

Silencing a woman's accusation of attempted rape in Johannes de Alta Silva's *Dolopathos*

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Abstract:

The story cycle *The Seven Sages of Rome* is known for showing how different characters tell and interpret the short stories embedded in its frame narrative according to their own interests and biases. The frame narrative has so far been excluded from this reading, with all trust placed in the omniscient heterodiegetic narrator at the expense of the female protagonist. This article opens new research perspectives by suggesting that the heterodiegetic narrator in one of the texts in the *Seven Sages* tradition, Johannes de Alta Silva's Latin *Dolopathos* (c. 1184–1212), might be unreliable, and that the discredited female protagonist's voice is as worthy of being heard as the other characters and narrators. This is particularly provocative insofar as the woman's narrative contains the accusation that she has been raped, which is framed as false by the narrator.

Key words: *The Seven Sages of Rome*; Johannes de Alta Silva, *Dolopathos*; rape; narrative; silence; gender; reliability.

A woman brings her stepson to trial for attempted rape, providing as evidence her physical injuries, her testimony and several female witnesses. The accused does not mount a defence, and the judge finds him guilty. A team of top-class legal scholars then presents circumstantial evidence aimed at discrediting both the woman and the judge. They manage to get the verdict overturned on procedural grounds by arguing that the stepson had not been granted a proper hearing. The stepson then makes an out-of-court public statement denying all charges, claiming that it was the woman who had initiated the sexual contact. Without any formal retrial, this turns public opinion against her and clears his name.

The 'he said/she said' scenario of this case, in which what 'she said' is ultimately dismissed as false, will sound familiar from the overwhelming number of contemporary rape trials that do not lead to a conviction of the accused. Institutional bias places the burden of evidence on the female complainant, who is forced to undergo verbal and physical examinations that echo the power hierarchy of the rape, meaning that their testimony is less likely to be believed. Accelerated by the #metoo movement, the voices of female survivors of sexual violence are slowly gaining greater credibility, with the trial of Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2019 seen as a watershed moment. Despite this recent progress, the conviction rates for rape and sexual harassment trials are still very low, with the 2020 case against Alex Salmond, former First Minister of Scotland, providing a prominent example of a trial that ended in acquittal.

The trial for attempted rape summarised above, however, takes place not in contemporary Edinburgh or New York, but in one of the most widely distributed fictional narratives of the Middle Ages, the story cycle *The Seven Sages of Rome*. In the historical reality of medieval Europe, rape was not always considered a crime, as the question of a woman's consent to sexual intercourse was often thought to be

irrelevant, though chances of a conviction increased if the woman was married, aristocratic and/or showed signs of physical injury.¹ In this story, however, a queen or empress accuses her royal husband's son of attempting to force her to have sexual intercourse without her consent, which is unambiguously considered a crime punishable by death by the characters in the story-world. The guilty verdict is nonetheless overturned and the accused man found to be blameless. Modern scholarship has been complicit in silencing the queen, insofar as it has never even taken her accusation of attempted rape seriously. Critics have taken at face value the omniscient heterodiegetic narrator's claim that the accusation is false and that instead the queen had initiated sexual contact and was rebuffed by her stepson. This one-sidedness is particularly striking insofar as research agrees that *The Seven Sages of Rome* is centrally concerned with the power structures by which truth is established, by which certain voices are heard and others are silenced, and by which narratives can be interpreted in multiple ways.² Numerous publications have made this point with reference to the shorter narratives that are embedded in the story cycle, but never extended it to the omniscient narrator's account of the rape accusation in the framing story.

I will argue in the following that we do have grounds to doubt this narrator's reliability, and will propose a new reading that hears the woman's voice. This is provocative, as it goes against deeply entrenched modern understandings of the contract at work in fiction, by which recipients trust an omniscient narrator unless they have reason to consider them unreliable. I will suggest that the latter is the case, and that moreover the entire text encourages reflecting on narrators' potential biases and interests. The text's poetics rejects the idea that there is such a thing as one definitive account of any event, using the sexual encounter as a paradigmatic example of an event which has more than one potential interpretation. Attention to these narrative truth-making techniques means that the woman's rape accusation can be seen as one possible valid account of the sexual encounter. On the level of narrative mediation, which I will turn to first, the heterodiegetic narrator unambiguously discredits the female accuser by stating that her charges are false, her injuries self-inflicted and her witnesses part of a conspiracy. Realising the narrator's bias and the strategies by which they claim a superior position can lead us to re-evaluate the queen's account in a way that is more in line with the text's poetics of multiple voices.³ In the plot, as the next part of this chapter shows, the woman's silencing is paradoxically due to the deployment of silence by the male defendant. His

¹ For an overview of historical understandings of rape in medieval Europe, see Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, pp. 112–16. – Thank you to Jessica Hines and Erik Wade for encouraging me to be bold in my argument, and to the editors and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on this chapter.

² This has been shown for versions of the *Seven Sages* in several languages: Mallette, 'The Seven Sages of Rome'; Toth, 'Authorship and Authority'; Weisl-Shaw, 'The power of woman's words'; Velázquez, 'Didacticism and the Ends of Storytelling'; Bollo-Panadero, 'Poder, palabra y realidad'; Obermaier, 'Zyklische Rahmenerzählung'; Bolens, 'Narrative Use and the Practice of Fiction'; Haug, 'Exempelsammlungen im narrativen Rahmen'; Steinmetz, 'Narrative Exempelkritik'. Yasmina Foehr-Janssens comes closest to arguing that the queen's claims against the son might be true on a symbolic level insofar as it expresses the stepson's treacherous disrespect to his father that would be on a par with taking his wife, but even she does not consider that the queen's accusation might be factually correct: Foehr-Janssens, *Le temps des fables*, p. 95. On the importance of who speaks about a female character, see also Antonia Murath's article in this issue.

³ I refer to the narrator initially using the gender-neutral pronoun 'they', though there is no clear distinction between the narrator and the male author persona speaking in the introductory sections.

silence calls forth a string of eloquent legal experts and creates a privileged community of male scholars who complicate the queen's account. It also turns the sexual encounter in the bedroom into a secret, which obscures the female complainant's powerful accusation. Understanding this mechanism reveals that speech does not necessarily have greater agency than silence, and allows us to reclaim the queen's voice.

Not only the accusation of attempted rape, but *The Seven Sages of Rome* as a whole deserves much more attention. Hugely successful throughout Europe and the Middle East in the medieval and early modern periods, *The Seven Sages* is now rarely studied even amongst specialists. Hundreds of manuscripts and hundreds of print editions survive from the 11th to the 17th centuries, with particularly dense manuscript clusters in what is now Southern Germany and Northern France. In all redactions, the text consists of a frame narrative into which seven or more shorter narratives are embedded. Several of the embedded narratives are also widely transmitted independently, such as the tales of the pound of flesh, of the holy greyhound, of the seven swans and of the swan knight. Perhaps of Persian origin, the *Seven Sages of Rome* was transmitted in over twenty European and 'Middle Eastern' languages, including English, Scots, German, Icelandic, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Czech, Polish, Armenian, Dutch, Hungarian, Danish and Yiddish. Some of the oldest extant versions include Syriac, Greek, Latin, French and Hebrew versions, but philologists have yet to agree on their genealogy and precise dating.⁴ In the following, I will work with the Latin *Dolopathos* as the earliest version to have been securely dated, a sophisticated and accessible redaction that has a strong interest in gendered voices. It was dedicated by its author, the otherwise unattested monk Johannes or Jean from the Cistercian abbey of Alta Silva or Haute Seille, to one Bertrand, who was bishop of Metz c. 1180–1212. Haute Seille became part of this diocese in 1184, giving us quite precisely the period in which what the dedication calls the 'opusculum de rege et septem sapientibus' (The little work of the king and the seven sages) must have been composed: between 1184 and 1212. It is attested in at least eleven manuscripts, five of which form the basis of Alfred Hilka's 1912 edition, which I shall use here.⁵

The need to review scholarship's trust in the omniscient narrator is especially clear when one sees the *Dolopathos* in the context of its sources and cognates from beyond what is now called Europe. *The Seven Sages'* poetics and some of its content is close to that of other story cycles with embedded (and sometimes doubly embedded) narratives told by various characters. This genre is common in Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian, with the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* and its Arabic version *Kalila and Dimna*, and *The Arabian Nights* as famous examples. These texts share a poetics of multiple, often competing voices telling the different embedded narratives, and sophisticated reflections on how truth is established.⁶ They were adapted into Latin and other European languages throughout the Middle Ages, but their poetics of openness and interpretive multiplicity is now often misunderstood or neglected. Another important context primarily stemming from a South East Asian, North African and Middle Eastern tradition for *The Seven Sages* is the

⁴ For an overview of some of the tradition, see Krönung, 'Fighting with Tales'; and Gerdes, 'Sieben weise Meister'.

⁵ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka. This edition includes descriptions of six manuscripts; an updated fuller list of the eleven manuscripts is provided in Losert, *Überschreitung der Geschlechtergrenzen?* pp. 110–22.

⁶ See, for example, Obermaier, 'Verborgener und offenbarer Sinn'.

Secrets literature, also widely adapted and copied in Europe. These texts, such as *The Secrets of Women* and *The Secrets of Secrets*, are compendia of knowledge, here on gynaecology and leadership, that also present embedded narratives or exempla. As I shall show, there are overlaps especially between *The Seven Sages*' and *The Secrets of Women*'s epistemological functioning, which relies on an obfuscation of relatively straightforward facts about and knowledge of women to create a superior male scholarly community with a more authoritative voice.

The narrator silences the female protagonist's voice

Imagine your partner emerges from their bedroom with lacerated cheeks and ripped clothes and tells you something like this about your troubled teenage son:

'Cum enim hodie solam in thalamo haberet, oportunitatem sui sceleris se ratus inuenisse, ut equus e frenis – quod etiam dicere confundor – in me insiluit uolens me uiolenter stupor illico maculare. Ego autem tantum execrans facinus quantum potui petulantis reppuli impetum, sed ille totis uiribus utens, dum quod prece nequiuerat ui extorquere cupit, me ut uidetis unguibus lacerauit. Videns autem ego quod michi libidinosus preualeret, cum aliud agere non possem, fortiter exclamaui: porro undique accurrere puelle ceperunt meque ab insano liberarunt.'

'Today, when he found me alone in the bed chamber, realizing that he had discovered an opportunity for his crime, like an unbridled stallion (I blush to say it) he leaped upon me to defile me with rape. Cursing the crime I tried to repel the attack of his lust as best I could. When he found he could not obtain his desire by pleading or violence, with all his strength he ripped my face with his fingernails, as you can see. I realized that my strength could not restrain his lust, and I could do nothing but shout for help. These women ran in to help me and free me from the madman.'⁷

This speech is of course the queen's from the *Dolopathos*' frame narrative, who makes a powerful case both rhetorically and physically, accusing the stepson of attempted rape. She gives a well-crafted statement, detailing a clear and plausible timeline of events, emphasising her attempts at resistance with reference to the physical evidence, citing a plausible motivation of the attacker and for her behaviour and introducing eye-witnesses. She ends with a direct plea appealing to the right authority for justice, and then silently waits for a reaction:

'Super tanto igitur scelere et obprobrio coram omnibus qui assunt principibus a te, o rex, iusticiam et iudicium expeto.' Et hiis dictis conticuit.

'Now before all your nobles, O King, I ask justice and judgment from you for this terrible crime.' When she had said this she was silent.

The silence she leaves at the end allows the King room to respond with his judgement, which he does. On the level of the plot, her speech in combination with her evident physical injuries and the ensuing silence initially has a powerful effect: it convinces her husband – who also embodies the judiciary – and his advisers of the factual accuracy of her words, and leads him to sentence his own son to death.

⁷ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, pp. 40–1; translated into English as: Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 36.

On the level of narrative mediation, however, the addressees of this story never get to take this woman's powerful accusation seriously. Her credibility is undermined because the omniscient heterodiegetic narrator has already framed her as unreliable before she even begins her speech, telling us unambiguously that she attempts to entice her stepson to sex, that her female friend plans the conspiracy and that the injuries are self-inflicted. The sexual encounter takes place when the queen's stepson, here called Lucinius, who had been away from the court of his father, King Dolopathos of Sicily, finds out about the death of his mother and is summoned home to find his father had since remarried a nameless woman. Lucinius had been studying in Rome with Virgil and other scholars from the age of seven for seven years. Virgil makes Lucinius promise not to speak until he sees him again, and Lucinius keeps that promise, explaining to his father's court through writing on tablets that he is unable to talk out of grief for his mother. His father is distraught at his muteness, as this makes his planned coronation of his heir Lucinius impossible. His courtiers advise (in line with medical knowledge of the time) that the young man's grief be treated with good music, food, alcohol and women. The queen offers to administer the treatment in return for half of the kingdom, to which the king consents. The narrator then tells us that she initially sends in her female entourage, but when that fails, she tries to seduce him herself. In the narrator's account, this also fails, and instead, she falls in love with Lucinius. When she is about to die from lovesickness, one of her female friends incites her against him, making her resent his rejection and pointing out that she is about to lose her political influence to him. The friend advises her to accuse him of attempted rape and to inflict the physical injuries on herself. The queen carries out the plan with the support of her maids. Lucinius does not speak to defend himself, and Dolopathos believes his wife's false accusations and sentences his son to death. Then one after the other, seven wise men from Rome experienced in the practice of law appear, and they each tell an embedded exemplum to persuade the king that he should not execute his son. They each manage to buy him one day's stay of execution. The eighth and last scholar to appear is Virgil himself, who makes the crucial procedural argument that Lucinius did not have a chance to defend himself, which renders the verdict invalid. As Lucinius is allowed to speak again upon seeing him, he now accuses the queen and her attendants of attempting to seduce him and plotting against him. The mob that had gathered for his execution turns against her and her friends, and kills them immediately. Lucinius now ascends to the throne as planned, and later is converted to Christianity in long conversations with a holy man.

By the time the queen makes her speech, the *Dolopathos'* addressees have no room to hear her account as anything other than a lie. Recipients of fiction by default believe the narrator, unless they have evidence to indicate that this narrator is unreliable. The latter is the case here. As Sabine Obermaier and many others have pointed out, story cycles such as *The Seven Sages* and the closely related *Book of Sinbad* as well as the *Arabian Nights* and *Kalila and Dimna* play with a layering of multiple embedded narrators to show how different characters interpret stories differently and still never exhaust the potential readings of a story.⁸ Highlighting the complicated ways in which truth is narratively constructed and never absolute is precisely the point of this poetics. Scholars, however, have never acknowledged that the unreliable narrator of the

⁸ Obermaier, 'Verborgener Sinn'.

sexual encounter in the bedroom may not only be the queen, but also the heterodiegetic narrator of the frame narrative. Unreliability has narratologically been defined in different ways.⁹ Ansgar Nünning provides a general definition of an unreliable narrator as one whose values contradict that of the recipient.¹⁰ This pertains here, even though there is no contradiction between the narrator and the overall value-system of the equally misogynistic text as a whole. The narrator expresses a strong negative moral judgement of the queen and her maids, and idealises Lucinius, his father and his male teachers in gendered terms. They report the aftermath of sexual encounter, for example, like this:

Sic ergo uertitur in crudelitatem amor, uertitur in furorem, uere ut ait poeta: ‘uarium et mutabile semper femina.’ [...] Conglomerantur in unum faatrices sceleris [...] Medea, o Medea seuior, trunculentior Clitamnestra omniumque inpudentior mulierum, quid agis? | Et ecce illa uirulenta colubra cum caterua minorum colubrarum de cauerna prodiens.

Her love was changed to cruelty and madness. Truly as the poet says: ‘Woman is always a varied and changing thing.’ [...] Her conspirators in crime gathered together. [...] O more savage than Medea, fiercer than Clytamnestra and most shameless of all women, what are you doing? [...] suddenly that venomous snake with her horde of lesser snakes came forth from her cave.¹¹

This is not just a negative view of an individual character, but of femininity: the queen is fickle as ‘woman’ (‘femina’) always is; she is compared to notoriously violent fictional women (not men); she is addressed as ‘the most shameless of all women’, not of all humans (‘omnium[...] inpudentior mulierum’); and both her and her female attendants are compared to the grammatically feminised poisonous ‘snakes’ (‘colubrae’). This misogyny undermines the narrator’s credibility concerning their moral judgement. This might not affect their credibility regarding the presentation of the facts of the storyworld, if we follow Obermaier’s distinction (based on Tom Kindt) between mistrusting a narrator’s value judgement (axiological unreliability) and mistrusting their representation of facts (mimetic unreliability).¹² Facts and judgments, however, are often closely related, in particular in accounts of sexual encounters without witnesses, so that this distinction is only of limited use. In the *Dolopathos*, I suggest, the narrator’s axiological bias, specifically their hatred or fear of women, is so extreme that it may well lead them to misrepresent even the facts of events in the storyworld – as far as we can speak of facts in a fictional universe – accurately, too. The seduction scene is certainly not an unbiased observer’s account. Instead, it reads like a male sexual fantasy of humiliating a stunning and powerful woman who is desired by all men:

Hanc sic cultam, sic paratam si uideres, putares alteram Helenam te uidere, pro qua iterum merito totus Oriens commoueretur. [...] puellis a thalamo exclusis iuuenem inermem, omnino pudicitie protectum armis aggreditur, obsidet undique, circumuenit multiphariis multimodisque sermonibus, enigmatibus uariis interrogat. [...] nunc propria lambendo, comprimendo sugendoque labellula [...] repente ceco insanoque capta cupidine tota in amorem Lucinii flagrat [...] nude et aperte omni puderer postposito uerbis, suauibus, amplexibus attractioneque uerendorum uiolenter impudenterque stuprum exigit.

If you had seen her so dressed and adorned, you would have thought her another Helen for whom the entire East could rightly go to war a second time. [...] she shut her maidens out of the bedchamber and approached the helpless youth, who was protected only by the weapons of his chastity. She made her attack on all sides

⁹ See, for instance, Nünning (ed.), *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness*.

¹⁰ Nünning, ‘*Unreliable Narration zur Einführung*’, p. 24.

¹¹ Johannes, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 39, l.15–p. 40, l. 9; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 35.

¹² Obermaier, ‘*Zyklische Rahmenerzählung*’, p. 197.

with soft words and suggestive questions [...] Sometimes she licked and pressed and sucked his lips [...] suddenly she was seized by a blind and insane lust and she burned completely with passion for Lucinius. [...] Nakedly and openly with words, kisses, embraces, even by handling his manhood without restraint she commanded him to satisfy her lust.¹³

The omniscient narrator here uses their privileged insight into all characters' minds to report as fact the queen's lustful intentions, while at the same time giving their own judgement of these feelings as 'insane' ('insano') and of her actions as 'attacking' ('obsidet') the 'helpless youth' ('iuuenem inermem'). A reading that takes this at face value would see an older powerful woman sexually assaulting a young man (underage by some standards, though not the standards of the storyworld).¹⁴ In its rhetorical exuberance and dwelling on the 'licking', 'sucking', 'pressing' and 'handling' of the overwhelmed young man's lips and genitals, this passage nonetheless reads like a chaste man's sexual fantasy of staying firmly in control despite the world's most desirable woman throwing herself at his feet and offering up sexual favours. It is the ultimate fantasy of man's dominance over a woman through sexuality: he gains superiority over one of the world's most powerful and attractive women by being able to resist her, and this power over her is only increased when she begins to desire him and loses control over her feelings and actions, and when he humiliates her further by staying in control of his desires. It is also an Orientalist fantasy of the man from the Holy Roman Empire being superior to the lustful men from the 'East' who would fall for her. Lucinius becomes superior not only to the queen, but also to the many men who desire her, through his ability to resist this prized sexual object.

That this scene in the bedchamber is closer to a sexual fantasy of resisting seduction than to a reliable account of events also casts doubts on the reliability of the narrator's report of the rape accusation scene. The gender roles and the power dynamics are the same in both passages. In the bedroom fantasy, a sexually voracious woman loses self-control, while a virtuous man withstands her through remaining passive, and thus gains control both of himself and of her. In the accusation scene, the sexually voracious woman is trying to hide her insatiable appetites by wrongly accusing the man of the same. As he did in the bedroom, the man again refuses to be drawn into this accusation by not reacting, so that he stays in control of himself and of her.

The heterodiegetic narrator's interests – here in presenting a case of male sexual superiority – clearly shape their telling of the story, both in the bedroom scene and in the following accusation scene. Acknowledging this does not mean turning the narrative against itself, as modern understandings of unreliable narration and of the privileged position of a heterodiegetic narrator might suggest. The clear disparity between the narrator's and the queen's versions of the sexual encounter in the bed chamber is instead fully in line with the poetics of multiple voices characteristic of the *Dolopathos* and related story cycles. They typically present two or more different interpretations of the same story in different contexts,

¹³ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 36, l. 8 – p. 37, l. 2; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, pp. 32–33.

¹⁴ Though Lucinius would be under the age of sexual consent in many countries today, boys in the Middle Ages could marry at age 14: Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, p. 154. The issue of his age is never raised in the *Dolopathos* and he is clearly considered old enough to become king.

depending on the specific situation, without one ever being the absolute truth. While this has been amply demonstrated with the embedded tales, where the narrators usually give a moralisation that leaves much unexplained and is sometimes contradicted by other characters, it is time to see this at work also on the level of the narrative mediation of the frame story itself. The point is not to decide if Lucinius attempted rape or not, if account A or account B is ‘the truth’, but to understand that arriving at the facts is a matter of careful contextualisation. A sexual encounter without eye-witnesses is a prime example for a site of contested truth, and an obvious scenario on which to hinge a narrative self-reflexively concerned with the ways in which narratives work.¹⁵ Both the queen’s and the narrator’s accounts are clearly informed by their respective situation and aim. The queen is interested in defending herself against accusations of treason and infidelity by sleeping with the heir rather than with the king. The heterodiegetic narrator is crucially, however, not a disinterested party either, but keen to demonstrate the fickleness and evilness of women as well as the values of chastity and self-discipline for a good ruler, and this likewise shapes their report of the sexual encounter. This is a major challenge to conventional modern understandings of the fictional contract, but in line with the poetics of the *Seven Sages* tradition.

The male protagonist’s silence undermines the female protagonist’s speech

Within the plot rather than on the level of narrative mediation between the heterodiegetic narrator and their addressees, a different mechanism is at work to undermine the queen’s narrative. Her account is initially considered reliable by king and court, but is then cast into doubt through a pattern of secrecy and silence. Silencing is usually perceived as a removal of the power that lies in having a voice, and used as a synecdoche for patriarchal power taking agency from female survivors of sexual violence.¹⁶ This is what happens to the queen in the *Dolopathos*, but the fact that this is achieved precisely through Lucinius’ silence, to whom *not* speaking gives greater agency, shows that more is involved than a simple opposition of speech and silence.

The events in the bedroom are within the diegesis of the plot first reported by the queen; and the king and court instantly take this account to be straightforwardly reliable. The king bases his judgement on the queen’s speech, and sets the punishment – death – in consultation with his advisers and in accordance with the unambiguous demands of the law. Lucinius does not give his own version of events and instead counters the queen’s story with continued silence. This proves surprisingly effective. First, it is precisely his silence, combined with a lack of any physical expression, that begins to make the court wonder if the queen’s account indeed states the facts:

At uero ipse cui mens bene conscia, nichil respondebat ad hec omnia patris illorumque uerba nec colorem eciam mutauit nec faciem, ita ut ex hoc omnes cogeret ammirari.

¹⁵ On the relationship between sexual fidelity of a character in a text and textual fidelity see also Margitta Rouse’s article in this volume.

¹⁶ See, for example, Serisier, *Speaking Out*, p. 178. On the concept of a ‘good silence’ as powerful in medieval German literature, see also Astrid Lembke’s contribution to this volume.

Lucinius himself, who had a clear conscience, did not say a word to his father or to them. He did not change color or expression, so that all were forced to wonder.¹⁷

It is as a direct consequence of his lack of expression ('so that', 'ita ut ex hoc') that the sexual encounter changes in the minds of the other characters from a fact into an unspoken secret and becomes something about which they are curious ('forced to wonder', 'cogeret ammirari').

Lucinius' silence has a second important effect that contributes to undermining the queen's account of events on the level of the plot: it calls forth a series of new narratives told by other learned men. The text offers no explanation for why the seven wise men suddenly ride up on horseback each day just when the son is about to be executed. In other versions, they are the son's teachers; perhaps the all-knowing magician Virgil has sensed or divined that his charge is in trouble and sent them. We do know that they each speak up for him in front of the crowds assembled for his execution, telling stories that they claim pertain to the case at hand either by warning against hasty judgements ('The Dog', 'The Treasure', 'The Sons of Bandit'), by suggesting that other legal solutions might exist ('The Creditor', 'The Son of the Widow') or by discrediting women in general ('The Swans', 'The Well'). The narratives are, however, very much open to interpretation and their plots often exceed the brief conclusions that the sages draw from them, as is typical of this genre of story cycles. While they may prepare the ground for the mob's bias against women and against the king's initial judgement, their content is ultimately secondary. What each sage says is less important than the fact that their stories add further puzzling angles under which to consider the accusation of attempted rape, and together emphasise that no one account can claim to be the exhaustive truth. The sages' tales in this way problematise the court's initial belief in the queen's account as a statement of facts. Rather than revealing what happened in the bedroom, however, they obfuscate it further through their tangentially related tales.

This emphasis on keeping a secret rather than on the content of the secret is typical of *Secrets* literature, as Karma Lochrie observes: 'the activity of secrecy is always more important than the secrets themselves'.¹⁸ Works such the *Secreta secretorum* (Secrets of secrets), a mirror of princes ascribed to Aristotle, or the *Secreta mulierum* (Secrets of women), a treatise on gynaecology and obstetrics ascribed to Albert the Great, contain relatively bland knowledge, widely known even in the thirteenth century, when these works were produced and circulated. Their main function lies not in divulging any form of knowledge, but in creating a privileged male scholarly community that shares this knowledge about women as well as about politically powerful men. The political leaders and the women *are* the secret whose tricks or physiology are revealed, whereas the writers and recipients of these texts *have* the secret. This puts the scholarly community on a different, superior level to the subjects discussed. The same happens in the plot of the *Dolopathos*:¹⁹

¹⁷ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 42, ll. 19–21, cf. p. 41, ll. 28–31; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 37. The fact that 'ammirare' could also be translated as 'to admire' contributes to the positive valuation of Lucinius.

¹⁸ Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, p. 129.

¹⁹ It also happens in the preface, dedication and epilogue of the *Dolopathos*, where the heterodiegetic narrator presents themselves as the author persona Johannes de Alta Silva and claims to be writing a story that only he knows, which he hopes will include him in a tradition of male classical writers as well as evidencing that he is worthy

Lucinius' secret brings together a male scholarly community from the dispersed travelling sages, united by their appearance in the same place and for the same purpose. This is an elite academic community led by Virgil, who we know has 'diuinorum [...] noticiam secretorum' ('knowledge of secret and holy things') that he keeps hidden from everyone but Lucinius.²⁰ Through his silence, moreover, Lucinius proves that he is worthy of the support of this privileged group by showing that he is willing and able to subject himself to Virgil's command of silence as proof of his commitment 'tuis semper et in omnibus obedire mandatis' ('to obey your order in all things').²¹ What he keeps secret is again not as important as the fact that he keeps a secret. The queen's narrative is no longer a version of events that is equal to Lucinius' silence and to any account he might choose to give, but inferior, as she does not belong to the privileged male community of Lucinius and the scholars: she *is* the story, while the men *tell* the story.²²

This technique of Lucinius' silence calling forth superior speakers and lifting his own narratorial status above that of the queen is most successful at the end of the frame narrative. Lucinius' silence directly provides the grounds on which Virgil can argue for an overturning of the verdict, independently of Lucinius' innocence or guilt. Virgil argues that the young man should never have been sentenced because he was mute and could not defend himself, which is against the law unless his guilt is obvious to all:

'Sed ut hiis iam finem imponam, tu, o rex, uosque, o principes, contra leges sententiam in Lucinium protulistis, mutum nec respondere nec se excusare ualentem condemnantes. Nam quamuis leges singulis criminibus singulas decernant penas, nulli tamen excusandi se uel pro se respondendi adimunt facultatem, nullum uero surdum aut mutum nisi de his que omnibus patent dampnare uidentur: hunc quia excusare se aut pro se respondere non ualet, illum quia nec audire sufficit accusantem.'

'Now to put an end to this affair, I say that you, O King, and you, o nobles, sentenced Lucinius contrary to the laws. He was mute and could not explain or defend himself when he was condemned. Although the laws state the punishment for each crime, in no case do they take away a man's right to defend himself or explain. They can condemn no deaf or mute person unless his guilt is obvious to all, because a dumb man is not able to defend himself or explain, and a deaf man cannot hear his accuser.'²³

Virgil reveals that not hearing the defence case – literally because the defendant did not speak – invalidates the trial. He invokes a law apparently aimed at protecting those with speech or hearing impairments and uses it to defend someone who voluntarily chose not to speak. The difference between inability and unwillingness to speak is not taken into account in his reasoning (perhaps because he sees Lucinius' muteness as a matter of obedience or honour rather than as a choice), and nobody challenges him on this

of his abbot's encouragement and his bishop's patronage: Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 3, ll. 16–24; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 4; Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 2, ll. 6–9; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 2.

²⁰ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 14, l. 27– p. 15, l. 3; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 14; cf. Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 20, ll. 24, 26–27; p. 90, ll. 26–9; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, pp. 19 and 80.

²¹ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 22, ll. 17–20; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 20. Cf. Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 18, ll. 5–6; p. 21, l. 24; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, pp. 17, 20. In other versions, such as *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher*, also known as *The Seven Viziers*, there is an astrological reason why speaking would be unlucky for the Lucinius figure for the duration of seven days.

²² Carissa M. Harris has observed a similar dynamic of a male community being created through narratives of rape in medieval English literature: Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, pp. 26–66.

²³ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 90, ll. 4–12; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 79.

point. Neither is the question of what actually happened in the bedchamber, and whether Lucinius is guilty or innocent, ever brought to trial again. It is not what Lucinius is silent about, but the mere fact that he is silent that invalidates the queen's accusation.

When Lucinius now finally does give his own version of events, it now longer needs to be weighed against the queen's account, which has already been dismissed by Virgil. Rather than before the judge, Lucinius speaks before the crowd that had assembled for his execution. As the court had done before with the queen, they immediately believe Lucinius' briefly summarised account of how

regina ac puella ad libidinem inclinare conate sint, quo etiam consilo contra eum coniurauerint uultus, crines, uestes manibus unguibusque laniantes. Tunc cuncto populo contra reginam eiusque puellas proclamante, in eodem loco absque ulla dilatione a propriis parentibus et cognatis igni tradite sunt et consumpte.

the queen and her attendants had tried to incite him to lust; and how they had plotted against him by rendering their faces, hair, and clothing with their nails. At this all the people cried out against the queen and her attendants, and in that very place without delay their own parents and relatives threw them into the flames, and they were burned alive.²⁴

Lucinius here depicts the women as lustful and accuses them of conspiracy, which he cannot have witnessed directly. While this version of events might deserve equal hearing to that of the queen, the crowd is already biased so much towards him by this stage that it immediately overrides the queen's account in its entirety, and there is nothing more that the women can say or do. The women's voices are thus comprehensively silenced and replaced with Lucinius' account in the plot. For refusing to engage with the women and succumbing instead to the male authority of Virgil and his father, Lucinius is then amply rewarded with transferral of the patriarchal power of the king. His conversion to Christianity is a further seal of approval in the value system of the text.

An astute reader, however, must wonder at the speed ('without delay') with which the mob turns on the women. So must have any hypothetical member of the crowd who had listened to the three sages who had explicitly told narratives to warn against hasty judgements ('The Dog', 'The Treasure', 'The Sons of the Bandit'). Simply swapping one account of the facts with another and killing the teller of the divergent version can never be the best course of action. Even readers who are willing to believe Lucinius' account are in this way left with a somewhat hollow happy ending that goes against what the text as a whole advises: that there is always more than one way to interpret an event.

The content of the secret: the threat of men becoming feminine and garrulous

Though the mere fact of Lucinius' silence is enough to silence the queen, the content of the secret aids this further. In the *Dolopathos*, as in the *Secreta mulierum*, the secrecy essentially hides the fact that gender is a spectrum rather than neatly divisible into two opposing poles.²⁵ In the bedroom, Lucinius comes close to what the text describes as turning into a woman by giving in to his sexual desires and by speaking. The

²⁴ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 90, ll. 15–20; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, pp. 79–80.

²⁵ Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, pp. 31–41.

secrecy about this encounter covers up the lack of an absolute difference between the genders. It does so both performatively, when Lucinius proves that he is a man by disciplining his tongue and not speaking about the sexual encounter afterwards, and through its content when Lucinius proves in the bedroom that he is a man by disciplining his sexuality. The threat to Lucinius and other men turns out to be not only women speaking up to complain about sexual violence, but also men being revealed to be no better than women. Keeping this lack of male superiority hidden helps to further discredit the woman's voice.

The gender dimension to voice control is made explicit in the frame narrative. If Lucinius lost control of his voice, this would feminise him, according to the narrator. Lucinius has to master his tongue not just for the sake of accessing a male scholarly community, or of succumbing to his teacher, but also in order to stave off the danger of losing his masculinity. The sexual encounter between the queen and Lucinius comes about as part of a planned attempt to loosen his tongue by sending in the queen and her female entourage to entice him to sexual pleasures, food and music. This is intended to lift his grief over the loss of his mother and make him speak again, but would mean a softening of his whole body at the same time:

Quis tam ferreus quem amplexus tales, talia suauiā non emollirent, cuius cor adamantinum licet ista non frangerent, quis tam saxeus, tam insensibilis cuius caro as impudicos attactus non titillaret? [...] Sed iuuenis fortissimus et contentissimus sciens ad quo hoc ageretur consilio [...] Statuit et proposuit in animo quod omnia earum blandimenta preter usum Uenerium ob patris gratiam pateretur [...] Sciebat enim quia in hac parte uinceretur, necesse quoque esset ut et preceptum infringeret preceptoris. Prebebat ergo hylarem uultum singulis, earum amplexus, suauiā attactusque admittens, in lectulo uero et ad usum petulantie | ut lapis insensibilis habebatur.

Who is made of such iron that he would not soften [*emollirent*] at such embraces, at such kisses? Whose heart, even if made of adamant, could remain whole? Who is made of such rock, whose flesh is so unfeeling as not to be titillated at their wanton touches? [...] He firmly decided that for his father's sake he would endure all their allurements up to the point of the actual game of love. [...] He knew that if he yielded in this one thing he must break the promise to his teacher. Therefore he was always cheerful and endured their embraces, their kisses, their touches, but in bed at the final moment he behaved like a senseless stone.²⁶

The text expresses the threat that the maidens pose to Lucinius not as sexual intercourse, not as an involuntary erection, orgasm or emission of sperm, not even as being found impotent or attracted only to men, but as a softening of someone who had been as hard as a diamond, rock or stone. This softening would at the same time loosen his tongue and mean that he could not stay silent. Crucially, the narrator had early on in the text explicitly called such a softening of men a feminisation. This occurs in the context of King Dolopathos's male soldiers turning to sexual pleasures with women due to idleness:

Nec iam erat in armis querere gloriam, quia omnes ad delicias et molles attactus amplexusque mulierum studia conuertebant [...] uirile robur in muliebrem resolui molliciem.

No longer did they seek glory in arms, because all turned their thoughts to pleasure and the flesh [literally: softness and touch], and embraces of women [...] their manly strength was turned into womanly softness.²⁷

²⁶ Johannis, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, pp. 35–36; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, pp. 31–32.

²⁷ Johannes, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, pp. 5–6; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 7.

Men's softness induced by sexual contact with women is here explicitly labelled 'womanly' ('muliebris'). If Lucinius softened under seduction, this would not only loosen his tongue, but also by analogy feminise him. In order to retain their hard male bodies, both the soldiers and Lucinius must discipline their sexual appetites, and Lucinius in addition has to control his tongue.

The greatest challenge for Lucinius throughout the narrative is presented not as rebutting the queen's verbal accusation of attempted rape, as this is handled by the wise men and had been pre-empted by Virgil. What is tested is instead his ability to control his own tongue and the rest of his body to stop himself from becoming feminine. If verbal incontinence is a typical trait of women, Lucinius would become woman-like if he did spill his secret. The secret he creates with his silence, then, in two ways upholds gender difference: performatively by confirming that gender difference exists insofar as a woman would by definition be unable to stay silent, and as regards content by rendering the possibility unspeakable that Lucinius might have become feminised and lost his masculinity through letting himself become 'soft'. What this text fears is less female characters, and more the feminisation of the male characters. This can be seen as the ultimate act of silencing the queen by making her irrelevant to the central concern of the text.

Conclusion

In the plot, then, a woman's accusation of sexual violence is comprehensively silenced by the power of the male accused's silence. This silence makes a secret out of the sexual encounter, and exposes women as inferior due to their alleged verbal incontinence. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of secrecy cannot reconcile the contradiction between the text's celebration of silence and its celebration of a multiplicity of voices. For all its extolling of Lucinius' virtuous self-control, the text values different voices and narratives.

The embedded narratives disrupt the frame narrative and give additional perspectives on the plot. If in the frame narrative it is easy for Lucinius to become feminised through a lack of sexual and verbal self-control, in 'The Creditor', a woman is easily able to pass as a man – and a travelling legal scholar no less – through changing her clothes and using magic.²⁸ While this does not undermine the binary system of gender, it does show that male identity is not as securely separate from female identity as the text might hope. In 'The Old Man', the inability to keep a secret and control one's voice is presented as typically feminine, as it is for Lucinius and the soldiers. Here, a man who has illegally hidden his father from the law is asked by the king to present his worst enemy. Because the wise father knows that women cannot keep a secret, he tells his son to present his wife as his worst enemy. As the father had expected, the wife is insulted and out of spite spills the secret and betrays the 'hidden father' ('patrem occultum').²⁹ Because the men had wittily predicted the wife's verbal betrayal, the king forgives them. The confident knowledge of women's verbal incontinence thus mitigates the otherwise dangerous consequences for the men. The narrative's punchline rides on the fact that wives can always be expected to betray secrets, and thus takes this misogynistic knowledge for granted and perpetrates it further.

²⁸ For an extensive discussion of this episode, see Losert, *Überschreitung der Geschlechtergrenzen?*, esp. pp. 176–84.

²⁹ Johannes, *Dolopathos*, ed. Hilka, p. 61, l. 12; Johannes, *Dolopathos*, trans. Gilleland, p. 53.

Though some of the embedded narratives may confirm the misogynistic plot patterns of the frame narrative, there is always an excess of plot in the individual narratives that cannot be pressed into merely mirroring or confirming the frame narrative. The very fact that there are several stories told by several narrators celebrates the multiplicity of voices. If we are attuned to this poetics of plurality, it allows any reader who does not buy into the text's misogyny to hear the multiple voices even within the frame narrative. As I have argued in the first part, it is possible to hear the queen's voice.

If the multiple narratives open up multiple possibilities for hearing different voices that might counteract the dominance of the heterodiegetic narrator, the fact that *The Seven Sages* continued to be transmitted and adapted so broadly, too, suggests that its silencing of the queen's voice was never accomplished once and for all, but remained an ongoing project. In versions such as the Syriac *Sindban*, the issue of the queen's speech is much more prominent insofar as she gives her own interpretations of the stories told by the seven sages, or tells her own counter-narratives, often explicitly concerned with gender. As Andreea Weisl-Shaw has shown for the Castilian *Sendebär*, however, this does not necessarily give the female protagonist a stronger voice, as her stories and interpretations are devalued in other ways as less sophisticated than the men's.³⁰ Now may be the right time for scholars and readers not only to listen for female voices in all these texts, but also for the varied mechanisms by which they have been silenced for so long.

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