

“Car vallés sui et nient mescine”:  
Trans Heroism and Literary Masculinity in  
*Le Roman de Silence*

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BECAUSE OF ITS complex representations of gender, Heldris de Cornüalle's thirteenth-century narrative *Le Roman de Silence* has proved of great interest to feminist critics. This poem, by an otherwise unknown author (“Heldris of Cornwall” is likely a pseudonym gleaned from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*) survives in only one manuscript, MS WLC/LM/6 of the University of Nottingham.<sup>1</sup> Although it was unknown until 1911 and was not edited until the 1960s, it has been the subject of much recent scholarly discussion. Its title character, raised as a boy because of a ban on female inheritance, achieves acclaim as a knight and minstrel before ultimately being relegated to a traditional feminine role when the deception is revealed and the knight becomes a queen. The gender-bending nature of the plot, the linguistic ambivalence between masculine and feminine words to describe Silence, and the debates between a personified Nature and Nurture over the hero(ine)'s true identity have all opened this text to numerous assessments of its potential for rethinking the medieval relationship between body and gender identity. Understandably, particularly given the ending of *Silence*, many scholars identify Silence as a woman and Silence's masculine garb and presentation as a “disguise.”<sup>2</sup> Another

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1. Heinrich Gelzer, “Der Silenceroman von Heldris de Cornüalle,” *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 47 (1927): 87–99.

2. See, for example, Jane Tolmie, “Silence in the Sewing Chamber: *Le Roman de Silence*,” *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 63, no. 1 (2009): 14–26, doi:10.1093/fs/knn127; Michelle Szkilnik, “The Grammar of the Sexes in Medieval French

possibility, however, is that reading Silence as a transmasculine figure may expand the discussion of gender in Heldris's text in fruitful ways. In this article, I will present several readings of *Le Roman de Silence* exploring Silence as a trans man, attempting to identify potential benefits of trans studies as a lens through which to read the text and encourage further research along these lines.

The notion of cross-dressing as disguise, for example, is one that trans studies questions and problematizes; as anthropologist Jason Cromwell asks, "Is it deceit or disguise . . . when an individual wears clothing considered appropriate for their identity?"<sup>3</sup> Scholars of medieval literature have also interrogated the notion of "disguise" in medieval romances featuring cross-dressing characters; Peggy McCracken argues that, while "the disguise itself is not recognized as an expression of ambiguous gender or as a performance of an alternate gender that obscures or plays on the binary division of male/female"<sup>4</sup> in medieval texts, these texts often fail to contain the disruption caused to a "natural" system of gender found in a text like *Le Roman de Silence*. The question of Silence's identity is less than clear-cut; as a result, the assumption that, because Silence's body is read at birth to be female, the character must be a woman imposes on the character a straightforward connection between body and identity that the text does not consistently support. When critics characterize Silence's masculine self-presentation as a disguise, the underlying presumption is that the character had a defined feminine identity prior to assuming male garb and a masculine role. Elizabeth A. Waters explicitly and succinctly makes this point, arguing that "Silence did have a gendered identity prior to her cross-dressing: her parents cross-dress her. Drag is not necessarily a gender expression

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Romance," in *Gender Transgressions: Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature*, ed. Karen J. Taylor (New York: Garland, 1998), 61–88; and Sarah Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the 'Roman de Silence,'" *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (2002): 6–21, <https://www-jstor-org/stable/27870411>.

3. Jason Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 60.

4. Peggy McCracken, "The Boy Who Was a Girl: Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*," *Romanic Review* 85, no. 4 (1994): 520.

she herself would have chosen.”<sup>5</sup> The question then arises: does this mean that Silence would *not* have chosen a masculine gender expression? What does it mean if we consider not only parental pressure but the character’s own “masculine” traits as a factor underlying the depiction of Silence and the character’s self-presentation?

Although Silence’s body is read as female at several points in the text—notably at birth and at the story’s conclusion—the character’s complexion, bearing, and physical prowess suggest that a body can be “masculinized,” and in explicitly choosing to live as a man, Silence gives rise to the suggestion that a woman might become a man, or at least a certain kind of man. The modern term transmasculinity, defined by one scholar as a descriptive term for “people who were assigned to the female sex at birth, [but] who do not perceive this sex designation to be an appropriate representation of their gender or sex,” may be a useful starting point for discussing Silence’s participation in masculine roles.<sup>6</sup> This also necessitates a discussion of which pronouns are most appropriate in which contexts. Many scholars use the pronouns “she” and “her” to refer to Silence, but some opt to use “he” and “him,” while others instead use multiple sets of pronouns or call for other pronouns altogether.<sup>7</sup> Jane Bliss, for example, uses “he” to describe Silence in masculine roles and “she” to describe Silence in feminine roles, while Elizabeth Waters calls for “a third term, but also a fourth, a fifth, a sixth—an infinite number of terms to express gendered identities” in exploring the possibility of a queer identity for Silence, also mentioning the genderless vocabulary

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5. Elizabeth A. Waters, “The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in ‘Le Roman de Silence,’” *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (1997): 39–40, <https://www-jstor-org/stable/27869253>. See also Szkilnik’s reference to femininity as Silence’s “former gender.” “Grammar of the Sexes,” 69.

6. Matthew Heinz, *Entering Transmasculinity: The Inevitability of Discourse* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2016), 3. See also Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs*, chap. 2, for further discussion of the politics of terminology and identification for transmasculine individuals.

7. See, for example, Robert L. A. Clark, “Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the ‘Roman de Silence,’” *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (2002): 50–63, <https://www-jstor-org/stable/27870413>, and Linda Marie Zaerr, “When Silence Plays Vielle: The Metaperformance Scenes of *Le Roman de Silence* in Performance,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 42, no. 1 (2009): 99–116.

the King of France employs to discuss the character.<sup>8</sup> Throughout this article, I would like to explore the utility of considering Silence as a “he.” Although not all contemporary vocabulary will map neatly onto the thirteenth-century lexicon describing Silence, he is a character who spends much of the text living as a man and presents a masculinity based not on genitalia but on his upbringing, his outlook and decisions, and malleable features of his physiognomy, and presents a valuable model of a changeable and vulnerable masculinity that may be best explored by referring to him using masculine pronouns.

In the next section, I begin by addressing the question of whether and how the text might permit us to read Silence as a trans man, employing the lens of trans studies to examine particular moments from the text that seem to present him as choosing a masculine identity or treat him as a masculine character. I will then assess the potential critical utility of treating Silence as a literary hero, rather than as a heroine, by comparing *Le Roman de Silence* to Marie de France’s *Lanval*. Such readings may illuminate previously unexplored parallels between *Silence* and other texts, particularly in relation to these texts’ exploration of masculinity and critique of men’s treatment in courtly society.

### Trans Identities in a Medieval Context

A brief summary of the first portion of Silence’s life might help clarify the character’s significance for scholars interested in gender. Even before Silence is born, his parents, Cador and Eufemie, decide that they will raise him as a man regardless of his anatomy due to the ban on female inheritance, and from the moment of his birth they plan his upbringing around the necessity of keeping the nature of his genitalia secret.<sup>9</sup> They leave open, however, the possibility of turning Silence back into a girl in case they have another male child or the truth about Silence’s body

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8. See Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 134-41, and Waters, “Third Path,” 38.

9. Eufemie is not to be confused with the Queen Eufeme, who later tries to seduce Silence; much scholarly discussion has been devoted to the similarity and multivalent wordplay of these names, though space does not permit such an exploration in this article.

is discovered, suggesting that for Cador and Eufemie, at least, Silence's gender is a moldable trait that can be controlled by renaming and reeducation. As Michèle Perret notes, the word used here, *desvaleter* (or "dis-boy") is a neologism formed along the lines of *despucler*, to deflower;<sup>10</sup> the verb both suggests a remarkable level of flexibility in the formation of gender and the erotic implications of Silence's switching between "natural" and "unnatural" gendered positions.<sup>11</sup> As a girl, Silence can reproduce but not inherit; as a boy, he can inherit but not reproduce. Cador and Eufemie thus have a vested but conflicting interest in raising a child with the potential to become a successful man or woman.

Their seneschal and a cousin of Cador's who serves as a nursemaid raise and educate the child, who outshines other children in physical, moral, and intellectual development, in isolation. At puberty, Cador reveals the secret to Silence, and thrown into turmoil, Silence finds himself the subject of an argument between personified representations of Nature, Nurture, and Reason, each of whom has a stake in whether Silence identifies as male or female. Silence himself ultimately maintains his male identity, but, distressed by the deception and the possibility that he might be forced to live as a woman without any preparation for it, he runs away, disguised as a minstrel under the name "Malduit," or "Badly brought-up." The discrepancy between Silence's physical sex and his upbringing continues to underlie the rest of his adventures, and the narrator never allows the conflict between Nature and Nurture to be completely forgotten.

As this summary indicates, and as many critics who have brought feminist concerns to bear on this romance have noted, the depiction of Silence's gender is marked by complexities and ambiguities. Perret comments on the "hybrid" language used to describe Silence, marked by the "utilisation de deux termes référentiels, l'un masculin et l'autre

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10. Michèle Perret, "Travesties et transsexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine," *Romance Notes* 25, no. 3 (1985): 336.

11. See Patricia Victorin, "Le nu et le vêtu dans le *Roman de Silence*: Métaphore de l'opposition entre *nature* et *norreture*," in *Le Nu et le vêtu au Moyen Âge (XIIe–XIIIe siècles: Actes du 25ème colloque du CUER MA, 2–3–4 mars 2000, Senefiance 47 (2001): 365–82*, on the prevalence of the disjunctive prefix "des-" highlighting the conflict between Nature and Nurture when it comes to Silence's identity.

féminin, dans un énoncé où le verbe copule a pour fonction de poser l'identité des deux vocables, donc le caractère hybride de leur référent commun,"<sup>12</sup> giving as an example the statement "Il es desos les dras mescine" (line 2480; he is, beneath the clothes, a girl).<sup>13</sup> At other points, Silence is referred to with such apparently contradictory expressions as "li vallés mescine" (3763; the girl youth) and "li vallés qui est mescine" (3785; the youth who is a girl). Critics have argued that these ambivalent statements signal, variously, the hybrid character and gender of Silence; a "systematic refusal of univocal meaning"; or a censure of the offense against nature perpetrated by Silence and his parents.<sup>14</sup> The formulation also leaves open the possibility of reading Silence as a young man—a particular kind of young man, that is, the kind who is female.

Reading Silence as a "mescine" offers tempting possibilities. As a girl who goes from knight to queen, Silence belies the rigid binary of sexual difference between masculine virtues and feminine weakness; moreover, a female warrior as competent as Silence demonstrates the capacity of women to perform in a male sphere, and perhaps even more importantly, the performative nature of gender roles. As Robert L. A. Clark points out, however, a criticism that insists on Silence's identity as female runs the risk of imposing a gender essentialism that ill suits the ambiguities of the text itself. Clark asks, "What else might we see in the conflicted *Le Roman de Silence* if we were willing to set aside assumptions

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12. Perret, "Travesties et transsexuelles," 335. That is, Silence is described by "the utterance of two referential terms, the one masculine and the other feminine, in an utterance where the copulative verb has the function of establishing the sameness of the two terms, thus the hybrid character of their common referent."

13. Citations from the *Roman de Silence* will come from *Le Roman de Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse-Romance* by Heldris de Cornüalle, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1972). Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number. English translations are my own unless otherwise stated, but I have consulted the translations of Regina Psaki, *Le Roman de Silence* (New York: Garland, 1991) and Sarah Roche-Mahdi, *Silence: A Thirteenth Century French Romance* (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992).

14. See, respectively, Victorin, "Le nu et le vêtu," 370; R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvere," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986): 88; and Simon Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," *Paragraph* 13, no. 2 (1990): 202-16, esp. 208.

about the main character's identity as female, a move that feminist critics seem disinclined to make?"<sup>15</sup> He goes on to produce a compelling reading of Silence as a "queer body," a transvestite whose identity is not determined by biology and who variously occupies female and male roles, raising the specter of sexual transgression in both. I would like to propose here another kind of queer identity for Silence, one hinted at in such terms as "li vallés mescine," which may serve to define a kind of manhood depicted in the romance. Silence's internal debates elsewhere about the gender role he occupies, as well as the conflict between the way his society "reads" him and his inner sense of self, suggest that he may occupy the position of a person who identifies more strongly with male roles but, being unable to perform the male reproductive function or to be read as unambiguously male, cannot ultimately maintain that identity in a romance so invested in questions of inheritance and familial continuation.

This is a possibility that, when explicitly considered by previous critics, has occasionally been rejected, not least because medieval models of sex and gender differed significantly from contemporary concepts.<sup>16</sup> Before discounting the idea, however, it behooves us to examine the ways in which medieval medical, scientific, and religious discourse conceived of the difference between sexes and accounted for individuals that belied strict categorization of men and women. Despite the apparently firm distinctions between men and women in medieval society, both Christian ideas of gendered virtue and vice and the Aristotelian conception of women as imperfect men left open the possibility of ambiguity and at least a metaphorical move from one category to the other. Ephraim das Janssen cites Jerome's remark in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* that a woman who chooses to serve Christ more than the world "will cease to be a woman and will be called man"; a woman becoming more "manly" in this sense was a positive development, though the

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15. Clark, "Queering Gender," 53-54.

16. Karen Lurkbur sums up this position by asserting that "Rather than being a deliberate move on Heldris's part, the resemblance between Silence's situation and that of a modern transsexual is purely coincidental." "Medieval Silence and Modern Transsexuality," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 11, no. 4 (2010): 222.

reverse was often not true.<sup>17</sup> “Womanly” behavior on the part of men, including cross-dressing or prohibited sexual behaviors, conflicted with ideas of masculine social roles and could compromise a man’s status as such.<sup>18</sup> The rise of a celibate clergy—a class of men institutionally barred from sexual reproduction—forced a reconsideration of what constituted masculinity in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, again demonstrating the importance of behavior in defining what constituted manly and womanly roles in medieval religious thought.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, medieval scientific writers frequently saw men as being the more developed or perfect sex by virtue of their greater heat, but this state of perfection did not universally apply to all men. Scientists sought explanations in the humors, distribution of male and female “semen” in the womb, and physiognomy for such phenomena as the masculine woman, the feminine man, or the intersex person. As Joan Cadden notes, some medieval ideas of sex differentiation allowed for a spectrum of gender positions, even if divergent positions were not socially acceptable: “Heat, quantity of seed, and strength of seed or of

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17. Jerome, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* 3.5, cited in Ephraim Das Janssen, *Phenomenal Gender: What Transgender Discloses* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 54.

18. This is not to say, however, that male femininity was universally condemned; conceptions of the church as the Bride of Christ and later traditions of affective meditation on the sufferings of Christ permitted men to take on feminine roles and attributes, at least imaginatively speaking, with respect to God, identifying feminine traits such as compassion and vulnerability as appropriate for men in these contexts. Much work has been done on the complex gendered positions and social implications of these relations between God and men and women; see, for example, Shawn M. Kraemer, “The Virile Bride of Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 304–27, doi:10.2307/3169582; Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Line Cecilie Engh, *Gendered Identities in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs: Performing the Bride* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014); and Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

19. Jo Ann McNamara, “The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150,” in *Medieval Cultures, Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees with Thelma Fenster and Jo Ann McNamara (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3–29.

competing sperm all admitted of more and less—they existed not just in two states but in varying degrees.”<sup>20</sup> Marie-Christine Pouchelle’s study of the hybrid or hermaphrodite in thirteenth- through sixteenth-century French medical literature demonstrates that this notion of a spectrum of gendered traits—and the idea that Nature tends to move from a less perfect to a more perfect state—could open the possibility of women physically transforming into men. She cites sixteenth-century surgeon Ambroise Paré, whose *Des monstres and prodigies* (first published in 1573) lists several examples of children raised as girls who became men at puberty and continued to live as men.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, thirteenth- to fourteenth-century medical professor Pietro d’Abano theorized that blocked pores, preventing semen from reaching the penis and manly heat from developing masculine traits, resulted in a womanly man who, if this condition was treated incorrectly, “might change into a woman, and thus would be changed into something worse,” albeit in secondary and not essential (i.e., genital) characteristics.<sup>22</sup>

Not only medical but also literary works, such as a thirteenth-century continuation of *Huon de Bordeaux* called *La Chanson d’Yde et Olive* and a fourteenth-century *chanson de geste* called *Tristan de Nanteuil*, explored the idea of cross-gender metamorphoses. *Tristan’s* Blanchandine and *Yde et Olive’s* Yde, female characters living for various reasons in men’s garb, both find themselves married to foreign princesses and miraculously changed into men when they face the risk of their sex being revealed. Subsequently, both function as cissexual men—that is, both are able to impregnate their wives (thus helping to engender a saint in one case and an emperor in the other). Given the medical ideas of women as existing on a spectrum of heat and dryness with men, Angela Jane Weisl argues, “what happens in these poems becomes a kind of examination of potential rather than a pure fantasy.”<sup>23</sup> Although this change is imposed

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20. Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 203.

21. Marie-Christine Pouchelle, “L’Hybride,” *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 7 (1973): 53.

22. Petrus de Abano, *Expositio problematum Aristotelis*, pt. 4, probl. 26, quoted in Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 215.

23. Angela Jane Weisl, “How to Be a Man, Though Female: Changing Sex in

(or, as we might say, bestowed) from above rather than instigated by Yde and Blanchandine themselves, they still seem to represent a kind of transmasculinity, even if determining the characters' gender identity as such, given the nexus of factors such as class, nationality, and reproductive potential affecting their portrayal, proves at times to be difficult.<sup>24</sup>

These examples, literary, medical, and theological, support arguments by trans theorists that, though modern medical technology and decades of intellectual work have shaped the way we talk about trans identities today, the experience of being trans, albeit at times difficult to identify in historical situations, is far older than the terminology we now use to describe it.<sup>25</sup> Factors such as the oppression of women and, conversely, the greater amount of power and freedom often granted to men across different historical eras especially complicate attempts to "read" people who were assigned female at birth but who dressed in masculine clothing or lived as men. Considering one portrayal of nineteenth-century female-to-male cross-dressers, for example, Nan Almillia Boyd identifies a common but possibly flawed assumption, that "if they lived at a time when they could enjoy economic freedom, political rights, or sexual love for women as a woman, they would not choose to masquerade as men."<sup>26</sup> This assumption, which informs many contemporary attempts to read Silence's gender, poses an obstacle to cross-cultural and historical

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Medieval Romance," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45, no. 2 (2009): 114.

24. Michèle Perret observes that, as angels come down from heaven to transform Blanchandine and Yde's bodies when they are most in danger, "la transformation est en effet considérée comme une récompense divine accordée aux dames de haute mérite (vertu pour l'une, pitié pour l'autre)." "Travesties et transsexuelles," 337; the transformation is in effect considered as a divine recompense granted to ladies of high merit (virtue for the one, pity for the other).

25. See Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), chaps. 1 and 2, for a historical account of the medical developments and social history that have shaped the boundaries of contemporary discourse around trans men. Rubin cautions, however, that such historical genealogies have limitations, especially "the tendency to deny the significance of subjectivity and lived experience" (23).

26. Nan Almillia Boyd, "Bodies in Motion: Lesbian and Transsexual Histories," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 423.

studies of gender diversity. Cromwell laments that an inattention to distinctions between masculine-presenting women and trans men creates an intellectual climate in which “forerunners of contemporary female-bodied transpeople are made invisible. At the very least their motivations are obscured by socioeconomic arguments and the presumption of lesbianism.”<sup>27</sup> He offers several criteria for researchers interested in identifying early instances of gender diversity, including a historical person’s own statements on their identity and efforts to change their bodies. While a rubric designed for historical people cannot perfectly apply to fictional characters, Silence’s own statement that “vallés sui et nient mescine” (2650; I’m a young man and not a girl), his repeated decisions to continue to live as a man, and the romance’s presentation of nature’s and nurture’s role in defining a man or a woman might offer some guidance to readers today.

### *Silence and Definitions of Manhood*

If Silence is granted a kind of manhood in *Le Roman de Silence*, it is a manhood that is contingent, constructed, and defined in opposition to feminine weaknesses and vices. We might begin an examination of this deliberately constructed manhood with a glance toward the role played by naming and grammar in characterizing it. In proposing the gender-neutral or gender-flexible name “Silence,” which can work as a male name “Silentius” (which is what Silence is baptized as) or a female name “Silentia,” Cadour and Eufemie seem to recognize the power that words and names have to shape perception and even reality.<sup>28</sup> As Chantal Connochie-Bourgne notes, baptizing the child “creates” him in a very

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27. Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs*, 62. See chaps. 4–6 for his discussion of gender diversity historically and in indigenous or other non-Western European cultures that have been misread due to cultural biases on the part of anthropologists and other researchers.

28. See Perret, “Travesties et Transexuelles,” 335, and Victorin, “Le nu et le vêtu,” 373, on the resonances of these endings. The masculine *-us* echoes *us*, “custom” or “habit,” the feminine *-a* the third-person singular of the verb “to have,” suggesting the female sex Silence possesses by virtue of Nature.

real sense by giving him a social and religious identity.<sup>29</sup> The name is reinforced by the narrator's ambivalent use of gendered words to describe Silence, who is frequently referred to as a boy or as "he." This use of shifting grammatical gender to treat a cross-dressing character is not unique to *Silence*: similar playfulness or ambiguity with regard to modifiers occurs in *Yde et Olive*, *Tristan de Nanteuil*, and the fifteenth-century prose romance *Valentine et Orson*, among others.<sup>30</sup> The roles played by Nature and Nurture in the text in shaping Silence, however, and his parents' emphasis on him as an "uevre" or "work" and treatment of him as a son imply that the construction of masculinity at work here moves beyond the grammatical.

His parents' references to him as a boy and their conception of Silence's gender as a "work" both inform the episode in which Cador reveals to Silence the deception that he and Eufemie have authored and their reasons for it:

Se li rois Ebayns seüst l'uevre  
 Que nos de vos, *bials fils*, menons,  
 De quanque nos sos ciel avons  
 Estroit li vostre pars petite;  
 . . .  
*Bials dols ciers fils*, n'est pas por nos  
 Cho que faisons, ainz est por vos.  
 Tolte l'oquoison, *fils*, savés.  
 Si chier come l'onor avés,  
 Si vos covrés viers tolte gent.  
 (2444-57, emphasis mine)

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29. Chantal Connochie-Bourgne, "L'Ascension de la 'Pucele Vasletee' dans *Le Roman de Silence* d'Heldris de Cornouaille," in *Reines et Princesses au Moyen Âge: Actes du cinquième colloque international de Montpellier Université Paul-Valéry (24-27 novembre 1999)*, vol. 2, *Les Cahiers du C.R.I.S.I.M.A.* 5 (2001): 795-807.

30. See Szkilnik, "The Grammar of the Sexes," 61-88, for an in-depth discussion of the grammatical play at work in these texts and the different functions it serves. See also Bloch, "Silence and Holes," esp. 86-88, for the connection in medieval philosophy between grammatical indeterminacy and sexual transgression as illustrated, for example, in Alain de Lille's *De Planctus Naturae*.

(If King Ebain knew the work  
That we are putting into you, *dear son*,  
Of everything we have under heaven  
Your share would be small.

...

Dear sweet precious son, it is not for ourselves  
That we do this, but for you.  
Now, *son*, you know the whole situation.  
As dearly as you hold honor,  
So you will conceal yourself around everyone.)

During this speech, Cador neither refers to Silence as his daughter nor calls him a woman or a girl, referring only indirectly to Silence's sex by mentioning King Ebain's disinheritance of all English women. Though a listener might not detect the distinction between some gendered words when read aloud (again, contributing to the text's ambiguity), the repetition of "fils" (son) would have drawn attention to Cador's rhetorical strategies. One explanation of this apparent overemphasis on Silence as a son is that Cador deliberately uses guilt and the fear of shaming the family to pressure Silence to live as a boy, and it would be impossible to deny that familial shame is a factor here: Silence's family's honor, and their ability to keep hereditary lands in the family, depend on his continued exemplary performance as a male heir.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, obliquely instructing Silence to pretend to be a man by repeatedly referring to him as "son" seems unnecessarily circumlocutory. Cador's instructions here are not that Silence should act in any particular way but that he should "cover himself," an instruction repeated almost verbatim by Silence a few lines later when he says "Viers tolte gent me coverrai" (2462; Around everyone I will cover myself). The repetition of "covering" may recall both the cloth wrapping Silence's parents use to hide his genitalia at baptism and the male clothing he wears "por se nature refuser" (2360; in order to refuse his nature). What self or "nature" is it that Silence is covering?

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31. See Waters, "The Third Path," 39, for an articulation of this argument.

The word “nature” in the romance has multiple meanings, and the boundaries between what constitutes “nature” and “nurture” are occasionally quite porous. Roberta L. Krueger identifies a whole range of “natures” in the text, from biological sex to personality to noble breeding to socialized gender roles.<sup>32</sup> Clark, building from Krueger’s analysis, categorizes the various “natures” under two main rubrics: nature as biological sex or assigned gender role, which is frequently destabilized throughout the romance, and nature as good conduct or nobility, either of birth or character. These meanings, however, at times seem to clash with each other, and the binary opposition between Nature and Nurture threatens at times to collapse, necessitating a shift from one definition of nature to another: “Thus, at certain key moments when ‘nature’ as biological sex shows itself to be an incoherent category of analysis, Heldris’s text slips to the other semantic pole of the ‘natural.’”<sup>33</sup> This tension, as Clark and others note, manifests itself in such oddities as the presentation of sewing rooms and cooked meat as “natural.”<sup>34</sup> Silence, we learn, has both a “nature” that must be covered and a “nature” that must be developed and celebrated. As a child, he surpasses all other children in appearance, valor, and learning; his “bone nature” (2384; good nature) is such that he even teaches himself, and praise makes him even more determined to do well.

By contrast, a bad nature cannot be restrained by education:

Segnor, de moult legier empire  
 Ki tent a malvaistié et tyre,  
 Si com jo puis a droit esmer.  
 Ne por loer ne por blasmer  
 Ne se puet malvais hom retraire

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32. Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 117.

33. Clark, “Queering Gender,” 57.

34. See Gaunt, “The Significance of Silence”: “If the different values ascribed to Nature and Nurture are on one level rigidly delineated, on another distinctions break down,” which demonstrates that despite the text’s apparent valorization of Nature over Nurture at the end, each term’s “placing in opposition to the other is a premonition of its possible subversion, if not its destruction” (209).

De cho que cuers li loe a faire;  
Et por cho di jo que Nature  
Signorist desor Noretture.  
(2417-24).

(Lords, he goes very easily from bad to worse  
The one who tends and inclines toward wickedness,  
As I can rightly judge.  
Neither through praise nor blame  
Can a bad man desist  
From that which his heart counsels him to do;  
And that's why I say that Nature  
Reigns over Nurture.)

This aspect of Silence's "nature," then, is not negatively affected by his upbringing—though the narrator tells us that poor nurturing can make a noble heart turn bitter and shameful, Silence's natural qualities and upbringing have worked together, rather than at odds, to produce a person amply endowed with noble qualities. Conversely, the "nature" that must be covered refers to Silence's physical form, and specifically, those aspects of his body that mark him as essentially female.<sup>35</sup> It is only when he reaches puberty that Silence begins to recognize any discrepancy between his upbringing and the "self" he should embody, and he is approached by Nature, Nurture, and Reason and forced to come to a decision about which gender roles to occupy.

It is perhaps not surprising that Silence faces this crisis of self at age twelve. Although the teenage years were conceived of differently in the medieval period—Isabelle Cochelin notes that for much of the medieval period, life cycle schemata contained no separate middle age and often combined the stages *adolescentia* and *iuventus* into a longer stage comprising the portion of adulthood that comes before old age—puberty and its accompanying physical changes marked an important transition

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35. Cadden notes that many systematic accounts of sexual differentiation in the Middle Ages distinguished between essential differentiating features (those that pertained most closely to biological reproduction) and accidental or secondary differences between the sexes. *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 177.

from childhood to adulthood then as they do now.<sup>36</sup> If the defining social binary was less between men and women and more “between the masculine and the nonmasculine, including children of both sexes and castrati as well as women,”<sup>37</sup> then the point at which a boy might begin to display such characteristics of manhood as a beard, prominent body hair, a muscular chest, and the ability to produce semen marks a stage of significant identity shift.<sup>38</sup> A boy’s *failure* to display these characteristics, conversely, might thereby be a source of trauma or confusion, and would certainly trigger a recognition of dissonance between the expected steps of progression to manhood and the actual state of his body. Such trauma and confusion often marks the adolescence of trans youth today, when the body’s physical changes and their interpretation by a society inculcated with binary gender norms may not line up with a child’s self-image and desired future. Henry Rubin, for example, comments on the profound impact of adolescence on the trans men he spoke to, who described it as a time “when they risked and often lost their senses of themselves. . . . After puberty, as the process of sexual development took over their bodies, they felt simultaneously disembodied and acutely aware of their own bodies.”<sup>39</sup> Certainly for Silence, puberty marks a time at which his sense of self is tenuous, and for the first time his

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36. Isabelle Cochelin, “Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions of the Life Cycle,” in *Medieval Life Cycles: Continuity and Change*, ed. Isabelle Cochelin and Karen Smyth (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 1–54, esp. 7–10.

37. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 181.

38. See Isabelle Cochelin, “Adolescence Uncloistered (Cluny, Early Twelfth Century),” in Cochelin and Smyth, *Medieval Life Cycles*, 147–82; if secular authorities were more exacting about proofs of age, physical indicators served as a more relevant marker for many boys in monasteries, who could not become adult monks before a certain age: “Cluniac customaries indicate that the physical criteria signaling puberty were observed on children’s bodies. Quite possibly, these physical changes determined what was called the age of fifteen as well as or even more so than the chronological age per se” (169).

39. Rubin, *Self-Made Men*, 94. See also the argument by Lealah Pollock and Stephen L. Eyre: “It would seem that puberty, with its physical manifestations of womanhood, would present a potential crisis for every youth who has or will come to have a masculine identification.” “Growth into Manhood: Identity Development among Female-to-Male Transgender Youth,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 14, no. 2 (2012): 213.

self-conception is forced into direct confrontation with the social roles dictated by female and male characteristics.

The presentation of this conflict is worth examining for our understanding of Silence's self-conception, such as Helderis presents it. Silence's choice to live as a man is not without inner debate and ambivalence; initially, on being ordered back to the sewing room by Nature, Silence becomes convinced that Nature is right and decides to live as a woman before being confronted by Nurture and Reason. Similarly, he takes issue with his parents' decision to raise him as a boy when he becomes a minstrel under the name "Malduit":

A cort se fait nomer Malduit,  
Car il se tient moult por mal duit,  
Moult mal apris lonc sa nature.  
Et sil refait par couverture.  
(3177-80)

(At court he called himself Malduit,  
Because he considered himself very badly raised,  
Very badly educated with respect to his nature.  
And he did it for cover.)

His ambivalence toward his parents' "norreture" has been taken as evidence that a male identity has been forced upon him, or, at the very least, that he would not have chosen a male life if given the chance. But Silence's nobility, concern for his family, chosen activities, loyalty to his king, attitudes toward the feminine, and sense of shame all make his character a complex constellation of traits not so easily reducible to that of a girl living a male life under parental pressure.

To some extent, Silence's ambivalence is thematically necessary: the unstable categories of nature and nurture, the unreliable bounds of gender, and the linguistic indeterminacy are all emblematic of the text's exploration of ambiguity, and as its main character Silence is at the center of this shifting ground.<sup>40</sup> But on a diegetic level, much of Silence's

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40. Peter L. Allen comments, "We cannot remove the ambiguities from the romance without breaking its silence—without destroying the object we want to study." "The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing, and *Le Roman de Silence*," in

ambivalence seems to be driven by secrecy and shame rather than the sense that a male life is incompatible with his preferences or personal characteristics. The debate between Nature and Nurture, and Silence's initial capitulation to Nature, can both be read to stem from a fear that he is committing fraud "par covoitise" (2585; out of covetousness or greed). This fear would be understandable regardless of what gender identity he felt to be most applicable, given scholastic characterizations of physically gender-ambiguous humans (like the sex-switching prophet Tiresias, punished for fraud in Canto 20 of Dante's *Inferno*) and even animals like hyenas who were thought to switch sexes.<sup>41</sup>

Another factor motivating his ambivalence is his dissatisfaction with the exclusion from his peers engendered by the need to keep his body covered. Asking himself whether anyone else has found themselves in a situation like his, the answer seems clear:

Nenil! adunc quant jo m'afule  
Por moi de tel giu a retraire  
Com vallet suelent encor faire,  
Dont dient tuit mi compagnon:  
Cis avra moult le cuer felon  
Se il vit longhes entressait.  
Mais ne sevent com moi estait.  
Se me desful par aventure  
Dont ai paor de ma nature.  
(2564-72)

(No! Whenever I get dressed  
To withdraw from such games  
As young men usually play,  
Then all my companions say,  
"This one will have a false heart

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*Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 99. But see also Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," who argues that the text's play with ambiguity "serves less to valorize ambivalence than to censure it and thereby to reinforce the predetermination of the conflict between nature and nurture" (206).

41. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 213.

If he lives long, anyway.”  
But they don’t know how it is for me.  
If by chance I get undressed,  
Then I’m afraid about my sex.)

Although he earlier describes his behavior as “*pas natureus*” (2554; unnatural), the disjuncture between self and gender role here is not based in a sentiment that he is ill-suited to be a boy but rather in the social rejection caused by being unable fully to participate in the boyhood his peers enjoy. Because, as we learn, Silence excels at wrestling or fighting—“*Il seus fait tols ses pers fremir*” (2496; he alone made all his peers tremble)—his distress at the slight to his masculine virtue and the intimation of cowardice represent not only offense but indignation, a tension between how he is treated and what he knows himself to be. “Nature” again in this passage refers not to a mental sense of self but to the physical sexual characteristics that differentiate Silence from other boys and result in his social isolation.

At other points, Silence’s internalization of the social roles attached to manhood and womanhood is consonant with the misogyny the narrator occasionally espouses. In addition to misogynist remarks made by characters like Cadour and Ebuyan about women’s irrationality or obligation to keep quiet, the narrator criticizes Queen Eufeme’s behavior in a relatively long digression characterizing women in general as fickle and unstable (3901–24); at the end of the romance, the epilogue tells us that a woman can be good “*s’ele oeuvre bien contre nature*” (6691; if she works hard against nature). With this model of feminine nature before him, perhaps it is no surprise that Silence rejects the idea of adopting a woman’s role with such anxiety:

Voire, fait il, a la male eure  
Irai desos, quant sui deseure.  
Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.  
Nel sui, par foi, ains sui honis  
Quant as femes voel estre onis.  
(2640–44)

(Truly, he said, it'll be a wicked hour  
When I step down, when I'm on top.  
Now I'm very valiant and worthy.  
No I'm not, by my faith, but I am shamed  
When I want to be on par with women.)

Certainly there are practical considerations at play as well—Silence risks disinheritance if he takes on a feminine role, and as Reason points out, if he reveals his sex, Silence will lose “cheval et carete” (2621; horse and cart) and be unable to train for knighthood. But the shame voiced here suggests less a fear of material loss and more a conviction that Silence’s character will be degraded by becoming a woman. His attitude here reflects a generally misogynous tendency to promote the masculine over the feminine—Gaunt comments that Silence “knows that men are better than women” and “has dutifully assimilated male values,” while Anita Benaim Lasry describes Silence as a heroine “possessing purely masculine values and behavior.”<sup>42</sup> Despite Silence’s mixed feelings about his upbringing as a boy, it seems, he still aligns himself ideologically more with a male perspective. When he becomes a knight, we learn that “Silences ne se repent rien / De son usage, ains l’ainme bien” (5177–78; Silence did not at all regret his habits, but rather he liked them very much); apparently reconciled to his parents’ decision, he seems willing to grow from a boy into a man.

Becoming a complete man in the narrator’s view, however, is impossible for Silence. Nurture, who most encourages Silence to live as a man, says that she has made him “D’un noble enfant un malvais home” (2602; from a noble child, a bad man). Clearly he is not bad in the sense that Eufeme, described at the end of the romance as “malvaïse,” is bad; his character is described rather as “frans et honorables, / Cortois et pros et amiables” (5121–22; noble and honorable, courteous and worthy and kind), and he loyally serves both Ebain and the king of France. Nor is he “bad” at manly activities. Indeed, he succeeds at masculine pursuits

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42. Gaunt, “The Significance of Silence,” 212 and 213; and Anita Benaim Lasry, “The Ideal Heroine in Medieval Romances: A Quest for a Paradigm,” *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1985): 231.

more than the men with whom he competes. Instead, he is “bad” in the sense of “defective” or “incomplete,” as the narrator remarks:

Il a us d'ome tant usé  
Et cel de feme refusé  
Que poi en falt que il n'est malles:  
Quanque on en voit est trestolt malles.  
El a en tine que ferine:  
Il est desos les dras mescine.  
(2475-80)

(He was so accustomed to men's ways  
And had so refused women's ways  
that little was wanting for him to be male.  
Whatever one sees of him is completely male.  
But there's something besides flour in the tub—  
He is, beneath the clothes, a girl.)

Neither Silence's will nor his ability to occupy a masculine role seem to be in question here, but rather the “poi” (little bit) that, though it may escape the eyes of most who meet Silence, takes on major significance in defining a man. The problem is not even Silence's body more generally, as both in appearance and physical capacity he seems to excel among boys, but specifically the parts of him that are hidden from view.

The disjunction between his excellent physical appearance and the truth of his naked body is continually stressed as Silence grows and more fully occupies a male role in society. As Florence Bouchet notes, the detailed description of Silence's armor as he prepares to fight on behalf of King Ebain at lines 5336–60 participates in the epic motif of arming the hero and apparently minimizes the markers of his sex visible on his torso by making them possible to hide with a silk tunic.<sup>43</sup> But this detailed portrait, particularly when read in juxtaposition to the portrait of

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43. Florence Bouchet, “L'écriture androgyne: Le travestissement dans le *Roman de Silence*,” *Le Nu et le Vêtu au Moyen Âge (XIIe–XIIIe siècles: Actes du 25ème colloque de CUER MA, 2–3–4 mars 2000, Senefiance 47* (2001): 47–58.

Silence's body as crafted by Nature at birth in lines 1904 to 1955, draws attention again to the hint that Silence's exemplary male surface hides something deficient within.

Sexual maturity and attractiveness to women only exacerbate the discrepancy. If Silence's appearance, even at age 12, has made him an "object of universal desire,"<sup>44</sup> Nature never allows audiences to forget that this erotic desire can never achieve the fulfillment of heterosexual reproduction, telling Silence,

.m. femes a en cest vie  
Ki de toi ont moult grant envie  
Por le bialtet qu'eles i voient,  
Car puet scel estre eles i croient  
Tel cose qu'en toi nen a mie.  
(2513-17)

(There are a thousand women in this world  
who greatly desire you  
for the beauty they see there—  
Because they believe they'll find something there,  
Such a thing as is not in you at all.)

The physical "nature" that Silence conceals from the women who want him is not his "bialtet" or beauty—earlier described in detail as a "natural" product of Nature's craft and labor—since despite the exposure to the elements said to have ruined Silence's complexion (that is, made it more like a man's), this beauty is readily apparent. We have already been told that Silence has rejected the "us" of women in favor of masculine gender roles, so the "cose" (thing) here does not refer to any particular affiliation with femininity that Silence conceals. Instead, it seems to gesture at a physical marker of masculinity—a penis—whose lack is hidden by his clothes.

This catalogue of masculine and feminine physical traits becomes more exaggerated later in the text, after Silence has become a knight in

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44. Bloch, "Silence and Holes," 89.

the court of the King of France. Here, Silence achieves great renown as a jousting knight, but still the narrator seems compelled to comment on the discrepancy between what his fellow knights see and what has been concealed from them:

Tels chevaliers par li i vierse  
Que se il le tenist envierse  
Et il peüst la fin savoir  
Que grant honte en peüst avoir  
Que feme tendre, fainte et malle,  
Ki rien n'a d'ome fors le halle,  
Et fors les dras et contenance,  
L'eüst abatu de sa lance.  
(5157-64)

(Many a knight was struck down by Silence there  
Who, if he held Silence down  
And he could know the truth  
Could have had great shame as a result,  
That a woman, tender, faint, and soft,  
Who had nothing manly except the weather-beaten complexion,  
And except the clothes and bearing,  
Had beaten him at the lance.)

The listing of attributes lends an exaggerated, comic tone to the portrayal of gender in this passage. Silence is patently *not* “tendre, fainte et malle”<sup>45</sup>—his performance in the joust demonstrates that he has not only a man’s appearance but also the physical strength and skill with a lance needed to unhorse an armed knight. Moreover, Silence’s male complexion is not so insignificant as the narrator seems to call it here—if Silence lacks the beard that would mark him as undeniably virile, he also lacks the soft face that Isidore of Seville, for one, counts as an important

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45. He is not “malle” in the sense of “soft” or “weak,” at least, although to call him a “malle feme” in the sense of a “male woman” would be consistent with the narrator’s use of ambivalently gendered phrases to describe Silence.

distinguishing trait of women.<sup>46</sup> The repetition of “fors” (except, apart from) here may hint that, by drawing attention to the list of manly attributes that Silence *does* have, the narrator deliberately renders the description of Silence’s “womanliness” absurd. He may, however, have all the features necessary to be a *virago*, a manly woman, but he is not so manly that he can avoid being a womanly man.<sup>47</sup> The lacuna at the center of this portrayal of Silence’s performance as a man, hinted at in the reference to his phallic “lance,” is Silence’s genitalia: if he has the weapons, complexion, clothing, and bearing of a man, he still lacks one particularly significant marker of manhood.

The focus on genitals as a uniquely privileged marker of sex is certainly not limited to Aristotelian conceptions of women as defective men or thirteenth-century writers whose society placed such emphasis on the importance of dynastic reproduction. Indeed, the presence or lack of a phallus continues to be the sole determiner of sex in many social and official contexts, much to the chagrin of trans men and other transmasculine people who decide against constructive genital surgeries.<sup>48</sup> As

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46. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 182.

47. For the often positive connotations of this term with respect to active women, see for example Kimberly A. LoPrete, “Gendering Viragos: Medieval Perceptions of Powerful Women,” in *Victims or Viragos?*, ed. Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless, *Studies of Medieval and Early Modern Women*; 4 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 17-28.

48. On the administrative, social, and legal hurdles this focus on genitalia causes contemporary trans people, see, for example, Thom Senzee, “7 Lessons in How (And How Not) to Interview Trans People,” *Advocate.com*. Posted April 24 2015. Accessed September 6 2015, available at <http://advocate.com/politics/media/2015/04/24/7-lessons-how-and-how-not-interview-trans-people/>; and Lambda Legal, “FAQ about Identity Documents,” *Lambda Legal: Making the Case for Equality*, accessed March 16, 2017, available at <http://www.lambdalegal.org/know-your-rights/article/trans-identity-document-faq>. The potential impact of difficulty obtaining official documentation such as an updated driver’s license and birth certificate can be severe, with consequences ranging from job and housing discrimination to an inability to use public facilities. This latter has been visible in the passage of such “bathroom bills” as North Carolina’s HB 2, The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, which “shall require every multiple occupancy bathroom or changing facility to be designated for and only used by persons based on their biological sex,” defining “biological sex” as “The physical condition of being male or female, which is stated on a person’s birth

Cromwell notes, “The problem is the attitude that without surgically constructed penises they are not real men or even able to be categorized as such.”<sup>49</sup> The excessive importance placed on the penis as a marker of manhood not only devalues the lives and experiences of trans, intersex, and genderqueer people whose bodies and lives enact different conformations of masculinity, femininity, and nonbinary genders, but it also renders masculinity fragile by tying genitalia to a host of traits, masculine and feminine, that any given cis or trans man may or may not possess.

Despite the emphasis placed on them, genitalia are no more the first indicators of gender identified by contemporary individuals than they are for the knights facing Silence in a joust. Gayle Salamon notes that the term “sexual reassignment surgery” is something of a misnomer, arguing that sex in the public view has much less to do with genitals than “with comportment, clothing, behavior, and social recognition. . . . [I]n the workings of culture, sex attribution has almost nothing to do with genital configuration.”<sup>50</sup> If Heldris’s narrator cannot refrain from obliquely referring to Silence’s lack of a penis, it may be because the text as a whole does not seem to draw straightforward conclusions about the relationship between reproductive potential and gender success. Silence’s success at traditional masculine heroism, juxtaposed with King Ebain’s shortcomings in this area and Silence’s ultimate subjection in marriage to Ebain, conveys a certain cynicism about the ability of innate “masculine” characteristics such as the phallus to create successful and virtuous

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certificate.” General Assembly of North Carolina, Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, Second Extra Session 2016, House Bill 2. Available at <http://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2015E2/Bills/House/PDF/H2v1.pdf>.

49. Jason Cromwell, “Queering the Binaries: Transsituated Identities, Bodies, and Sexualities,” in Stryker and Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 509–20.

50. Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 179. See also Jamison Green, “Look! No, Don’t!: The Visibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men,” in Stryker and Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 499–508. “The signifiers that matter are not necessarily the clothing, or the genitals (which are not visible), or the sex partner (who may not be present or apparent), but the qualities of character and non-genital physicality, as well as aspects of personal expression that may be cultivated or innate, that give the ‘reader’ an idea of the subject’s masculinity or femininity” (505).

men, and about the power of the royal court to maintain conventional standards of courtly living and behavior.

As Lorraine Kochanske Stock points out, Ebain's weaknesses as a ruler and his inability to control his temper align him with misogynistic ideas of women's nature—even, specifically, Eufeme's nature—rather than with men's. As both a ruler and a man, Ebain is constantly destabilized: he behaves unreasonably, his wife deceives him, his subjects rebel, and his overlord the King of France has serious misgivings about his judgment. If Silence's success as a man brings glory to the French king's court and helps prop up Ebain's monarchy, Ebain's own failures endanger his community through wars against Norway and against his own subjects.<sup>51</sup> This negative association between Ebain and stereotypically feminine traits might serve as a counterexample to the frequent argument that *Le Roman de Silence* presents the case for expanded female freedoms in the person of its central protagonist. If the romance destabilizes any straightforward connection between sex and gender, presenting both as malleable, it does not go so far as to argue that these porous and shifting boundaries should be expanded to allow women widespread access to masculine roles, or vice versa. As Sharon Kinoshita notes, "Privileging gender over sex does not prevent the text from treating masculinity as naturally superior to femininity."<sup>52</sup>

This sense of an inferior femininity and an unstable center of royal power may be a factor in the oft-noted ambiguity of the ending, which seems to put Silence in the position he deliberately rejected earlier in the text. Silence has often been productively compared to several heroic female warriors in medieval literature, but comparing him not to cross-dressing women but to other men in medieval literature may illuminate Heldris's criticism of a society in which flawed lords can put even the most talented and worthy of men in impossible positions.

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51. Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable': Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (1997): 7-34, esp. 9-14.

52. Sharon Kinoshita, "Heldris de Cornualle's *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage," *PMLA* 110, no. 3 (1995): 402.

## Mellor N'Engendra Rois Ne Cuens: Silence as Literary Hero

Comparisons of *Le Roman de Silence* with other medieval texts have largely been guided by attempts to interpret the significance of the main crossdressing plot, whose source has been located by many critics in the Grisandole episode of *Lestoire Merlin*,<sup>53</sup> as well as by evaluations of its merit relative to the Arthurian romance tradition.<sup>54</sup> This courtly literary tradition offers potential literary sources and parallels for *Silence* that have been obscured by the general scholarly consensus assuming *Silence*'s gender identity as a woman. Though *Silence*'s excellent performance as a knight and feudal supporter invites comparison with a number of male heroes, I intend to focus on one particular literary tradition and hero in this article: the Breton lai and Lanval, the hero of Marie de France's *Lanval*, which are useful points of comparison for exploring the ways that *Silence* represents the fragile and vulnerable masculinity of young noble men in medieval society and literature.

The comparison with the Breton lai tradition is suggested by a number of factors. The first is that, in its self-referentiality and emphasis on the role of the jongleur—the hero of the story does, after all, spend some time as a minstrel in an apparently plot-irrelevant but thematically important interlude—the romance places lais and minstrelsy at its center. Almost literally, in fact: in a romance of 6706 lines, the minstrel episode stretches from lines 2689 to 3682. At 2761, one minstrel fiddles “un lai berton” (a Breton lai) while in 2765, two minstrels together play “un lai Mabon” (a lai about Mabon), an apparently lost lai on the Welsh Arthurian character. In *Silence*'s metatextual references to itself as a

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53. Thorpe, *Le Roman de Silence*, 14. Jane Bliss speculates that the text may have been written as an “Enfances Grisandoles” to give a backstory for Avenable, that is, the character from *Lestoire Merlin* who takes on the identity of the squire “Grisandole” and is, like *Silence*, exposed by Merlin. Bliss argues that if *Silence* is intended as an origin story, “the apparently regressive ending, which in fact does not close off speculative space, would be opened up and undermined.” *Naming and Namelessness*, 138.

54. See, for example, Sarah Roche-Mahdi's counterargument against the charge that *Silence* is hackneyed and lacking erudition; she makes a case for the textual echoes connecting Merlin in *Silence* to the Merlin of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* and the Vulgate *Lestoire Merlin*. “A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin,” 6–21.

“conte” or a “rime,” as well as in its explicit reference to specific Breton lais, Heldris seems to present *Silence* as in some way comparable or related to the lai tradition.<sup>55</sup>

A second reason to read *Silence* in comparison with the Breton lai tradition is its manuscript context, which highlights geographic and thematic connections between the two. The only extant copy of *Le Roman de Silence* appears in Nottingham MS WLC/LM/6, a compilation manuscript containing a number of narrative texts including *La Chanson d’Aspremont*, Gautier d’Arras’s *Ille et Galeron*, and several fabliaux (as well as a fragment of a fable by Marie de France, “De la cugnie” or “About the Ax”). These texts, rather than being randomly assembled, seem at least to be connected by certain shared motifs, including Breton characters and musicians. The hero of *Ille et Galeron* is a Breton who ultimately becomes the emperor of Rome, while *La Chanson d’Aspremont* features a *jongleur* named Graelent—which also happens to be the name of the hero of another Breton lai, a character who, like *Silence* and Marie de France’s *Lanval*, must reject the advances and then the hostility of his queen.<sup>56</sup> It

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55. Linda Marie Zaerr counts ten instances of Heldris’s narrator calling *Silence* a “conte.” “When *Silence* Plays *Vielle*,” 104. Though such generic terms can be slippery, it is perhaps worth noting that Marie de France frequently refers to her *Lais* as “con-tes” or “cuntes”; the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics*, in noting this, also comments that “Later, the term *lai* became synonymous with *conte*.” U. T. Holmes and V. T. F. Brogan, “Lai,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 780.

56. See Keith Busby, “Post-Chrétien Verse Romance,” *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes* 14 (2007): 11–24, on the possible occasion of the manuscript’s assembly, Béatrix de Gavre’s marriage to Breton lord Guy IX of Laval around 1286, and how this might have influenced the selection of texts in the collection. For more on the manuscript context of *Silence*, see also Alison Stones, “Two French Manuscripts: WLC/LM/6 and WLC/LM/7” in *The Wollaton Medieval Manuscripts: Texts, Owners and Readers*, ed. Ralph Hanna and Thorlac Turville-Petre (York: York Medieval Press, 2010): 41–56.

57. For *Lanval*, see Marie de France, *Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Karl Warnke and trans. Laurence Harf-Lancner (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990), 134–67; for *Guingamor*, see *French Arthurian Literature IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Boydell & Brewer, 2007), 141–96; and for Graelent, see Burgess and Brook, *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, 349–412.

is to this plot point, the Potiphar's Wife motif, that I turn now in order to highlight the similar functions it may serve in *Silence* and *Lanval*.

The trope of a queen attempting to seduce and then threaten the hero is a fairly common motif in the *lais*: it appears in Marie de France's *Lanval*, in *Guingamor* (an anonymous *lai* that also features a rejected queen sending the hero on an impossible task), and in the aforementioned *Graelent* (in which the rejected queen causes the hero's financial ruin at the beginning of the *lai*).<sup>57</sup> Although *Silence* is a much longer narrative, Heldris stresses the trope's importance to the plot by repeating it: after *Silence* initially rejects Queen Eufeme's advances, she tries and fails to have him executed, tries and succeeds to have him sent away to the court of the King of France, and sends a falsified message encouraging the King of France to execute him (which, after consulting with his advisors, he declines to do). When *Silence* returns to Ebain's court and Eufeme again accosts and fails to seduce him, she succeeds in having *Silence* sent to find Merlin, on pain of death if he fails. Since Merlin can only be captured by "engien de feme" (5803; a woman's trick), Eufeme assumes that this will rid her of *Silence* once and for all, but *Silence* finds Merlin, who reveals both *Silence*'s and Eufeme's secrets and prompts Eufeme's execution.<sup>58</sup>

For comparison, a brief summary of *Lanval* reveals that the Potiphar's Wife motif is similarly important to its plot. When the *lai* opens, *Lanval*, who has been neglected by Arthur despite (or perhaps because of) his envy-inspiring virtues, has run out of money entirely and wanders in the woods to decide what to do next. There, he is led to a mysterious woman who becomes his lover and offers him unlimited money—as long as he does not speak of her. Under the pressure of repeated seduction attempts by Guinevere, followed by an accusation of sodomy, he rashly reveals that he loves and is loved by a woman more beautiful than the queen. Charged with treason for this insult, he is unable to produce his

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58. Critics generally read this as the reason *Silence* finds Merlin—he is a woman "tricking" the king with his masculine garb and later tricking Merlin into eating cooked meat. Given the negative portrayal of Eufeme, however, the text may contain the suggestion that the "engien de feme" here is Eufeme's, rather than or in addition to *Silence*'s.

lover no matter how often he calls for her (a consequence, no doubt, of breaking his promise and revealing the secret), and faces a possible death sentence until, on the day of his trial, he is rescued by his lover and whisked away to Avalon.<sup>59</sup>

The obvious commonality between the two texts is the Potiphar's Wife motif, but the similarities between the ways this trope affects the characterization of the protagonists and their courts has been less thoroughly explored. Like Silence, Lanval is constrained by the force of a powerful secret that prevents his defending himself from the queen's advances and anger. Both men are, in varying senses, simultaneously outstanding and outsiders in the court: Lanval is the son of a foreign king, while Silence has been raised in isolation by maternal relatives; both characters' virtues have attracted attention and envy among their peers; and both have returned from adventures abroad (living as a disguised minstrel and fighting in tournaments in France, or engaging in amorous affairs in Avalon) when they attract the queen's attention. Both heroes begin their replies to the queen with an indignant request to be left alone. The narrator describes Lanval's response thus: "Dame, fet il, laissez m'ester!" (271; "Lady," he said, "Leave me be;"),<sup>60</sup> while as for Silence, "Dame, fait il, por Deu ostés!" (380; "Lady," he said, "for the love of God, leave off"). Both follow this exclamation with an expression of loyalty to their lords and then announce their unwillingness to do wrong by him using variants of the word "mesfaire": Lanval says that not even for the love of Guinevere "mesferai a mun seignur" (276; will I wrong my lord), while Silence says "Meffait nen a el mont gregnor" (3805; There is no greater crime in the world) than betraying his lord with his lord's wife.

Each queen responds by trying again to persuade the hero to submit to her advances. In *Le Roman de Silence*, Eufeme's repeated efforts to

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59. For a summary of the scholarly discussion about the relationships between *Lanval*, *Graelent*, and *Guingamor*, see Glyn S. Burgess, "Marie de France and the Anonymous Lais," in *A Companion to Marie de France*, ed. Logan Whalen (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 155.

60 Marie de France, *Lanval*, in Warnke and Harf-Lancner, *Lais de Marie de France*, 147, line 271. Citations from *Lanval* will come from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number. English translations are my own.

convince Silence provide rhetorical amplification to the scene; this section is much shorter in *Lanval* (as, indeed, the whole text is). But in both cases, the queen's response to the failure of this attempt is to assume that the hero is homosexual. Both queens hint at the religious impact of this accusation, Eufeme by referring to Silence as an "erite" (literally, a heretic, connoting spiritual as well as sexual deviance), and Guinevere by implying that Arthur has been endangering his own soul by allowing Lanval, as an alleged homosexual, to be in his company:

mult est mis sire malbailliz  
ki pres de lui vus a sufert;  
mun escient que Deu en pert!  
(286-88)

(My lord is much harmed  
By allowing you to be near to him:  
I know that he is losing God's grace because of it!)

Such indictments render Lanval's and Silence's refusal not only a personal rejection but, perhaps counterintuitively given their stated reasons for refusal, a threat to the moral and social well-being of their societies.<sup>61</sup>

In response (either to the accusations or to the queen's advances), both heroes proffer the existence of other lovers as a justification for their refusal of the queens' love. Of course, in Silence's case, this is not actually true—he has no other lover (in contrast with Nicolette, Yde, and other cross-dressed female characters). The narrator provides no insight as to why Silence uses this particular excuse; unlike in *Lanval*, Eufeme articulates her suspicions about Silence's lack of interest in women not to him but to herself, so he is unaware of any need to rebut this particular claim. Since the original rejection that resulted in these accusations, moreover, he has gone on to a successful martial career, including rescuing the king from rebellion, that should on its own counter any argument

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61. See Stefan Jurasinski, "Treason and the Charge of Sodomy in the *Lai de Lanval*," *Romance Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2007): 290-302, for the political implications of Guinevere's accusation in *Lanval*.

that he poses a threat to the moral fabric of his society. Eufeme does not demand that Silence produce this lover, distinguishing the impact of this claim from that in *Lanval* (as well as *lais* with similar plots, like *Graelent*), and indeed, its impact on the plot of *Silence* seems negligible. As a plot point or a rhetorical strategy, its main effect seems to be to connect Silence with a tradition of lover-heroes from which his lack of amorous activities would otherwise completely exclude him.

*Lanval* and *Silence* end very differently, with Lanval leaving the Arthurian court for the idealized, otherworldly Avalon and Silence remaining in his lord's court but abandoning the identity to which he has devoted so much time and effort. Whereas Lanval's association with the supernatural, in the form of his fairy mistress, ultimately saves him, Silence's meeting with the supernatural in the person of Merlin results in the restoration of women's right to inherit in England but the destruction of the life he has built.<sup>62</sup> Though our lack of knowledge about Heldris makes it impossible to say whether *Silence* is influenced by *Lanval*, the internal references to the *lai* tradition and the commonalities in plot points suggest at least a comparison between this romance and the Breton *lai*. What might we learn from such comparisons?

Along with their outsider positions, Lanval and Silence have something else in common: they are improperly rewarded for their virtues by their respective lords.<sup>63</sup> Although at the beginning of *Lanval*, we learn that Arthur's kingdom is facing incursions by raiding Scots and Picts, which is why he has made his residence at Carlisle and is in need of talented knights, Arthur's failure to fulfill his obligations to Lanval leaves the knight poverty-stricken and unable to remain at court. Similarly,

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62. Roche-Mahdi's analysis of Merlin's role concludes that, when compared to other texts, *Silence's* Merlin seems more like a hostile force, as "the elements that persuade the reader he is a genuinely 'friendly helper' are absent, and much is added that reinforces the impression that he is playing a malicious game." "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin," 17.

63. Though space does not permit a detailed discussion of other "Potiphar's Wife" *lais* here, it is worth mentioning that this is also true for *Graelent*, who represents his king against his enemies in a tournament at the beginning of the *lai*. Guingamor does not fit this mold, but he is the king's nephew; Silence's father Cadour is also the nephew of his respective king.

Ebain faces military threats to the stability of his kingdom from the Earl of Chester's uprising but nonetheless fails to act to maintain Silence's loyalty.<sup>64</sup> This puts both Silence and Lanval, interestingly, in positions similar to that of the poet-narrator who, as the prologue of *Le Roman de Silence* explains, feels improperly rewarded by *his* patrons. Lanval, Silence, the narrator—and indeed the jealous *jongleurs* who teach Silence to become a musician and then attempt to murder him when his success threatens their livelihoods—all are at the mercy of a lord who may or may not reward them for their services to him.

Heather Tanner, in her reading of the social dynamics of Heldris's romance, notes that the prologue of *Le Roman de Silence*, rather than explicitly stating the theme of the romance, contains instead a complaint about stingy nobles who do not appreciate art and thus do not fulfill their functions as sponsors to the arts. Far from being irrelevant, Tanner suggests, this prologue introduces a major topic of the work, namely, that lordship and patronage “will be a central theme of the story.”<sup>65</sup> Read in this light, Silence's journey serves to identify places where the king and, by extension, his society have failed in cultivating courtly virtues and in properly appreciating talented subjects. Perhaps the best examples of this emerge in the subplot in which Silence disguises himself as a minstrel: when Silence runs away, Cador banishes all *jongleurs* from Cornwall on pain of death. This punishment extends even to those who let a minstrel escape, making Cador's actions even more egregiously unfair. We might

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64. See Robert S. Sturges, who argues that, despite Silence's loyalty to him, Ebain is a terrible lord, not only for Silence but for any young man dependent on the generosity of a feudal lord for his livelihood. Not only does he send Silence away from the court without consulting his advisors on the strength of Eufeme's false rape accusation, “he subsequently, for the same reason, rewards Silence's excellent service in battle with an apparently impossible task.” “The Crossdresser and the ‘Juventus’: Category Crisis in ‘Silence,’” *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (2002): 47, <https://www-jstor-org/stable/27870412>. Moreover, as Eufeme complains, if the rape accusation were accurate, this would also be an inadequate response and out of keeping with Ebain's policy of strict penalties for lawbreakers, described in lines 112–20. It also contrasts with what we are told about Ebain's largesse in lines 121–38: there, he conscientiously maintains a force of young warriors via generous gifts.

65. Heather Tanner, “Lords, Wives, and Vassals in the *Roman de Silence*,” *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 141, doi:0.1353/jowh.2012.0004.

compare this behavior to Ebain's harsh treatment of lawbreakers—the narrator tells us that the king throws anyone who breaks the law into prison for life, “n'a droit n'a tort” (117; right or wrong), again rendering the ostensible workings of law more about the whims of a lord than about true justice.<sup>66</sup>

Whereas Lanval's escape to the other world suggests the possibility of a remedy to the stingy or ill-advised overlord, for Silence escape from traditional hierarchies of power proves impossible. Every step he takes to extricate himself from his conundrum only more firmly entangles him in a court in which Ebain, despite his failings as a lord, successfully consolidates power and in which the disruptive force of the supernatural, rather than upsetting this state of affairs, in fact only affirms Ebain's position. The ambivalence of the “happy” ending, then, parallels the author's skepticism about attaining fair recompense for his work. In a society where the nobility has lost the generosity and sensibility that helped previous generations of courtly knights and writers to flourish, neither fighting ability nor writing ability guarantees a stable position and an appropriately appreciative patron. In this reading, considerations of class rather than gender take priority, and reading Silence as a young man, albeit one with a particularly pointed weakness, rather than as a woman in disguise, helps illuminate the parallel between the vulnerable knight and the vulnerable poet that informs Heldris's treatment of his material, including the Potiphar's Wife motif, in *Le Roman de Silence*.

What might be the impact for Heldris of making the hero of this plot a character whose masculine identity is rendered complicated and vulnerable both by Silence's internal conflicts and the pressures resulting from the unjust disinheritance of women and the lack of a royal heir? The answer might lie in the apparent pessimism I have outlined in the above paragraphs. Economic vulnerability, the possibility of unjust criminal prosecution at the whim of capricious lords, the physical vulnerability of a knight in battle or a king under attack—all intimate the instability of men's positions in *Silence*, and so it is perhaps not surprising that

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66. See Stock, “The Importance of Being Gender ‘Stable,’” 9-10, for a discussion of how the apparent praise in the text's introduction of Ebain masks a critique of his kingship.

even the right to live as a man is subject to the whims of external forces beyond the individual's control. Susceptibility to attack from a social superior or the supernatural extends to the protagonist's very identity in a way that making Silence a cisgender hero or heroine would not fully illustrate. If physical sex and gender are malleable, as the references to Silence as an "uvre" or creation of both his parents and Nature intimate, this creative power and flexibility offer no more guarantees of stability than the minstrel's talents.

In his analysis of the ways that *Le Roman de Silence* displaces concerns about class onto a discourse of gender through the figure of Silence, Robert S. Sturges compares the apparent vulnerability of *jongleurs* expressed in the romance's prologue and the Malduit episode with the crisis following the rise of primogeniture described by Georges Duby, in which younger sons, no longer allowed to inherit portions of their fathers' estates, found themselves in search of a stable source of income and social status. Cut off from their familiar wealth and position, these young men not only faced the threat of possible abuse from an unfair overlord but also, as a displaced site of military strength without stability, themselves posed a potential threat to the existing social order. Sturges concludes that the ending of *Le Roman de Silence*, in which female inheritance is restored to England, represents a resolution of both the economic and the gender crisis present throughout the romance: "If the crossdresser has served as a displacement for the real-life class crisis caused by the disinheritance of the Juventus, the resolution of the economic issue means that the crossdresser has served her purpose."<sup>67</sup>

I would argue, however, that neither crisis is fully resolved. Sharon Kinoshita observes that Ebain's tendency to usurp his subordinates' authority over familial marriages appears both at the beginning of the romance, when he helps to orchestrate Cador and Eufemie's marriage, and at the end, when he unilaterally decides to marry Silence. As she adds, this marriage is dubious for other reasons, as well: Silence does not verbally assent to it, which "violates the reformist requirement of the freely-given consent of both partners to contract a legitimate marriage"

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67. Sturges, "The Crossdresser and the 'Juventus,'" 48. See also Clark, "Queering Gender," 50-63, for a discussion of the ways class and gender crises are intertwined in *Silence*.

and “covers up the incest of Ebain’s union to his own great-niece.”<sup>68</sup> If the romance spends little time detailing the legal or genealogical specifics of Ebain and Silence’s marriage, it does leave a lingering hint that Ebain’s underlying flaws as a king remain. Silence may be a better queen than Eufeme, but as long as the king’s failings are never corrected, the projected happy ending for women—or for that matter troubadours and other vulnerable subjects—may ring a bit hollow.

Moreover, given that Silence himself, during his debate with Nature, Nurture, and Reason, has raised the question of just how capable he is of living as a woman, it seems reasonable for readers to ask the same question: to what extent *can* someone who has spent his entire life as a man function as a queen? As we have seen, for Silence, beginning life as a woman represents a step down. This is not as easy or “natural” a process as the narrator’s reassuring tone at the end might suggest; Silence does in fact require physical changes to feminize his body. After King Ebain orders Silence disrobed, the situation is explained to him, and Silence is dressed in female clothing,

D’illeuc al tierc jor que Nature  
Ot recovree sa droiture  
Si prist Nature a repolir  
Par tolt le cors et a tolr  
Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle.  
(6669-73)

(From then to the third day since Nature  
Recovered her rightful possession,  
Nature took to repolishing  
Silence’s entire body and removing  
Everything masculine that was on it.)

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68. Sharon Kinoshita, “Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the ‘Roman de Silence,’” *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (2002): 72, <https://www-jstor-org/stable/27870414>. See also Tanner, who wonders as to how successful a husband Ebain will be to Silence: “Will Ebain act upon her proven wisdom and good character by seeking her advice and assent in private? Or will he be fooled by Nature’s removal of all masculine traces upon her body and treat her as he treated Eufeme?” “Lords, Wives, and Vassals,” 152.

As Peggy McCracken notes, however, the very fact that Nature *had* to remove masculine traces from Silence's body suggests that Silence's ultimate assumption of a female role is more complicated than a cross-dressed woman shedding a disguise. McCracken wonders what exactly Ebain saw when he ordered Silence undressed, "since the 'truth' of Silence's anatomy does not appear to be self-evident at all," adding that Nature's physical reshaping of Silence's body "denies the autonomous truth of sexual characteristics; where the King saw a woman's features, Nature saw masculine traces."<sup>69</sup> This process of feminization implies that Silence's transformation from "Silentius" to "Silentia" is just that: a transformation, not a revelation of clear truth, and a transformation with ambiguous benefits. If Silence's earlier declarations demonstrate that he finds at least some happiness in living as a man, his silence at the end makes his attitude toward his new body and new life obscure.

*In fine*, though the ambiguity in the portrayal of Silence's gender distinguishes him from most other medieval literary heroes, he also shares important characteristics with heroes ranging from Tristan to Roland to Eliduc: all are vulnerable to jealous peers and an older generation who constantly stand as obstacles to their desires. In a time in which an old feudal aristocracy was fading into a new kind of fiefdom preserved not by military strength but by reproduction and primogeniture, traditional guarantees of land and power no longer provided the secure social identity to which a young knight or, for that matter, a minstrel seeking a patron might have aspired.<sup>70</sup> In this sense, Silence is vulnerable not only because of Eufeme's hostility but in the same way that every adulterous lover, paramour of a fairy mistress, or young *chanson de geste* hero surrounded by only men is vulnerable: none of their relationships can produce legitimate heirs. And Silence's only area of "female" expertise, minstrelsy, is shown in both Heldris's prologue and the "Malduit" episode to be an equally unreliable profession for a man. To examine Silence solely as a female character obscures the way he exemplifies and even amplifies these areas of male vulnerability, and the way that he can *only*

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69. McCracken, "The Boy Who Was a Girl," 532.

70. See Kinoshita, "Feudal Politics of Lineage," esp. 402-6, for a discussion of this.

achieve a position of social stability by completely effacing his former self and abandoning the pursuit of male measures of success. He is a man and a hero, that is, insofar as the challenges he faces in a changing feudal world are those of a romance hero, and his body represents both one more area of vulnerability and a potential escape from this struggle, albeit not a particularly appealing one.

### Conclusion

The preceding arguments are not intended to undermine the work of feminist critics who have read Silence as an empowering figure for lesbians, cross-dressing women, and women more generally. Instead, I propose merely one more vantage point from which to view this challenging and complex literary work. Clearly, the question of what defines a man or a woman and what makes for a good one is of concern to Heldris. Silence's success as a knight juxtaposed with King Ebain's weaknesses; Silence's own inner dilemma over what gender role to choose and why; and the prominence of the allegorical figures of Nature, Nurture, and Reason as they argue over Silence all affirm the author's interest in these questions of identity. Ultimately, both the narrator and Silence are trapped by literary and societal conventions; as there is no miracle restoring the security of the narrator's position, there is no fairy lover or descending angel who can extract Silence from the narrative corner into which he has been painted. Yet, if Nature must ultimately win out and Silence must take on the role of queen, cutting off any future as a knightly hero, surely we as readers are not also obliged to terminate the discussion at this point, accepting the narrator's final remarks as not only applicable to how we should interpret Silence's gender identity but also as to how we should interpret the rest of the text.

I would like to conclude by quoting Sandy Stone, who, in her discussion of the way trans stories have been framed to occlude difference and exclude complexity and "impurities," suggests viewing "transsexuals not as a class or problematic 'third gender,' but rather as a *genre*—a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured

sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.”<sup>71</sup> If reading Silence or other medieval figures as belonging to such a genre requires a messy examination of inconsistencies, ambiguities, and slippages in the way characters (and people) are permitted to express themselves, *Le Roman de Silence* seems to embrace such an exploration. If the potential for “productive disruption” meets with ambiguous success at the end of Silence’s story, this very ambiguity provides space throughout the text for audiences to question assumptions, deconstruct boundaries, and explore new possibilities.

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71. Sandy Stone, “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in Stryker and Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 231.