Here begins such an adventure
as you have never heard in a book.

The many lies are also the locus of the text's novelty, or in Geoffrey of Vinsauf's terms, its source of rejuvenation.¹⁶ These artistic and rhetorical flourishes are what set Heldris' tale apart from its literary antecedents, referred to summarily as the *latin escrite*. Accordingly, the 'truth' that the 'lie' of *Le Roman de Silence* contradicts is not an equivocal historical reality, but simply established versions of the textual matter that it glosses. The work of this poet thus confirms Roger Dragonetti's suggestion that medieval writing (including even historical writing) is more concerned with constructing truth rhetorically than with expressing some epistemological *vérité*:

C'est là un phénomène solidement établi, mais qui impliquait que l'historiographie médiévale, largement tributaire des arts du langage, c'est à dire de la littérature, demeurerait irréductible aux règles des méthodes modernes de l'histoire, ne fût-ce que par la manière aussi dont les médiévaux conçoivent différemment le traitement des sources et encore du fait que leur discours historique ne vise pas à *exprimer* la vérité, mais à la construire rhétoriquement et symboliquement en vue de la persuasion.¹⁷

¹⁶ This is another term used by Geoffrey of Vinsauf to describe his rhetorical strategies for linguistic and literary renewal. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Le Poetria Nova*, ed. and trans. Lewis Thorpe (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 55.

¹⁷ Roger Dragonetti, *Le Mirage des sources* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987) 19.

The contradiction of textual authority creates a truth, inasmuch as the new text with its added lies now constitutes a separate, discreet work which is even better than those that preceded it.

Therefore, this practice of re-writing inherent to narrative romance should not be considered as a pejorative act of transgression, but one of differentiation. As in the case of Philip's infamous *livre*, the new text depends upon the old for its genesis, but relies on how it differs from the latter to establish itself as a discreet literary object. To borrow a term from the prologue to Marie de France's *Lais*, the poetic *surplus* is what distinguishes a text, what makes it *novel*.¹⁸ Heldris' attempt to fashion a story completely *a talle* thus becomes a quest to communicate something that is true by translating the tacit fullness of silence into a profusion of well-chosen words:

N'i metrai rien qui m'uevre enpire
Ne del voir iert mos a dire
Car la verté ne doi taisir. (ll. 1667-69, *emphasis mine*)

I won't add anything to worsen my story,
nor truly will there be a word to add to it,
for I must not suppress the truth.

The lies of a literary text such as *Silence* actually become its truth, the mark of its literary originality. In vernacular writing, truth and fiction are thus one, both subject to an endless cycle of renewal and regeneration within the poet's language.

¹⁸ Marie de France, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. (Paris: Poche). Marie addresses the dynamics of medieval textual composition in the prologue, referring to the addition of new material as a "surplus" (ll. 1-56).

The Politics of Signification

For a narrative that claims to “preserve the memory of Silence,” (*Ki de Silence fait memorie*, l. 2658), it is somewhat surprising that its central character does not appear until quite late in the romance, her name mentioned for the first time at line 2067. In addition to the prologue, the first two thousand lines of the narrative are devoted primarily to the stories of Ebains (the king of England) and Cador and Eufemie, the future parents of Silence. While several critics have addressed the amorous relationship between Silence’s parents, considerably fewer have given serious attention to Ebains and the narrative’s political structures. One notable exception is Sharon Kinoshita, who develops a rapport between politics and gender politics in *Le Roman de Silence*:

For under the cover of Silence’s cross dressing and refeminization, the romance reformulates the way bodies matter in the thirteenth century imaginary, redefining the function of the medieval nobility as not military service but genealogical reproduction.¹⁹

Kinoshita’s interpretation is both interesting and well developed, and I do not wish to refute her thesis. Rather, I contend that just as political and gender issues are allied in the text, so too, are these issues tied to the narrative’s discourse on language and writing. To put it another way, the feudal and gender politics of the text are also a politics of silence and signification.

The first character presented in the tale (apart from Heldris de Cornuälle) is Ebains, whose authority as a ruler – unlike Arthur in the *Graal* – is without challenge:

Li siens conmans n’ert pas *jenglois*,
Car n’avoit home ens el roïame,

¹⁹ Sharon Kinoshita. “Heldris de Cornuälle’s *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage,” *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 398.

De Wincestre trosqu'a Durame,
 S'il osast son conmant enfraindre
 Nel fesist en sa carcre enpaindre,
 Par tel covant n'a droit n'a tort
 N'en issist point trosqu'a la mort. (ll. 112-118, *emphasis mine*)

A command from him was no *idle chatter* [lie],
 for there was not a man in the kingdom,
 from Winchester to Durham,
 who, if he dared disobey the king's command,
 would not be thrown into prison,
 so that, rightly or wrongly,
 he wouldn't get out again until he died.

The praise of rulers, be they historical or imaginary, is a common *topos* of European literature that had its beginnings at least as early as the Punic Wars, when political leaders began to fully realize the positive influence of rhetoric.²⁰ In the above passage, this strategy is used to fashion the portrait of an unmitigated aristocratic power. Furthermore, the word *jenglois* suggests that his authority has its foundation in a specific type of linguistic representation. Derived from the Latin *iactare*, *jenglois* designates, as in the above translation, "empty or idle speech." The nominal form of this word – *joglerie* – has a number of possible meanings, including singing songs (as in the case of a *jongleur*), or playing tricks, both of which portray language as pure artifice: "In either case, playing tricks, joking, and empty speech all have one thing in common - the use of signs or symbols to point to that which is not there, to indicate absence."²¹ Essentially, to *jongler* is to lie. Thus, the fact that a command from King Ebains is not *jenglois* implies that his words do not deceive: they name what is there

²⁰ Curtius 176. In fact, as Curtius notes, many ancient leaders were themselves engaged in literary activity.

²¹ Kate Mason Cooper, "Elle and L: Sexualized Textuality in Le Roman de Silence," *Romance Notes* 25.3 (1985): 349. Cooper also notes that it is fitting that *joglerie* is undertaken by Silence (l. 2863 ff.), since the heroine herself 'plays a trick' by her false appearance and name. See p. 215 ff. for a discussion of this episode.

instead of what is absent. Within the political context of the fiction, this etymological straightness or linguistic propriety becomes emblematic of a certain feature of the text's discourse on language and writing that is explored through a series of economic and symbolic exchanges among its principal characters.

The importance of economic exchange in *Le Roman de Silence* is first alluded to in the prologue, where the narrator issues an angry complaint directed at those who would hear or repeat Heldris de Cornuälle's tale:

Ne violt qu'espars soiënt par gent
Qui proisent mains honor d'argent,
N'a gent qui tolt voellent oïr
Que si n'ont soing c'om puist joïr
De gueredon qu'il vollent rendre. (ll. 9-13)

He does not want it to be spread among people
who value honor less than money,
nor to people who want to hear everything
but don't want to let a man enjoy
the reward they should give him in return.

Quite simply, if one wishes to hear the story of *Silence*, one should pay to do so. Such appeals to the financial generosity of an audience are fairly common in medieval literature, but it is essential to note that the poet is not only complaining of his personal hardship. He is also reprimanding others for their greed.²² Whether for practical, moral, or purely rhetorical reasons, the criticism of avarice is present in many secular and religious works from this period. One finds, for instance, a rather lengthy passage in *Le Roman de la rose* that paints a decidedly negative picture of those persons with a lust for money.²³ The same is true of the poet's condemnation of *avere gent* (l. 31) in the prologue of *Le Roman*

²² Curtius 470. One also finds "begging" poems among the Provençal troubadour lyrics as well as in Chaucer's poetry. See, for example Chaucer's "To You, My Pur and to Non Other Wight."

²³ In this case, greed is explained as the result of a "lack of love" (ll. 5120-5252).

de Silence. By their actions, these greedy people are said to lose both the practical value of their money and their personal honor:

Ont torné en fiens entasser
Car qui violt avoir amasser,
Quant il n'en ist honors ne biens?
Assés valt certes mains que fiens.
Li fiens encrassce vials la terre,
Mais li avoires c'on entreserre
Honist celui ki l'i entasse. (ll. 45-51, *emphasis mine*)

All this they have changed into piling up manure;
for who wants to amass wealth
when neither honor nor good comes of it?
It is surely worth less than manure.
Manure at least enriches the earth,
but the wealth a man buries
shames the one who hoards it.

Despised not because they are wealthy, but because – as their name makes clear – they do not share their wealth with those who deserve it, the behavior of such individuals turns great riches (*biens*) into something even less useful than a pile of shit (*fiens*). The emphasis here is clearly on *utility*: money, like any other object of exchange, retains its value only so long as it is used. Its worth is not located in the material components of its physical composition, but in what these components stand for in their passing from one person to another. These passages allude to a functional relationship between economic exchange and the circulation of linguistic signifiers. In both cases, the object is but an abstraction – what St. Augustine might call a conventional sign – that serves as the representation of something other than its material components.²⁴ In fact,

²⁴ Conventional signs are described as “those [signs] which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood.” These are opposed to natural signs, which “without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire.” Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958) 35 (II.i.2 – II.ii.3).

medieval vocabulary recognized this commonality by using the word *symbolon* to refer to both word and coin,²⁵ a verbal conflagration strikingly similar to the one intimated in the prologue of *Le Roman de Silence*:

S'il a .m. *mars* en une masse
Trestolt icho tient il a nient,
Et neporquant perdre le crient; (ll. 52-54, *emphasis mine*)

If he has a thousand *marks* in a heap,
it doesn't seem he has anything at all,
and yet he is afraid of losing it

Heldris' courtly currency is *mars*, a term that, like its English equivalent, can denote both a measure of money and a graphic sign. Hoarding marks, the *avere gent* impede their circulation, prizing not the functional utility of the sign, but its idolatrous image. They are, as St. Augustine says, "slave[s] to a sign."²⁶ For the poet, whose work is based upon generating new meanings for the words he finds (*il trouve*, l. 4), such behavior problematizes the activity of poetic composition. The honor (*honors*) lost in such a non-exchange is both personal and poetic, as Geoffrey of Vinsauf's description of the challenge and benefit of effective metaphorical writing intimates:

Haec duo mista
Sunt et honos et onus: onus est transsumere vocem
Ut decet, est et *honus cum sit trassumpta decenter*.

Two things are mixed here: onus and honor – the onus of transferring a word properly, and *honor for having succeeded*.²⁷

²⁵ Eugene Vance, *Marvelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 130.

²⁶ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 83-85 (III.iii.9. – III.iii.11): "He is a slave to a sign one who uses or worships a significant thing without knowing what it signifies."

²⁷ Ll 951-954. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *The Poetria Nova and its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine*, ed. and trans. Ernest J. Gallo (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 64-5.

By prizing the word itself instead of its power as a transferable instrument of signification, greedy people render it sterile and useless to the poet. One gets the feeling that even Chrétien might not be able to sow verse in such arid earth.

The antithesis of this avaricious conduct is found in King Ebains, whose behavior is in perfect accord with the poet's charitable guidelines. His land, we are told, is a model of virtue and honor, an accomplishment which the poet attributes to the monarch's ability to give and hold back appropriately:

Del sien lor donoit liëment
Et moult apparelliëment;
Car cho doit cascuns prodrom faire,
Doner et garder cui retraire, (ll. 129-132, *emphasis mine*)

He gave to them happily of his own wealth,
and very becomingly.
Every noble man should do this,
give and hold back appropriately.

Such generosity, of course, stands in marked contrast to the greed of the *avere gent*, whose only reward for the poet is "a frowning face and a stingy one" (*bien laide chiere et une enfrume*, l. 29).²⁸ The specific vehicle through which Ebains channels his fiscal control and thus maintains the *concordia* of his realm is the *don*:

Il maintenoit chevalerie,
Si sostenoit bachelerie
Nient par falose mais par dons. (ll. 121-123)

He upheld chivalry,
and kept his young knights

²⁸ Thus, the poet does, in reality, use a 'gloss' to explain the *avere gent*, even though he claims to have no need for such strategies (ll. 68-9). By showing how Ebains' practices (which are the exact opposite of those discussed in the prologue) are honorable, he also shows why the greedy people are dishonorable. This is an oft-employed rhetorical tactic, and its use is specifically mentioned in the *Roman de la Rose*: "Ainsi va des contraires choses;/Les unes sont des autres gloses;/Et qui l'une en veult defenir,/De l'autre li doit souvenir" (Thusly go the contrary things. The ones are of the others glosses, and he who wishes to define one has to remember the other, ll. 21577-21580). For a brief description of *contraires choses*, see Dragonetti, *Le Mirage des sources* 51.

not by deception but by gifts.

While selfish people recompense their subjects with a frowning, deceptive face, Ebains offers gifts – *don* is derived from the Old French verb *doner* (lat. *dono*), meaning to give, present, or bestow – to his loyal subjects. If for no other reason than the excessive repetition of its diverse forms in this part of the text (there are no less than nine instances of *don* or etymologically related words in the span of fourteen lines, ll. 122-135), this act of giving warrants further attention.

What, then, are these gifts that play such an important role in Ebains' control of his feudal realm? At least in part, they reflect the historical composition and function of the fief, although the narrative ultimately adapts this material to its own poetic ends.²⁹ While returning to the court one day, Ebains and his entourage are attacked by a terrible serpent who kills several of the king's men. Disturbed by this loss, Ebains offers a reward to any knight who would kill the offensive beast:

Jo lie donroie *une conté*
Et feme li lairai coisir
En mon roiaime par loisir
Ki miols li plaira, celi pregne
Mais solement soit sans calengne. (ll. 382-386)

I would give him an *earldom*

²⁹ Economic exchange, in the form of rewards, or *dons* was the cornerstone of early French feudalism. In France, feudal society first came to the forefront during the Carolingian empire, beginning in the early ninth-century. For this group of rulers, feudal rewards were the logical means to an end. In order to accomplish their goal of spreading the doctrine of Christianity as far as possible, a wider-reaching network of power than that offered by a traditional centralized monarchy was required. Such a network was found in the series of dependent relations first established during their rise to power. The maintenance of these older ties, as well as the creation of new ones came to depend strongly upon economic compensation. As Marc Bloch explains, "Once in power, they had to reward these 'men'. They distributed lands to them, by methods which we shall describe in detail later. Furthermore, as mayors of the palace and then as kings they had to get supporters and above all create an army. So they attracted into their service - frequently in return for gifts of land - many men who were already of high rank." March Bloch, *Feudal Society*, vol. 1, trans. L.A. Manyon (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964) 158.

and I would let him choose
any wife in my kingdom, at his pleasure.
He may take whichever pleases him most,
as long as she is not already spoken for.

This *don*, then, includes two main features: a *conté* and a *feme*. The symbolic exchange of a woman occurs one other time in this text, when the King of Norway offers his daughter to Ebains as “a chattel of war” – tangible evidence of an accord between the warring countries.³⁰ Hence, within the context of the fiction, it is not surprising that Ebains makes this offer. What is interesting is that the names of both Ebains’ queen (Eufeme) and Cador’s first choice for a mate (Eufemie) are – like that of the father in *La Vie de Saint Alexis* – variations on the word euphemism (Gk. “use of good words”).³¹ A substitution of one signifier for another, these women are pleasing tokens in a symbolic exchange realized as part of the fiction’s feudal politics. The female body is thus represented as a sort of human currency, one in a series of signifiers that negotiate a transfer of power between lord and vassal.

Similarly, the conception of a *conté* as tangible retribution only partly explains its textual significance: the endowment of valuable assets (e.g., a castle, land) is not its only feature, especially in the case of a high-ranking vassal who receives a landed fief. To give a *conté* - or any such fief - also implies the accordance of a title, a name.³² He who gives the *don* is therefore also he who

³⁰ Kathleen J. Brahney, “When Silence Was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*,” *The Spirit of the Court: Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society* (Toronto 1983), eds. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Dover, NH: Brewer, 1985) 55.

³¹ See p. 45 ff.

³² Marc Bloch 131. It is interesting that during the assumed period of composition of *Silence*, the feudal title became a more important feature of the *don*, supposedly because fewer landed fiefs remained available for this use.

gives a name. Different from blood relations, which are founded on biological links, a feudal tie such as the one created between Cador and Ebains is based uniquely upon a cultural and symbolic system of signifiers. This pact creates a tie which need not exist in nature: Cador is now 'related' to the king by virtue of his new role in the monarchy.³³ Without this linguistic enunciation to designate a relation between them, there is no actual basis for the existence of a feudal tie. In this sense, the currency of Ebains' feudal politics is also a linguistic one. If we return to the *avere gent* of the prologue for just a moment, the inherent verbal fault of their conduct is now obvious: responding to the committed service of their subjects with only a muted facial expression, their crime is a crime of silence.

Breaking this silence is thus an authoritative discursive act, the practical and linguistic effects of which are clarified by further examination of the story of Cador and his chosen wife, Eufemie. A short time after the two are wed, Eufemie's father, Renaut of Cornwall, dies. And although he has already been promised the count's land and castle by both Ebains and Renaut, Cador immediately takes possession of them by force:

Cador a fait com hom voisiés,
 Que anchois que li cuens morust,
 Que folors n'i entrecorust
 En tols les castials mist ses gardes.
 Tels gens ki ne sunt pas coârdes. (ll. 1646-1650)

Cador behaved like a prudent man,

³³ Although Ebains refers to Cador as his "bials niés" (fair nephew, l. 532) nephew", this reference can not be understood as a clear indication of a genealogical tie between the two. Before Cador succeeds in slaying the serpent, he is only referred to as "Un vallet" (a young man, l. 391). It is not until after he has demanded that Ebains acknowledge his reward and thus the receipt of his *conté* and his title that Ebains refers to him as his "fair nephew". The actual sense of the term is therefore ambiguous, and Ebains' remark could simply reflect the fact the he and Cador are now affiliated by virtue of the *don*.

for as soon as the count died,
to prevent any disorder from erupting
he placed guards all around the castle,
men who were no cowards.

Clearly, this act is an assumption of the material trappings of power, but it is also the appropriation of a signifier, since Cador's claim to Renaut's physical property (part of his *conté*) is followed by his almost immediate adoption of the latter's title. In fact, the proper name Cador is mentioned only twice more, shortly after the above passage.³⁴ Certainly, the character *li cuens* (the count) is also the character Cador in the fiction, but this former name is replaced by a new one with his entrance into an alternative social and symbolic structure. Throughout the more than 5,000 remaining lines of the romance, he is only referred to as *li cuens*, the name he receives thanks to his newly acquired position in the feudal politics of the fiction. One signifier is substituted for another, with this change in appellation mediated by a transfer of physical assets.

The *metaphoric* relationship between these two names is an indication of the *metonymic* nature of the text's feudal symbolic structure as a whole. Symbolic signification is important not only to those who receive a *don* from the king, but also to the king himself. Ebains is praised because he is a king who keeps his honor and his knights by offering gifts. It thus seems logical that by not giving gifts, one could, like the *avere gent*, lose these things:

Car ki done derriänement
Il n'i a gré ains pert son don
Et plus avoec, son los, son non: (ll. 134-136, *emphasis mine*)

For he who gives grudgingly
gains no profit from it, but rather loses his gift,
and more along with it: his reputation and his good name.

³⁴ Cador (l. 1657), Li cuens Cador (l. 2148).

Note the paradox of feudal homage: he who gives grudgingly, can actually lose his *don* and, the text says, his *name*. While the king, by the nature of his social position, has the power to name, he depends upon the same process to give him his own title, his own feudal signifier. A feudal monarch such as Ebains retains his position and his power only as long as all the other members of this cultural structure continue to recognize him as ‘the king.’ Indeed, Ebains also defines himself with respect to others in the text, including the king of France: *Jo sui ses hom, il est mes sire* (I am his man, and he is my liege lord, l. 4255). Thus, a feudal title exists solely in relation to other titles, with no one title possessing meaning in and of itself. Unable able to speak as an ‘I’ on its own, the feudal subject is quite literally “nothing other than that which slips into a chain of signifiers.”³⁵ Since a subject can speak of himself only in relation to other subjects, identity is always generated by displacement; he who signifies must also be signified if he is to have any significance at all.³⁶ The accordance of a *don* not only rewards loyalty, but also perpetuates feudalism’s symbolic order by reinforcing the identities of its otherwise faceless participants.

Law and Loss

However, as is so often the case when reading *Le Roman de Silence*, it is extremely difficult in this instance to maintain a single, definitive path of analysis. Although the differential symbolic network described above is indeed

³⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 48. “Le sujet ce n’est rien d’autre – qu’il ait ou non conscience de quel signifiant il est l’effet – que ce qui se glisse dans une chaîne de signifiants.”

³⁶ I am using Lacan’s term (displacement), which itself is developed from concepts of Freud and Jakobson, to denote the essentially associative means of definition inherent to metonymy. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977) 156.

at work in the Ebains' feudal politics, it only partially explains the subtle interplay of language, economic exchange, and political power in this narrative. The same is true of the historical relationship between lineage, inheritance, and the *don*. In his book *Etymologies and Genealogies*, R. Howard Bloch studies the evolution of familial structures and structures of signification throughout the Middle Ages.³⁷ He describes the medieval family as "a loosely defined grouping of relatives and retainers," a condition resulting from the equitable recognition of agnatic (male) and cognatic (female) lines, as well as family members with no blood or marriage ties.³⁸ Like the aforementioned relationships of exchange between Ebains and his feudal subjects, ties between members of such kinship groups are defined by spatial associations: an individual's status and the meaning behind his name or title is created and maintained through fluid structures of personal service to and compensatory rewards from other individuals, rather than an immutable or static affiliation between them.³⁹ In Bloch's opinion, it is a shift in how these family members identify each other as such that points to a shift in the signifying structure of the medieval family:

The kin group as a spatial extension was displaced from within by the notion of the blood group as a diachronic progression: the power of feudal princes, once established geographically, produced a corresponding sense of the family through time. And not just any sense, since the "horizontal" clan, loosely spatially conceived, took on, through increased emphasis upon time and blood, a necessarily tighter and more "vertical" slant.⁴⁰

³⁷ R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983).

³⁸ R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies* 65-66.

³⁹ Note that the English word 'relative' can have either of these two connotations.

⁴⁰ R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies* 69.

In other words, biological relationships became more important than functional (feudal) ones, a realignment that greatly influenced the way in which assets (including both tangible ones like land and intangible ones such as titles) were transmitted.

While fictional texts are under no obligation to provide accurate reflections of historical trends – indeed, they often do quite the opposite – it is interesting to note that the political and symbolic structures of *Le Roman de Silence* also become increasingly “vertical,” as sexuality, inheritance, and the power of Ebains converge. In what is perhaps the key event of this narrative, an unnamed count and his twin daughters arrive at the court, where two young counts are to marry the twins. However, the identical visual appearance of these sisters triggers a clash between their suitors over which shall receive the larger portion of a collective inheritance:

Cho dist cascuns qui a l'ainsnee;
Por quant li uns a la mainsnee.
Mellee i ot por son avoir,
Car cascuns [violt] la terre avoir. (ll. 281-284)

Each one said that he had the elder,
although in fact one had the younger.
There was a war for the property,
for each one wanted to have the land.

Specularly indiscernible from one another, these brides make it impossible to determine whom should receive the land and title of their father, a dispute that eventually leads to the death of both young counts. However, while the original argument was centered on the women's ages, Ebains' *venjance* is visited upon their sex:

Mais, par le foi que doi Saint Pere,
Ja feme n'iert mais iretere
Ens el roame d'Engletiere,

Por tant com j'aie a tenir tiere.
Et c'en iert ore la venjance
De ceste nostre mesestance. (ll. 313-318)

But, by the faith I owe St. Peter,
never again shall a woman inherit
in the kingdom of England
as long as I hold this land.
This shall be my vengeance
for this wretched situation.

Missing or ignoring the true source of the problem, Ebains avenges one loss with another by suspending inheritance through the cognatic line. Women have lost the ability to inherit: what they lack – that which now determines whether or not a person will have the right to inherit in the kingdom of Ebains – is a male sexual organ. In the feudal politics of *Le Roman de Silence*, physical lack is also a lack of the phallus, for possession of male genetalia is now also what gives one the right to possess and control language through the feudal title (*conte*).⁴¹

Furthermore, by making inheritance dependent on biological sex, Ebains' legislative decree establishes a law within the narrative that mandates a continuity between corporeal features and social signifiers of gender, such as dress, name, and conduct. Indeed, agnatic biological inheritance shares an affinity with etymology, which seeks to establish a definite, traceable path of meaning through time. Just as the sense of a newer word is understood by the meaning of those from which it developed,⁴² the power associated with the

⁴¹ Lacan does not equate the phallus with the penis (although this is often a metonymic displacement of the phallus), for it is not an object, but a signifier — the master signifier — which allows for the metonymic and metaphoric functions of language. Inasmuch as Ebains law accords only males with the ability to inherit, and thus control the signifying function of the *conté*, it masks over the sexual non-specificity of this concept. Lacan, *Ecrits* 284-5.

⁴² An example of this strategy is found in *De Doctrina Christiana*, (II.xi.16), where etymology is advocated as a means for understanding names in the scriptures: "The great remedy for ignorance of proper signs is knowledge of languages. And men who speak the Latin tongue, of whom are those I have undertaken to instruct, need two other languages for the knowledge of

agnatically inherited *patrimoine* is not validated by fluctuating horizontal associations, but by a vertical progression from father to son.⁴³ Ebains' demarcation of sexual difference within familial inheritance results in a similar, though not identical tightening of linguistic signification in the narrative. Linguistically speaking, the twin brides are homographs: identical in appearance but different in meaning. Although logically faulted (the same problem could still occur with twin sons), the king's legislative decree strives to avoid this situation by linking sexuality, writing, and death together in a new law of linguistic signification. Once all his subjects have taken an oath to abide by this ruling, Ebains buries the bodies of the two counts, inscribing an ominous *memento mori* on their coffins:

Li rois fait les mors enterrer,
 En .ii. sarqus bien enserrer.
 Ecrire i fait: "Par covoitise
 Tolt a maint home sa francise,
 Et plus avoec quant s'i amort
 Troter le fait jusque a la mort. (ll. 327-332)

The king had the dead buried,
 Closed up in two fine coffins.
 There it was written: "Covetousness
 robs many a man of his nobility
 and still more when he is bitten by it:
 he hastens to his death.

This gesture bonds words to loss, transforming writing into a definitive mark of difference, the visible trace of a forbidden desire. Outlawing desire (*covoitise*), Ebains hopes to avoid any further misunderstanding (*mesestance*) within his

Scripture. Hebrew and Greek, that they may have recourse to the original texts if the endless diversity of the Latin translators throw them into doubt." St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958) 43.

⁴³ A striking graphic model of this verticality is of course the family tree, which was in use during the Middle Ages. In the case of Ebains, he alludes to a straightness in his lineage when he refers to his possessions as his *droiture* (l. 5410), while females are said to be *contre droiture* (l. 672).

feudal realm by establishing a uniformity between appearance and identity, between words and their meaning.

Desire and the Silent Other

But just as Saint Paul suggests that he did not know sin until he knew the Law,⁴⁴ this new linguistic commandment incites its own transgression, as illustrated by the story of Silence's parents, the knight Cador and the maiden Eufemie. Respectively, these two characters are presented as idealized figures of masculine and feminine behavior. Cador,⁴⁵ for example, has all the attributes of the perfect knight:

Un vallet o le roi avoit,
Cador le preu, ki moult savoit.
Il ert le plus vallans de tols,
Li plus amés, et li plus prols. (ll. 391-394)

But there was a young man with the king,
Cador the valiant, who was very wise.
He was the most valorous of all,
the bravest and the most beloved.

Similarly, Eufemie is praised for her intelligence and superlative feminine beauty, which exceeds that of all her peers:

Li cuens n'avoit enfant que li:
Tols ses païs en abeli,
Qu'el mont n'avoit plus bele mie,
Et si l'apielent Eufemie.
Des .vii. ars ert moult bien aprise. (ll. 399-403)

The count had no other child,

⁴⁴ Take, for example the following passage from Romans 7:7-9: "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead."

⁴⁵ One of the more obscure points of intertextuality in *Le Roman de Silence*, it is nevertheless interesting to note that a character named Cador also appears in the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth and, like the Cador of *Silence*, he is also the quintessential knight. For more information on his role in this narrative, see Douglas Kelly, *Medieval French Romance* (New York: Twayne, 1993) 5.

and she graced the whole land,
for there was no lovelier creature in all the world.
Her name was Eufemie.
She was well instructed in the seven arts.

Surpassing other men and women in both physical and mental refinement, Cador and Eufemie are the text's rhetorical exempla of 'ideal' gender behavior vis-à-vis biological sex. Granted, some of Eufemie's attributes and actions do not coincide with historical tradition, but this does not mean that the character represents an "unrealistic feminine ideal."⁴⁶ As a poetic work, *Le Roman de Silence* is not concerned with creating realistic representations, for it is first and foremost a fiction, a conjunction of *truth and lie*.⁴⁷ Therefore, its characters should not be construed as representations – faulty or otherwise – of a reality, but as literary figures, the pure products of poetic artifice. So, whether the idealized personages of Cador and Eufemie are unrealistic is of little consequence to their significance within the fiction. Rather, as deliberately constructed models of ideal masculinity and femininity, their importance lies in their role as purposeful elements of the text's discourse on sexuality.

A considerable portion of the narrative is devoted to the problematic courtship of this exemplary couple, and it is through an examination of relevant passages that its sexual/textual significance becomes more explicit. Given their common perfection, an amorous union between Cador and Eufemie would perhaps seem to pose few practical problems. Such is the reasoning used by Ebains when he considers the possibility of their marriage:

⁴⁶ Anita Benaim Lasry, "The Ideal Heroine in Medieval Romances: A Quest for a Paradigm," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 32.3 (1985) 231.

⁴⁷ Recall that these are the words used by Heldris to describe his composition. *Jo ne di pas que n'i ajoigne / Avoic le voir sovent mençoigne / Por le conte miols acesmer* (I don't deny that I have joined many a fiction [lie] along with the truth to arrange the story better, ll. 1663-1665).

Die lor qu'il sunt d'un eäge,
 D'une bialté, de halt parage,
 Et quent eäges les ivuelle,
 Et bialtés n'estroit pas merveille
S'andoi quesissent l'aparel
Qu'il en amor fuscent parel.

(ll. 1267-74, *emphasis mine*)

Tell them that they both of the same age,
 and the same beauty, and noble birth;
 and since age and beauty unite them,
 it would be no wonder
if both of them sought the means
to be united in love as well.

Indeed, Ebains (who is ignorant of any actual sentiments between the two characters) is correct in his supposition, for the two are, in love with each other. However, whereas beauty, age, and noble lineage serve to unite Cador and Eufemie, love's effect upon the couple is more ambivalent.

Although their desire for each other is mutual, it is this same desire that so resolutely divides them. Evidence of this division between Cador and Eufemie, and thus, between the two textual poles of sexuality, is most noticeable in the means (*aparel*) by which their desire for one another must be expressed – language. Shortly after his initial appearance in the text, Cador's secret love for Eufemie is revealed to us by the narrator:

Cil l'ainme et dire ne li oze,
 Ainz a s'amor si fort encloze
 Que nuz ne l'aperçoit en lui.

(ll. 405-407)

He loved her and dared not tell her;
 instead he had so concealed his love
 so that no one perceived it in him.

Held in secret, Cador's amorous sentiments are imperceptible to others as well as the desired other. Similarly, Eufemie loves Cador without daring to say so (*Fors lui amer sans ozer dire*, l. 770). So, the expression of desire is subjected to a mental silencing (l. 573), a repression of its presence from discourse that perpetuates

separation.⁴⁸ Desire thus becomes the locus of an absence or lack in the verbal exchange between the lovers, pointing to a fundamental interaction in the narrative between it and the powers of language.

The linguistic dynamics of this relationship become even more pronounced after king Ebains rewards Cador and Eufemie for services that they have rendered to the crown. Once again, they are pushed apart even as their stories draw them together. As previously mentioned, Cador is accorded the privilege of choosing as his wife whichever woman in the kingdom pleases him the most (*Ki miols li plaira, celi prenge*, l. 385) as compensation for killing a dragon. Due to smoke inhaled during this battle, he falls ill and the king summons Eufemie, whose great ability in the seven arts qualifies her the best doctor in the land (*El pais n'a si sage mie*, l. 594). Having promised to cure the knight of his illness, Eufemie is offered a reward nearly identical to Cador's:

N'i a prince si riche mie
Qu'a baron ne l'ait Eufemie
Celui que miols desire et ainme,
Por c'altres forçor droit n'i clainme. (ll. 605-608)

There was no prince in the world so powerful
that Eufemie would not have him for her lord,
whichever she most desired and loved,
as long as no prior claim bound him.

At first blush, such a state of affairs might seem to clear the way for the revelation of this couple's hidden love. Instead, their frustration is all the more evident when they try to capitalize on these rewards by transposing their silenced desire into the medium of speech. In one of the most interesting

⁴⁸ This is the same sort of disjuncture that Freud, in contemplating the dreams and their representations, identified as repression or censorship, which for him occurred at both psychic (in the dream itself) and linguistic (in the patient's recounting of the dream) levels. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 310-338.

passages of the narrative, the linguistic results of this attempt are presented in poetically striking fashion. Having lost a battle to control her desirous heart, Eufemie goes to Cador's room to speak to him:

Vient al cambre a son ami.
 Dist li: "Amis, parlés, haymmi!"
 Dire li dut: "Parlés a moi,"
Mais l'Amors li fist tel anoi
Que dire dut: "Parlés a mi,"
Se li a dit: "Parlés, haymmi!" (ll. 881-886, *emphasis mine*)

She went into her ami's room,
 and said to him; "Ami, speak, alas!"
 She should have said, "Speak to me,"
but love [Love] so troubled her
that when she meant to say "Speak to me,"
instead she told him, "Speak, alas!"

Apart from the above translation of 'alas,' the word *haymmi* in this passage has also been interpreted as "to the middle" and "hate me."⁴⁹ Although such translation choices are certainly justifiable, the most important feature of this term is its literal status as a signifier of disappointment or loss. This is because the substitution of *haymmi* for the directive *a mi* is both a subtraction and an addition, the replacement of an intended meaning with another. In its overt contemplation of this metaphoric mistake, the text ascribes the blame to *Amors* (Love), who troubles Eufemie. The fact that love is personified in this passage is significant, since it shifts the sense of the word from an emotion that is *sensed by* Eufemie to an emotional force that *acts upon* her, or more accurately, upon her words. All of this suggests that a subject's speech can never really say what it wants to, its request for the desired object or other subjected by its desire to a

⁴⁹ R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986) 94. Loren Ringer, "Exchange, Identity, and Transvestism in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Dalhousie French Studies* 28 (1994) 10.

series of transformations and contaminations as it passes from silence into speech.⁵⁰ Elsewhere in the text, the power of the lover's heart is explicitly likened to the power of fire to deform or destroy written signs:

Nient plus n'a cuers d'amant valor
De bien retenir s[a] mimorie,
Que cire encontre fu victorie
De retenir la lettre escrite. (ll. 1174-1177)

The heart of a lover can no more
retain its memory [writing]
than wax can prevail against
the fire to retain the written letter.

Burning with desire, so to speak, the lover's heart melts its own writing (*mimorie*), thereby impeding the formal expression of its silent impulses. In this sense, language is not the means by which desire for the other can be articulated, but rather the means by which it is betrayed, always entering into the symbolic structures of language as a corrupted version of itself.

In Eufemie's case, the corrupted demand (*Parlés, haymmi!*) as well as its correct, but sublimated version (*Parlés a mi*) are also requests for Cador to speak. Here then, desire for the other is equated with a desire for the speech of the other,⁵¹ and Cador responds to Eufemie's request, analyzing her confused *parole*:

Cis mos "amis" fait esperer
Cador qu'or para averer
Cho qu'il plus convoite et desirre.
"Aimmi!" demostre le martyre,
Le paine d'amor qu'a sofierte;

⁵⁰ Lacan describes desire as "an effect of the subject of that condition which is imposed upon him by the existence of discourse, to make his need pass through the panes of the signifier." Jacques Lacan, "La Direction de la cure et les principes de son pouvoir," *La Psychanalyse* 6 (1961): 190.

⁵¹ Here, Collete Soler provides an enlightening interpretation of this dynamic, which Lacan articulates in the article "Function and Field of Speech and Language": "Revelation in speech is produced between the subject who speaks and the subject who listens. More precisely, what produces revelation – and revelation in speech is revelation for the subject him or herself – is interpretation. Collete Soler, "The Symbolic Order (I)," *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Janus (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996) 42-43.

Mais que li parole est covierte

(ll. 903-908, *emphasis mine*)

This word “ami” made Cador hope
that now he would be able to realize
what he most craved and desired.
“Alas” showed anguish,
the pain of love that she had suffered,
only the word was hidden.

Interpreting the troubled phrase, Cador attempts to find the hidden word or meaning of her speech. Like the poet, Cador is a *trouvère*, trying to ‘find’ words to fill in the lacunae of the empty or partially empty page. In this passage, then, two modes of representation are depicted. One – feminine – exposes an absence, the unintelligible but meaningful residue of desire, “a metonymic remainder” as Lacan calls it, while the other – masculine – attempts to eliminate that absence, to supplement its lack with signs, and thereby arrive at a revelation of the truth behind words, the Word itself.⁵² Thus, in this episode, language is presented as the means by which desire – as that which is silent – might be revealed.

However, this revelation is the truth that appears only as a product of the ‘play’ in language, not an actual signifier. Thus, when Cador and Eufemie come to recognize their mutual love for the first time, this revelation is achieved not dialogically, but with a *silent kiss*:

*Sans dire font, si com moi sanble,
De fine amor moult bon enseigne,
Car li baisiers bien lor enseigne
Et li qu’il trait paine et martire,
Et lui qu’ele l’aime et desire.*

(ll. 1094-98, *emphasis mine*)

⁵² Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 154. “This nodal point is called desire, and the theoretical elaboration that I have pursued in recent years will show you, through each stage of clinical experience, how desire is situated in dependence on demand – which, by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it, an element that is not indeterminate, which is a condition both absolute and unapprehensible, an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued (*méconnu*), an element called desire. Cf. Cooper 352.

*They acted without speaking, it seems to me,
a very clear sign of noble love,
for the kiss taught them well;
her, that he suffered pain and martyrdom;
and him, that she loved and wanted him.*

This kiss – literally a joining of *langues* (tongues) – is also the figurative joining of the couple's different representational languages (*langues*). Incapable of being expressed by either of them individually, the sign that is produced as well as what it teaches Cador and Eufemie, remain unspoken. This fusion of masculine and feminine is also equated – as it was in the *Conte du Graal* – to a medicine, which the text says will appear as a product of the exchange between these lovers:

*Et lui garir par la mescine
Et li avoir par lui mecine.
U cascuns d'als son per garra,
U la mecine n'i parra.* (ll. 875-878, *emphasis mine*)

*Cador must be cured by the maiden
and she must have her medicine from him.
Either each one will cure his mate,
or the medicine will not appear.*

Another name for the philosopher's stone of medieval alchemy, the *medecine* is that mysterious material reputed to have the power to change ordinary metals into gold, to perfect the imperfect, to unite the divided.⁵³ Here, alchemical transformation takes on the guise of sexual copulation, also a recurrent theme in texts from that field.⁵⁴ Furthermore, *mecine* (medicine) can be translated

⁵³ Saint Augustine also refers to God as the "Physician and Medicine" and suggests that textual analysis is a medicinal exercise. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 15 (I.xiv.13).

⁵⁴ The thirteenth-century doctor and alchemical practitioner Roger Bacon speaks of the attributes and uses of this *medicinam propriam* at considerable length in the *Speculum alchimiae. The Mirror of Alchimy Composed by the Thrice-Famous and Learned Fryer, Roger Bachon*, ed. Stanton J. Linden (London: Garland, 1992). For a summary of the ideas of Bacon and other alchemists, see Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

phonetically as “maiden” or, by use of a phonetic elision, as “my sign” (*me cine*). If the subject of this ‘my’ is the ‘I’ of narration (i.e., the poet) his sign leads us back to his desire to speak that which cannot be spoken, to name the ineffable, symbolized here by the silent kiss of Eufemie and Cador.

Nature’s Nurturing, Nurture’s (de)Naturing

Telling the story of Silence – the eventual product of this physical coupling between Cador and Eufemie – would thus represent an attempt to tell the story of silence, to recreate the tacit fullness of her parents’ linguistic copulation by eliminating the difference between presence and absence, between desire and its linguistic signifiers. Certain traces of this attempt are easily discerned, including the ambiguous names used by the poet to refer the character: *li vallet qui ert meschine* (the boy who was a girl, l. 3704) or simply *li vallés mescine* (the boy-girl, l. 3763).⁵⁵ In these confused epithets, the conflation of the binary opposites ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ is symptomatic of a central movement in the narrative’s thematic and poetic structures to eliminate both sexual and linguistic difference, with the character Silence serving as its ambiguous archetype.

The initial creation of this figure of linguistic and sexual totality is carried out by the goddess Nature who, like the *natura formatrix* of Alain de Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*,⁵⁶ decides to fashion a paragon of her creative abilities. But whereas the goddess of *Anticlaudianus* chooses to create the perfect male, Nature here longs to fashion the perfect female form, to be distinguished from all other

⁵⁵ My own use of the word ‘her’ is marked by this same relationship, but for the sake of simplicity and consistency, I will refer to Silence using feminine pronouns.

⁵⁶ The goddess Natura in *Anticlaudianus* de Antirufino calls on her fifteen celestial sisters to aid her in the creation of a perfect man. For a detailed examination of this and other medieval texts that incorporate the goddess Natura, see Georges Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

women – much like her terrestrial mother Eufemie – by a superior feminine beauty:

La matere ai moult estuïe,
Si a[i] estei moult anuïe
De grosse ouvre, et de vilainne.
Or voel a cesti mettre painne.
En li sole, car bel me sanble,
Metrai plus de bialté ensanble
Que n'aient ore .m. de celes
Qui en cest monde sont plus beles. (ll. 1877-1884)

I have saved this material for a long time,
and I am very weary
of coarse and ugly work.
I want to take good care with this.
In her alone – for so I wish –
I will put more beauty together
than now belongs to a thousand
of the most beautiful women in the world.

The jealously-guarded material for this project must be free of imperfection, equated in the narrative to a well-sifted white flour, free of any chaff or straw (l. 1808 ff.), of which the product is a fine cake: *Et de la fleur fait ses gastials* (From the flour she makes her cake, l. 1821). Completely pure, integral, and without a mark of difference to blemish its surface, Silence's stark white body recalls the state of the blank page prior to poetic composition, a silent fullness that has not yet been transgressed by an intrusion of the written word. Indeed, Nature intimates that she is striving to create a lack of lack, a plenum: *Cho dist Nature: "Jo m'en duel/Si riens i falt."* (Nature said, "I shall grieve if anything is lacking." l. 1921).

Just as a well-baked cake brings about hunger, so too, does the perfectly white body / page of Silence induce a desire to signify, to recuperate its fullness in writing. Nature herself literally inscribes features onto the flawless face of her creation:

La bouce *escrist*, fait l'overture
 Petite e levres a mesure
 Sor le menton les dens serrés.
Ja nul si bel volt ne verrés. (ll. 1931-34, *emphasis mine*)

She *inscribed* [*wrote*] the mouth,
 made the opening small, and the lips to match,
 the teeth she set above the chin.
You will never see such a beautiful face.

Thus, the formation of Silence's body corresponds figuratively to the genesis of a written text which, like the poet's verses, are made *a mesure*. However, this text is so exquisite that it will *never be seen*, existing in written form only as a simulacrum of that which it names. Beyond the descriptive powers of language, integral only in its linguistic absence, Silence's body is the locus of an ultimate articulation, the Other that escapes language and whose most accurate expression "is a circumscription of absence or emptiness."⁵⁷ To some extent, Cadon's choice of the surname Silence for his child (l. 2067 ff.) acknowledges the futility of an attempt to name such a figure, for this word belies its own lack. That which cannot be signified points not to something, but to nothing, a nothing that cannot be directly expressed in language.

At the same time, both the absence of Silence's perfect female body and her grammatically indeterminate name pose a problem for her father. Because of Ebains' recent law against female inheritance, Cadon requires a male heir in order to preserve the genealogical continuity of his estate: a female child would result in forfeiture of the patrimony. Therefore, prior to the birth of their child, Cadon suggests that, in the event their child is a female, he and Eufemie should circumvent the law by means of a specular ruse:

⁵⁷ Cooper 346.

Faisons li com un fil norir,
De priés garder et bien covrir,
Si le poons, del nostre engier. (ll. 1757-1759)

Let us raise her as a son,
keep and protect her closely [guard and cover her well],
if we can, with our endowments [trick].

In this way, Cador will have a 'son' even if he truly has a daughter, giving him a legal successor, or at least the appearance thereof. To do so, he must cover, or silence, the politically disadvantageous body of his daughter by dressing her in male clothing:

Quant li enfes pot dras user,
Por se nature refuser
L'ont tres bien vestu a fuer d'ome
A sa mesure, c'est la some. (ll. 2359-62, *emphasis mine*)

When the child could wear clothes,
in order to deny her nature
they dressed her all in a man's fashion,
scaled down to her size [measure], that's the truth.

Like the poet, who promises to tailor (*tailler*) his verses strictly to the measure of the silent holes in language, so too, does Cador intend to cover the ineffable female body of his daughter with masculine clothes, cut strictly to her measure. Within the political drama of the fiction, Silence is a representation of the poet's own desire to fashion the illusion of presence where there is only absence.

This change in clothes is accompanied by a change in the heroine's name, a frequent occurrence in medieval texts with cross-dressing female characters. However, whereas re-namings in other texts consist of a simple re-writing of the original feminine names,⁵⁸ this same activity in *Le Roman de Silence* involves the application of both a feminine and masculine supplement to a common root:

⁵⁸ Cf. Perret 332.

Mellor conseil trover n'i puis.
 Il iert només Scilenscius;
 Et s'il avient par aventure
 Al descovrir de sa nature
 Nos muerons cest -us en -a,
 S'avra a non Scilencia.
 Se nos li tolons dont cest -us,
 Nos li donrons natural us,
 Car cis -us est contre nature
 Mais l'atres seroit par nature

(ll. 2073-2082)

I can find no better solution.
 He will be named Silentius,
 and if it happens by chance
 that his true nature is discovered,
 we will change the -us to -a,
 and she will be named Silentia.
 If we remove this -us from her,
 we will give her more natural custom,
 for this -us is against nature,
 but the other would be according to nature.

Defying what he himself considers a natural continuity between biological sex and outward signifiers of gender, Cador violates grammatical laws of proper linguistic representation. A female body covered by a masculine signifier, the child Silentius is, in the parlance of Alain de Lille, a barbarian in grammar, an over-exaggerated metaphor that bends the rules of expression too far by confusing gender categories, which Alain considers a defect.⁵⁹ At the same time, however, it is this linguistic defect that allows Cador to correct what in the fiction's feudal politics amounts to a physical one: by grafting the suffix *-us* onto the radical Silence, Cador is able to confer upon his daughter, at least artificially,

⁵⁹ Alain describes homosexuality in grammatical terms: "A man turned woman blackens the fair name of his sex. The witchcraft of Venus turns him into a hermaphrodite. He is subject and predicate: one and the same term is given a double application. Man here extends too far the laws of grammar. Becoming a barbarian in grammar, he disclaims the manhood given him by nature. Grammar does not find favour with him but rather a trope. This transposition however, cannot be called a trop. The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects." Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1980) 68. Cf. R. Howard Bloch, "Silence" 85.

that which she lacks – a penis. Creating the linguistic illusion of a physical presence, Cador undermines the same exterior signifiers of sexuality upon which Ebains' new etymologically-inspired law is founded.

The grammatical prosthetic *-us* can thus be understood as the narrative's graphic mark of falsified genealogical continuity, an image recuperated later in the narrative when Silence presents herself to her own father disguised as the jongleur *Malduit*. The significance of this name would be hard to miss, since it literally means "poorly educated." However, despite the clue contained in this name and the vehement claims of an old white-haired man that this *jongleur* is Silence, Cador is not convinced of Malduit's sublimated identity until he receives written confirmation:

Sor diestre espaulle li enseigne
Une crois qu'il ot a enseigne
 Ormais puet li cuens bien croire:
 Donc a baisié son fil en oire. (ll. 3647-50, *emphasis mine*)

He showed his father a mark
 on his right shoulder *in the shape of a cross, as a sign*.
 Then the count could finally believe it,
 and he kissed his son at once.

The only means by which Cador is able to recognize the *jongleur* Malduit as his son, this graphic mark on the body is, like the *-us* of her masculinized name, a contrived signifier of familial succession. It is also the mark of linguistic continuity, for the inheritance that Cador wishes to pass on – his *conté* (earldom) – is almost orthographically indistinguishable from the *conte* (tale) and his holdings include an allowance of *.m. livres* (a thousand pounds/books, l. 1295). Silence, or more precisely, Silentius is not only Cador's son (*fil*), but also the continuation (*fil*) of literary production for the poet. Graced with a seal of the familial *conté*, Silence is next in line to rise to the status of *li cuens* – he who

administers the *conté* and the *conte*. So, the barbarous *-us* of her name and the cross inscribed on her shoulder are marks of linguistic authority, the phallus.⁶⁰

In fact, Silence's nurturing is so complete that there is almost no trace of femininity left, either in her or on her. Raised by Cador's cousin and a seneschal of the count, Silence receives all the instruction of a male child, surpassing even her biologically male peers in traditionally masculine pursuits like jousting and swordplay. In addition, her skin is deliberately altered by frequent exposure to the elements in order to make it more closely resemble what the text deems to be that of a male:

Sel mainne plus sovent el halle
Por cho qu'il violt faire plus malle.
Il a *us d'ome* tant usé
Et cel de feme refusé
Que poi en falt que il n'est malles:
Quanke on en voit est trestolt malles. (ll. 2473-78, *emphasis mine*)

He [the seneschal] took him most often out in the sun,
to make him look more like a male.
The child was so used to *masculine ways*,
and had so refused the feminine,
that he was very nearly a boy;
what could be seen of him was entirely male.

His daughter completely covered with both vestimentary and corporeal signifiers of masculinity (*us d'ome*), Cador seems to have succeeded in his attempt to turn a girl into a boy, in naming the unnameable body of Silence. Thus, the allegorical character Nurture (*Noreture*) – presented as Nature's sworn enemy – claims that she has completely denatured Nature's creation (*Jo l'ai tolte*

⁶⁰ Here, it is interesting to note one of Lacan's descriptions of the phallus: "Because the phallus is not a question of form, or of an image, or of a phantasy, but rather of a signifier, the signifier of desire. In Greek antiquity the phallus is not represented by an organ but as an insignia; it is the ultimate significative object, which appears when all the veils are lifted." Jacques Lacan, *Seminar of April-June, 1958* p. 252, quoted in Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, ed. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) 187.

desnaturee, l. 2595). This boast proclaims not only the failure of Ebains' laws of sexualized representation, but also the success of the poet's efforts to modify language to his will: the verb *desnaturer* is, to borrow Geoffrey of Vinsauf's expression, a *rejuvenated* word,⁶¹ a poetic invention created by transforming the noun *nature* into a verb with the addition of a prefix (*des-*) and a suffix (*-er*). Tailoring signifiers to fit the needs of his tale, the poet transforms language into a pliant instrument of his desire, his *meschine*.

That Which is Not There

The only noticeable threat to this otherwise successful *vita in camera* is Ebains' wife Eufeme, whose unwelcome advances eventually lead to the undoing of Silence's vestimentary disguise and the rest of her sexual ruse.⁶² When Silence first arrives at the court of Ebains, she is enthralled with *li vallés meschine*, a sensual attraction brought on solely by the young person's outer appearance:

La roïne en est molt esprise
Por sa façon, por sa bialté (ll. 3693-3694)

The queen was very taken
by his appearance and his beauty.

This admiration is unfortunante, for much earlier in the tale, Nature warns Silence of the problems that her indeterminate sexuality will create in relationships with members of the female sex:

.m. femes a en ceste vie
Ki de toi ont moult grant envie
Por le bialtet qu'eles i voient,
Car puet scel estre eles i croient

⁶¹ See p. 113.

⁶² Edward J. Gallagher, "The Modernity of *Le Roman de Silence*," *University of Dayton Review* 21.3 (Spring 1992): 35.

Tel cose qu'en toi nen a mie

(ll. 2513-17, *emphasis mine*)

There are a thousand women in this life
who will greatly desire you
for the beauty they will see in you,
*and because they will think to find in you
something that is not there at all.*

Reducing feminine sexual desire to a desire for the sexual member of the male other, Nature bemoans the *cose* that Silence does not really have. Rather, with her masculine dress and the *-us* of her name, possession of this biological signifier is strictly an appearance, an illusion.

This illusion however, is enough to fool Eufemie, whose understanding of signs is based not upon their *hidden word*, but upon the emptiness of their visual representation:

Seroit la roïne sanee
Kist par *sanblant* moult enganee.

(ll. 3721-22, *emphasis mine*)

The queen would be healed,
who was so misled by *appearances*.

This lack of hermeneutic ability allows the queen to fall in love with Silence, and in an effort to seduce her, she feigns illness so that boy-girl will remain by her bedside. Once there, Eufeme proclaims her love for the boy and proposes an amorous exchange of kisses:

Por .i. baisier vos donrai .ii.
Et ne vos sanble bien estrange
Que vos avrés si riche cange?

(ll. 3761-3763)

For one kiss I will give you two.
Does it not seem strange to you
that you should have such a rich exchange?

As was true in the coupling of Cadore and Eufemie, kisses here are the means by which Eufeme hopes to realize the physical union between her and Silence, revealing the 'medicine' that would be the cure for her illness. However, this

exchange is tilted in Silence's favor from the start, and what little Eufeme does receive in return for her lovely and amorous kisses is not what she expected:

Li dona .i. baisier sinple,
Car il n'entent pas, al voir dire,
Con fait baisier ele desire. (ll. 3766-3768)

And he gave her one simple kiss,
and truth to tell he did not understand
what kind of kiss she wanted.

Thus, all that Eufeme encounters in her exchange with Silence is loss, for Silence is unable to give her what she wants. Her desire leads only to deception, for what she desires the other is not able to give, whether this *don* be physical or symbolic.

In fact, the sexual indeterminacy generated by Silence's disguise turns her into the narrative's "object of universal desire."⁶³ In both her masculine and feminine guises, Silence garners the admiration of a score of different characters, both male and female: the king of France, her parents, Ebains, and Eufeme. Thus, when she leaves the country to follow two wandering minstrels who passed the night in the home of the seneschal, everyone laments her loss. Cador, who is under the impression that Silence has been kidnapped by the *jongleurs*, conceives of their crime as such:

Li cuens set que li jogleör
Ont pris del mont le mireör. (ll. 3115-3116)

The count knew that the jongleurs
had taken away the mirror of the world.

Despite the fact that Cador is mistaken in his accusation, this passage is notable for its use of the term *mireör*. The image of the mirror, or *speculum* is a common

⁶³ R. Howard Bloch, "Silence" 89.

one in medieval literature, appearing in several works of fiction from this period, including *Le Roman de la Rose*. In addition, medieval grammar generally conceived of language as an indirect *reflection* of inaccessible truths, and was thus referred to as *grammatica speculativa*.⁶⁴ Here, what Silence reflects, or at least did reflect before her disappearance, is the speech of others, linguistic desire. For without Silence, Cador's kingdom is a land of linguistic crisis where all *joie* (joy) has been lost, a joy which is essentially that ecstasy of hearing ones' own speech reflected back in the mirror that is s/Silence:

Quant il est lius de *mener joie*
 Apertement, si con bien *l'oie*,
 U quant il est lius de parler
 C'on *voit* sa coze devorer,
 Moult grieve mains par certes l'uevre
 Quant on le cuer si en descuevre
 Com li affaires li requiert,
 Et si c'on a le coze afiert.
Mais cist nen osent faire noise (ll. 3035-43, *emphasis mine*)

When it is time to *rejoice* openly,
 so that everyone *hears* it,
 or when it is time to speak
 and one *sees* one's speech received eagerly,
 the matter is much less painful
 when one can open one's heart about it,
 as need requires it,
 and speech is suitable to it.
But these lords did not dare to make any noise.

The rhyming play that associates *joie*, *oie*, and *voit* in this passage is a striking portrait of the poet, whose joy is to emit signs, have these signs be heard, and see them reflected back through the mirror of written language. Deprived of s/Silence – the mirror onto which linguistic desire is reflected – no noise can be made.

⁶⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Le langage, cet inconnu: Une initiation à la linguistique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981) 134-42.

Possessing this mirror, however, does not necessarily guarantee great *joie*. When Silence escapes to France with the *jongleurs*, they are at first enthusiastic about having the child as a companion and apprentice. However, once Silence has learned the poet's trade, she very quickly surpasses her teachers, and the audiences no longer want to listen to anyone else. This enrages the tutors, who accuse *li vallés mescine* of having stolen their poetic knowledge and, along with it, their money:

Duree n'i puet nus avoir:
Cis a emblé nostre savoir. (ll. 3267-3268)

No one can deny it:
This one has stolen our knowledge.

Nostre damages doblera,
Car nostre avoir enportera (ll. 3277-3278)

He will double our loss,
for he will take away our wealth.

Differing by only a single letter, the *savoir* and the *avoir* of the poets are nearly identical and, as in the prologue of this text, the wealth in question is composed of *marcs* (marks, l. 3356). Thus, the *avoir* that Silence steals is not only monetary currency, but also the linguistic currency of poetic signifiers, while the purloined knowledge (*savoir*), is the ability to manipulate and control them. In an attempt to reappropriate this treasure, the poets plot to take Silence's head, the physical locus of this stolen (*s*)*avoir*. However, this plan ends in failure as Silence, who is now a master of signs, is able to interpret a dream in which dogs attempt to tear her from limb to limb as a foretelling of her masters' scheme:

Silences entent et escolte.
Or n'est il pas de cho en dolte,
Que li doi culviert desperé
N'eüsscent son songe averé
Des chiens dont il avoit songié

Se il n'eüscent le congié.

(ll. 3403-3408)

Silence listened and heard.
He was no longer in any doubt
that the two desperate villains
would have made his come dream true,
the dream about the dogs,
if they hadn't plotted aloud together.

Here then, Silence uses the same type of dream-interpretation that Freud equates with "hitting on a clever idea," an inventive, poetic interpretation of the dream material.⁶⁵ Listening and hearing, Silence's linguistic quietude is what allows her to avoid harm: her stillness creates a space for poetic activity.⁶⁶ As a result, she is able to walk away with more marks than each of the *jongleurs*: *Et l'enfens .c. mars en depart/A çals en lasce plus de .c.* (And the boy took a hundred marks for his share, leaving them over a hundred, ll. 3474-3475). It is in fact Silence – the *mirror of the world* – who steals something, not the *jongleurs*. Exchanging signs with the poets, but never returning a like amount, Silence is a symbol of the silent mirror of language that refracts rather than reflects desire.

The Silent Truth

From the moment when Silence is first given her adaptable surname by Cador, *Le Roman de Silence* taunts readers with the possibility of seeing beyond this disguise. Like her masculine clothes, Silence's name constitutes a paradoxical attempt to stitch over a silent fullness and recuperate it within the

⁶⁵ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* 97. See p. 3 ff.

⁶⁶ Martin Heidegger suggests that both motion and stillness are vital characteristics of a poetic 'presence.' "What is moved is brought to the stand and position of a presencing (verbal), brought in a bringing-forth. This can occur in the manner of *physis* (allowing something to emerge of itself) or in the manner of *poesis* (to produce and represent something). The presence of presencing, whether it is something at rest or in motion, receives its essential determination when motion and, with it, rest as fundamental characteristics of Being originating from presencing are understood as one of its modes. Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 5.

confines of language. Silentius, which is *contre nature* (against nature, l. 2081) can, says Cadore, be replaced by Silentia, which would be *par nature* (by nature, l. 2082). Yet in almost the same breath, we are told that removal of the suffix *-us* would grant the child more *natural us* (natural custom, l. 2080). Natural and unnatural are thus not so clearly separated as other passages in the text would have us believe. Even the poet seems uncertain of which side of this debate he supports. After a particularly heated exchange between Nature and Nurture, he interrupts the tale in order to address his audience directly:⁶⁷

Con di me tu? Qui sommes nos? (l. 2416)

What do you have to say about it? Who are we?

Often, the purpose of such interrogative exchanges is not to solicit a response but to support a particular position or claim advocated by the poet.⁶⁸ In this instance, however, a definitive response is not forthcoming. For while we are told a few verses later that “Nature rules over Nurture” (*Nature signorist desor Noretur*, l. 2423-2424), the fiction itself repeatedly asserts the opposite, suggesting that beings can be “completely denatured” (*tolt desnaturée*, l. 2595).

⁶⁷ Though relatively rare in contemporary fiction, such deliberate breaks are often used as a means of maintaining the attention and goodwill first established in the prologue of medieval texts. Like some of the other rhetorical strategies discussed in the previous two chapters (self-denigration, brevity, etc.), such feigned dialogues are part of the poet’s attempt to obtain the attention and goodwill of an audience a task most often undertaken in the prologue. See Curtius’ chapter entitled “Topics of the Exordium,” where he discusses many of the poetic tools used in the *captatio benevolentiae*. Certainly, it would be easy to ascribe these intrusions to what many consider to be the oral foundations of vernacular romance. However, to limit our understanding to the practical realm would be to occlude their poetical function as part of a written manuscript.

⁶⁸ Such is often the case in the *Roman de Silence*. See, for example, verses just before the one in question (v. ll. 2307-2309), where the narrator offers his own, emphatic “Oil” (Yes!) in reply to his query. The general rhetorical term for this category of figures is *interrogatio* (Gr. *erotema*), an appellation which encompasses what is referred to in contemporary parlance as a ‘rhetorical question.’ For Quintilian, this passage would be an example of what he calls *communicatio*, a moment when an orator takes an audience into consultation (...*quae dicitur communicatio, cum aut ipsos adversarios consulimus...*, IX, ii, 20).

Working against itself, the narrative seems to preclude any answer to this critical question.

That events fall so resolutely in favor of Nature during the closing episodes of *Le Roman de Silence* thus seems more than a little suspect. Furthermore, given the fact that Silence manages at one point to deceive even her own father, it is somewhat surprising that Cador and Eufemie's hoax is discovered at all. However, the narrative holds what amounts to a literary trump card: the all-seeing, all-knowing Merlin.⁶⁹ Thinking she has found the perfect means to a lasting revenge of her unrequited desires, Eufeme convinces Ebains to send the *vallés mescine* on a search for Merlin who, says the queen, claimed that he could be captured only by a woman's trick (*engien de feme*, l. 5803):

Mais il le pora .m. ans quierre
Anchois que il le prenge mie.
U cho n'est mie prophezie
Icho que Merlins dist adonques,
U cis revenra mais onques. (ll. 5814-5818)

But he could seek him for a thousand years,
before he could ever catch him.
Either what Merlin said then
was not a true prophecy,
or Silence will never return.

She is, of course, mistaken in her reasoning, yet another tactical error caused by her inability to read past the exterior signifiers of masculine gender that cover Silence's female body. Thus, assisted by the goddess Nature (who claims that Merlin has also been turned from her righteous path), Silence does, in fact, manage to capture the wizard.

⁶⁹ This is one of the traditional attributes of his fictional character. It is the seventh book of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *L'Estoire de Merlin* that contains accounts of his various prophecies.

Yet Silence's unexpected return to the court does not immediately provoke suspicion regarding her biological sex. Rather, as Ebains' reaction to the arrival of the boy-girl and her captive shows, it is the veracity of Merlin's prophecies that is called into question:

Or est il viers Merlin espris
Por cho qu'il dist ja n'estroit pris
Se ne fust par engien de feme (ll. 6177-6179)

He was astonished at Merlin,
who said that he would never be captured
except by a woman's trick.

Because the continuity between biological sex and appearance remains an incontestable truth for the king, Merlin's soothsaying is necessarily so much *joglerie*. So, when Merlin presents the court with a whole new set of prophecies, they are subjected to a harsh scrutiny of their content. Most prominent among these is the allegation that Silence fooled him with her boy's dress (*Silences ra moi escarni/En wallés dras, c'est vertés fine*, ll. 6534-6535), a claim that verified by the disrobing of Silence (along with a nun who Merlin says is also guilty of deceptive dress):

Li rois en est encor en dolte.
Fait Merlin fermement tenir
Et dont a fait avant venir
La nonain, sil fait despollier,
Et Silence despollier roeve.
Tost si com Merlins dist les trueve. (ll. 6568-6573)

The king was still in doubt.
He had Merlin firmly restrained
and then had the nun come forward,
and had her stripped,
and requested Silence to strip.
They found the two just as Merlin had said.

Like the other prophecies, this one is found to be accurate, with Merlin's words corresponding to the physical evidence uncovered by the court. As a result,

Ebains proclaims that the actual sexual identity of *li vallés mescine* can now be seen: *Nos veöns bien que tu iés feme* (We see clearly that you are a woman, l. 6586). The truth, it would seem, has been revealed.

However, the reliability of this proclamation as a guarantor of the truth is questionable at best. First, her body is never really described in the fiction, the veracity of its sex “guaranteed by the king’s authority, not by evidence on the body.”⁷⁰ In addition, the text itself problematizes the signifying power of the body, reducing it to yet another piece of clothing, another imperfect disguise:

Li cors n’est mais for sapelliere (l. 1845)

The body is nothing but another rough garment

If this is so, then not even nakedness reveals anything.⁷¹ Rather, it hides an identity which cannot be signified, cannot be explicitly written or said. In this sense, *any* covering of the body is an illusion, with its propriety based upon a body which is itself an abstraction. So, when Silence is returned to her ‘natural’ appearance, even this appearance betrays its supplemental nature:

D’illuec al tierc jor que Nature
Ot *recovree* sa droiture
Si prist Nature a *repolir*
Par tolt le cors et a tolir
Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle. (ll. 6669-73, *emphasis mine*)

⁷⁰ Peggy McCracken, “‘The Boy Who Was a Girl’: Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*,” *Romanic Review* 85 (1994): 535.

⁷¹ Silence herself alludes to this fact earlier in the tale. Enraged by Silence’s manly lifestyle, Nature enjoins the boy-girl to take up more feminine activities, including sewing. Silence listens carefully, but ultimately rejects any possibility of an identity other than the one at the level of the signifier –us. “My name is Silentius, I think, or I am someone else than I was. But this I know well, by my right hand, that I cannot be any other! So I am Silentius, it seems to me, or I am no one [naked].” (*Silencius ai non, jo cui, / U jo sui altres qu ne fui. / Mais cho sai jo bien, par ma destre, / Que jo ne puis pas altres estre! / Donques sui jo Scientius, / Cho mest avis, u jo sui nus*, ll. 2533-2538). Were she stripped of the name Silentius and her masculine clothes, Silence would not only be naked, she would be *no one*, the source of her identity not the immutable corporeal features her body, but rather her social comportment. For further information on this topic, the reader is directed to consult Roger Dragonetti’s comments on this topic in *Le Mirage des Sources* 50.

On the third day after Nature
had *regained* [*recovered*] her right,
she began to *reembellish*
Silence's whole body, and to remove
everything masculine about her.

One set of signifiers that simply takes the place of another, even Silence's *natural* gender appearance is an embellishment. The verb *repolir*, literally the recovering of the skin with hair, figuratively reflects the re-writing of Silence's masculine name that is the other mark of her supposed return to a state *par nature*:

Silence *atornent* come feme.
Segnor, que vos diroie plus?
Ains ot a non Scilensiüs:
Ostés est -us, mis i est -a,
Si est només Scilentiä. (ll. 6664-68, *emphasis mine*)

They *dressed* [*rearranged*] Silence as a woman.
Lords, what more should I say?
Before, her name was Silentius;
the -us was removed and -a put in its place,
and she was named Silencia.

Similar to Nature's reembellishment of Silence's body, the substitution of the suffix *-a* is but an exchange of signifiers, with neither one able to express what lies beneath them. Defying accurate categorization and classification, Silence's name is inherently non-grammatical, and any attempt to make it so merely reveals the impropriety of the words used.

Just as the various disguises and names that attempt to enclose Silence with vestimentary and linguistic signifiers meet with failure, so too, does the poet's desire to tailor his verses strictly to the measure of silence – that ultimate articulation – end in division in resignation. The final word in the narrative – the one with which he ends a poem for which he claims there will be not a word left to say – does not indicate rest or repose, but continued longing, *désirent*:

Beneöis soit aui le vos conte,

Beneöis soit qui fist le conte.
A cials, a celes qui l'oïrent
Otroit Jhesus cho qu'il desirent. (ll. 6703-6706)

Blessed be he who tells the story,
And blessed be he who wrote it.
And to all those who hear it
May Jesus grant them what they desire.

Confronted with the task of naming that which is unnamable, of turning absence into presence, the poet is only able to desire, and not name his desire, for the fullness of silence is present only in its absence, in the termination of the poet's verse.

Conclusion

*Nay, nothing, all is said.
His tongue is now a stringless instrument.*

— William Shakespeare, *Richard II*

There is, paradoxically, much more that could be said about silence, but the preceding chapters have given voice to a number of fundamental ideas regarding this pervasive linguistic phenomenon. Most notably, the critical readings in this study have shown that silence, though unpronounced and immaterial, plays a considerable role in the structural disposition and signifying potential of language. For the Middle Ages in general and French medieval narrative in particular, its most provocative attribute is its lack of any definite attributes: nothing and potentially everything, silence is the only signifier for that which, by default, desire, or design, lies beyond linguistic reach. An indescribable no-thing serving the expressive purposes of priests and poets alike, its empty volume may – similar to Saint Augustine’s precious *vasa* – hold all manner of content, from the solemnly sacred to the unabashedly profane.¹ The specific import of silence in *La Vie de Saint Alexis*, *Le Conte du Graal*, and *Le Roman de Silence* is therefore intimately tied to each text’s unique combination of thematic material, cultural influences, and compositional structures; the gaps between its words are just as distinct as the words themselves.

Yet while particular fictional, social, and structural imperatives in each of these vernacular romances make a uniform definition of silence impossible, there are important similarities in how all three conceive of and communicate this

¹ See p. 26 ff.

‘presence of absence.’ At a most basic level, textual manifestations of silence are perceptible in the physical lacunae – missing lines, torn pages, and forgotten words – so characteristic of medieval manuscripts.² Indeed, compositional anomalies abound in the narratives studied here: the list compiled by Lewis Thorpe for his edition of *Le Roman de Silence* alone fills five complete pages.³ Although such gaps are in many cases unintentional, it is often extremely difficult to draw the line between compositional mishap and poetic manipulation. What appears to be a chance textual defect may, after further consideration, seem the tacit reflection of a carefully plotted fictional construct. This is, for example, true of the *Graal* conclusion, where an overt structural lack in the narrative’s final verses is also part of a more deliberate commentary on the intricate architecture of linguistic expression.⁴ But whether the result of accidental defacement, scribal error, or deliberate modification, these visible silences all attest to a fundamental instability at language’s very core, what Lacan calls the fissure (*la faille*) of human discourse – a representational chasm between our unconscious desires and their manifest expression.⁵

² The theoretical relevance of such issues is by no means confined to medieval literature. In fact, our newest forms of ‘textual’ diffusion have much more in common with medieval models of writing than with contemporary publications. Like medieval manuscripts, an Internet website or electronic text is highly susceptible to modifications over time, a temporal evolution of writing that is now considerably more accelerated than in the Middle Ages. The activity commonly called *surfing* is really nothing more than *reading*, with the added risk that pages may disappear or passages may be modified or amended between consultations.

³ Lewis Thorpe, ed., *Le Roman de Silence* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1972) 236-240.

⁴ Analysis of this passage from the *Le Conte du Graal* is spread throughout chapters three and four, but particularly on p. 162 ff. A similar thing happens a passage from the Hildesheim *Alexis* in which a line that would have contradicted much of the surrounding thematic development regarding the saint’s ascetic motivations is – though present in other Old French manuscripts of *La Vie de Saint Alexis* – ‘missing’ from *L*. See p. 65 f.

⁵ For Lacan, this fault marks an intrusion of unconscious, sublimated desires in the symbolic order. See p. 2 ff. for a more detailed explanation of the rapport between silence and the psychoanalytic unconscious.

These cracks in the textual and fictional facades of writing also have a very significant effect upon how a narrative is read and understood. In fact, the question of whether or not such textual silences are intentional is ultimately irrelevant when it comes to the reception and comprehension of a medieval manuscript. As one half of the linguistic matrix within which the poet positions a text, his silences deserve no less attention than his substantive signifiers. When we, as readers, come upon these grammatical and thematic impasses, the rends in narrative fabric must somehow be pieced together if we are to catch a glimpse of what Jeremy Bentham calls “a discourse of indefinite length.”⁶ Therefore, the moments at which the text loses hold of itself are also the moments at which the act of reading becomes most crucial. Indeed, a willingness to participate in the interpretational evolution of medieval narrative is for the narrator of *Le Roman de Silence* essential; in the opening verses of his prologue, he admonishes those who control the text to keep it from falling into the hands of people who “have no idea of what it shows” (*Ne sevent preu a quoi il monte*, l. 8). A sort of vantage point from which readers are invited to survey the fictional landscape, writing’s lack is its true creative locus, a space from within which new textual and linguistic relationships may be envisioned and brought into view.

Silence is, in other words, the linguistic guarantor of fictional longevity, a structural flexibility that allows a narrative to be continuously renewed through the minds and voices of its readers. In this sense, silence is the mark of the poet’s

⁶ Jeremy Bentham, 68. Although Bentham on the fictional significance and interpretive usefulness of words, his remarks point to a continuity between silence and fictional meaning: “And thus it is by bringing into view other words, in the character of words of which, though not pronounced, the import was meant to be conveyed by the word which was pronounced, that a single word may be made to have the effect, and thus, as it were, comprise the import of an indefinite number of other words...”

most stinging failure as well as his greatest success: although it signals that point at which efforts to name and explain the silent unknown of his fictional material are abandoned, the fact that something remains unsaid also leaves the way open for future attempts to bring it into language. Furthermore, because it is to readers that these textual blanks implicitly call for new interpretations and ideas, his also represents the textual space in which the subjectivity of the reader takes hold.⁷ “To read,” says Roland Barthes, “is to struggle to name,”⁸ and it is within this nominative struggle that one may experience something akin to the childish game of hide-and-speak that is for Freud and Lacan such a telling illustration of the subject’s rapport with language.⁹ For when a subject names a thing that had previously been passed over in silence, or gives voice to a new idea, or proffers a new explanation to an old mystery, there is both gain and loss. As in the scene from *Le Conte du Graal* in which Perceval first pronounces his own name, discovery is followed by deception. What was a subjective (personal) expression soon becomes the property of all, itself liable to be the subject of revision and commentary. Both intimate and alienating, silence will, in the end, always win out. But it is only by taking a chance, by opening oneself up to the harsh sting of

⁷ Brown’s interpretation of Hamlet’s final words offers a similar interpretation of the significance of literary silence: “A more acceptable answer might be that the audience, and each individual member of that audience, is left to interpret as they wish, according to their own “business and desire, / Such as it is” (I.v.136-37).” “The most unequivocal impression given by the hero at the close of this tragedy is that his mind is unvanquished: his imagination is still exploring strange shapes and future eventualities – what is still unknown, and even silence itself.” John Russell Brown, “Multiplicity of Meaning in the Last Moments of *Hamlet*,” *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 16-33. Also see Mark Taylor, ““The Rest is Silence,’ Or Is It? Hamlet’s Last Words,” *Upstart Crow* 17 (1997): 78-86. Yoshioka Fumio, “Silence, Speech, and Spectacle in *Hamlet*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 31 (1996) 1-33.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 92.

⁹ I am, of course, referring to the *Fort! Da!* episode that is more fully explored earlier in this study. See p. 8 ff.

criticism that the subject of language can assert himself, sharing new ideas and inspiring even more. I hope this dissertation has done just that.

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Appendix: Medieval Illustration



Frontispiece of the Hildesheim "L" Manuscript of *La Vie de Saint Alexis*

Vita

A native of Michigan, Evan Bibbee attended Albion College and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from that institution in 1992, majoring in both French and Economics and Management. In 1994, Evan joined the master's program in what was at that time the Department of French and Italian at Louisiana State University, accepting an appointment as graduate teaching assistant. During his initial tenure at L.S.U., he served as graduate representative for his department and received the department's Outstanding Medieval Studies award in the spring of 1996. During this same period, he presented his first conference paper at the Comparative Literature Graduate Student Conference at Harvard University. Shortly thereafter, Evan left Baton Rouge to participate in one of the department's teaching exchanges, working as a university lecturer in the English Department of the Faculté de Lettres in Besançon, France. While there, he also co-founded an English club and served as its faculty adviser. Returning to Baton Rouge from France in the fall of 1997, he defended his thesis, *Tailoring the Text: Sexuality and Writing in Le Roman de Silence*, and received the Master of Arts degree in May of 1998. From January of 1998 to August of 1999, Evan lived in Strasbourg, France, working as an account manager in the private sector. In August of 1999, he returned to Louisiana State University to pursue his doctoral degree, and in the fall of 2000, was hired by the French Studies Department as a full-time instructor. Since then, he has completed his first major publication, a translation of Ollivier Dyens' book *Metal and Flesh* (MIT Press) and presented a paper at Brown University's Equinoxes conference. In May of 2002, he defended his dissertation, *Relicent romans: Silence and Writing in La Vie de Saint Alexis, Le*

Conte du Graal, *and* Le Roman de Silence. Evan is currently teaching in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota.