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Translation Trouble in *Le Roman de Silence*: A Test Case in Digital Editing for Polysemy

> *Silence needs this third term, but also a fourth, a fifth, a sixth — an infinite number of terms to express gendered identities*.
> — Elizabeth A. Waters "The Third Path" *Arthuriana* 1997

There is only one manuscript copy of the thirteenth century Picard verse romance *Le Roman de Silence*, and even that one copy was almost silenced forever. As Frederick Cowper describes in his assessment of the Wollaton Library Collection's Laval-Middleton 6 (WLC/LM/6), "Apparently, it had been there [at Wollaton Hall] since the reign of Henry VIII, for it was discovered by Mr. Stevenson in a box marked 'Old Papers – no value,' with letters from Henry VIII and other old documents and manuscripts" (Cowper 17).[1] After its discovery in 1911, *Le Roman de Silence* was first edited by Lewis Thorpe in 1972, first translated into English by Regina Psaki in 1991, then translated again by Sarah Roche-Mahdi in 1992 (with further editions in 1999 and 2007), and finally translated into Modern French by Florence Bouchet in 2000. Although the original text only survives in one copy, the many copies of its critical editions have been the fuel for much impassioned debate concerning its mysterious author/narrator, Heldris of Cornwall, and his intended message regarding the influence of nature and nurture on one's gender and one's character.[2]

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[1] In 1989, Peter Allen describes the manuscript's condition as exceedingly delicate, but it has since been restored.

[2] "The maxim that 'Nature passe norreture' was proverbial, but no text prior to *Silence* constructs 'Noreture' as an allegorical character" (Newman 141).

The narrative concerns the youth Silence who is born biologically female but who is raised entirely in conformity with a masculine gender performance — even to the point of becoming the best of all knights in the land — so that Silence and Silence's parents, Cador and Eufemie, may retain the rights to their land in secret violation of a ruling by the King Ebain that women may no longer inherit in England. Silence is ultimately stripped naked before the court ironically to maintain 'her' innocence against rape accusations by the cruel, foreign Queen Eufem, who is violently executed for cheating on the king with a man dressed as a nun (also stripped nude before the court), and King Ebain finally revokes the former inheritance law and marries Silence himself calling 'him' his most handsome, valiant knight (vv. 6579-6581), thereby reabsorbing the disputed lands into the fold of the monarch's control.

Some label the text an outright misogynist defense of the status quo, while others revel in the gendered possibilities the text allows its reader to imagine.[3] The text is so unstable and so unorthodox that many speculate that the otherwise unknown Heldris may be a woman in disguise.[4] Some question the quality of the writing itself, suggesting that its weaving together of

[3] Psaki writes, "We as critics disagree; that's our job. Published interpretations run the gamut from reading it as rah-rah feminism to reading it as boo-hiss chauvinism… How does the same romance generate such disparate evaluations of such a central issue?" ("The Modern Editor" 79). It is almost a trope of the scholarship on *Silence* to include a footnote placing all previous scholarship into rival categories. Robert Khan, Barbara Newman, Lorraine Stock, and Katherine Terrell all provide their own categorizations of the scholarship that precedes them, and their categorizations occasionally clash with one another. For my part, I find the following scholars to land in the camp of *Silence* as reinforcing a misogynist message: Blumreich (1997), Callahan (2002), Gaunt (1990), Hess (2011), Keene (2004), Kinoshita (2002), and Pratt (2003), whereas the following find a more subversive feminist message (either by the accident or intention of Heldris, the author): Akbari (1994), Barr (2020), Brahney (1985), Jewers (1997), Labbie (1997), Lloyd (1987), Psaki (1991 & 1997), and Stock (1997). And finally, the following names rest on a more ambiguous gender interpretation: Allen (1989), Bouchet (2001), Bloch (1983 & 1986), Burr (2016), Campbell (2019), Clark (2002), Cooper (1985), Khan (2002), Krause (2015), McCracken (1994), Newman (2003), Perret (1985), Terrell (2008), Victorin (2001), and Waters (1997).

[4] See Kathleen Brahney who is the first to raise this hypothesis in her chapter "When Silence was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*" (1985). Barbara Newman's chapter "Did Goddesses Empower Woman? The Case of Dame Nature" (2003) also offers an interesting

dialects and its seemingly erratic spellings and word choice are the result of ineptitude rather than authorial intention.[5] Others praise the text's abundance of word play and its manifold, interwoven motifs. On the possibility of an intentionally ridiculous narrator as an authorial choice, Psaki writes, "On the other hand, it is quite possible that for *this* text, a faithful verse translation may guide modern readers towards a refreshed appreciation of the absurdities of the narrating voice and his claims" ("Verse Versus Poetry" 429-430). And although she is critical of Heldris's voice, Burr suggests that the text is written with the intention to "provoke dialogue extratextually well after *Le Roman de Silence* concludes" (34), and no doubt, it certainly does. But is all of the scholarly, contentious, extratextual dialogue as productive as it could be?

In the absence of a more diplomatic edition and translation process in which all readers are *active* readers participating in the creative process that is reading this premodern text through modern eyes, what results is an echo chamber of scholarship hashing and rehashing the same key moments, the same key lines from the narrative (in particular the naming of Silence, the Nature versus Noreture dispute, the sexual advances of the Queen Eufeme, the stripping of Silence, and the abruptly misogynist coda by Heldris the narrator) over and over again. And as we repeat ourselves rehashing the same five scenes from the text over and over, drawing our intellectual lines in the sand, we neglect the rest of this rich text and the abundant detail of its language to our own detriment. In place of this *noise*,[6] what is needed is a living space in which readers can contribute their preferred edits and translations constructively and collaboratively.

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comparison of Heldris of Cornwall with Christine de Pizan both of whom treat Dame Nature in a similarly unorthodox way when compared to their contemporaries such as Jean de Meun.

[5] In "Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*", Kristin Burr writes, "He appears to be a man of limited ability" (38) based on Heldris's obtuse turn of phrase and contradictory generalizing. And in his corrections to the Thorpe edition, Félix Lecoy writes, "Heldris ne peut guère passer pour un styliste" (112).

[6] When Eufemie is giving birth to Silence, there is a humorous call for peace and quite, "Ma dame n'a mestier de noise!" (v. 1998). All of the Old French citations in this paper come from the Roche-Mahdi 2007 edition unless otherwise specified.

Despite a wide range of interpretations, the common thread running through scholarship on *Silence* is a shared frustration with the inability of modern language translations to convey the abundant polysemy of the text. It is not the fault of individual editors and translators but rather the limitations of traditional print technology that prevents us from more fully engaging with this unique, polysemous text. Unlike a traditional print edition, a flexible, animate digital edition could reflect the mutability of Heldris's elusive language, thereby articulating the ways in which *Silence* itself translates gender (Campbell 2019). In this paper, I will establish the need for nontraditional editing and translation practices when working with *Silence*, and I will demonstrate the benefits of the developement of such a digital edition.

The Call for New Methods

In the current scholarship around *Silence*, there exists a shared frustration with the editions and translations available with more than a little finger wagging taking place largely in the footnotes. As traditional practice dictates of course, scholars indicate in their writing which editions and translations they are using as their reference texts, but many specify that they are using their own translations due to complaints they have with the print ones available. For example, Katherine Terrell uses her own translations and complains directly about the gendered fixity of Roche-Mahdi's writing:

> ...this translation obscures the degree to which the narrator's grammatical usage follows Silence's public persona; employing feminine forms only when Silence is generally acknowledged as female, Heldris uses exclusively masculine grammar as long as Silence successfully passes as male… Any use of gendered language for Silence imposes a fixed meaning, stabilizing her as either masculine or feminine while denying other possibilities and omitting to address an invariable surplus of significance (45)

Terrell's complaint is not about inaccuracy in the translation per se; the problem for Terrell is its *fixity*. In a similar vein, Lorraine Stock pushes against both Psaki and Roche-Mahdi's translations of line "Non ai, se vos estes estables" (3817):

> Psaki translates this line as 'Not at all, if you are *firm*,' while Roche-Mahdi renders it, 'No I'm not, if you're *normal*.' Both translations imply gender or sexual instability, perhaps even sexual impotence. 'Estables,' however, which literally means 'stable,' is a multivalent code by which Heldris tests the boundaries of sex and gender. (8)

Ten years later, Psaki later agrees with Stock's improvement in her 2007 chapter "Verse Versus Poetry: Translating Medieval Narrative Verse" writing in a footnote of her own, "... neither Roche-Mahdi nor I did justice in our translation choices to the work done in the text by the term *estable* (4068)" (426n13). *Ten years* passed in this conversation in footnotes correcting the use of a single word in *Silence*. If fixity of gendered language is something to be avoided in *Silence*, surely the fixity of modern editing practices is something to be avoided as well. The mutability of gender in *Silence* is something that a traditional modern language edition will inherently struggle with, and so, what is required is an edition as mutable as Heldris's language.

Others go so far as to denounce the editions as outright in error, though these complaints are usually gentle and again tucked away in footnotes, and these 'errors' have a dramatic effect on the gendered readings of *Silence*. When considering the passage in which Heldris differentiates good women from bad women (vv. 6684-6694), Barbara Newman writes:

> Freed from the confusion created by an early editorial mistake [n26: The editions of Lewis Thorpe (1972) and Sarah Roche-Mahdi (1992) both have a comma after v. 6690 and a period at the end of 6691. I have adopted the valuable emendation of Simon Gaunt, 'The Significance of Silence' (211). This reading makes good sense out of *a passage that*

> *is garbled in both the Psaki and Roche-Mahdi translations.*], this oft-reviled passage actually softens and nuances the apparent triumph of Nature. (147)[7]

More blatant is Karen Pratt's condemnation of the proliferation of misreadings due to faulty editing and translation, which she calls "violence to Old French phonology and syntax" (96n32). In one example concerning the line "No jo n'ai soig mais de taisir" (v. 6627)[8], Pratt refutes Gaunt's conclusion that Silence silences herself in the end using an argument based in a dispute over translation choices, "It is a pity that so many scholars have followed Gaunt's and before him Bloch's reading of this key moment in the roman" (101n45). On this same issue , Waters for her part sides with Gaunt but still praises Psaki's translations otherwise. Pratt emphasizes the value of editing and translation as the foundation of quality scholarship, which I agree with wholeheartedly, but I do not think the problem is wholly attributable to a lack of quality in the editions and translations, rather it is due to the insufficiency of our traditional methods. And of course, intellectual contention is not a bad thing, but perhaps a common ground could be established via a diplomatic approach to such a contentious text.

As far back as 1989, Peter Allen in his chapter "The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing and *Le Roman de Silence*" questions traditional methods specifically when working on *Silence*:

> Our models of reading attempt to elucidate, pin down, and disambiguate medieval texts; *Le Roman de Silence* quietly, stubbornly, refuses to make itself accessible to this kind of approach. We cannot remove the ambiguities from the romance without breaking its silence – without destroying the object we want to study… If, however, we can open

[7] My emphasis added

[8] Psaki translates the line as "I no longer wish to be silent." Gaunt gives, "I care only to be silent," and Roche-Mahdi has, "nor do I care to keep silent any longer." Evidently, the interpretation is fraught and has an incredible amount of bearing on this crucial scene in the narrative.

> ourselves up to the text and accept its ambiguities, the text will free us to understand it better and to take pleasure in our readerly role. (Allen 99)

He goes on to write, "... the poem refuses to be reduced to a single meaning" (Allen 104). What if, then, many voices spoke *Silence* together in one place, at one time, rather than a limited few with the authoritative titles of editor and translator — titles that are almost always in the singular — across decades and in diffuse papers?

Psaki recognizes that, "*Silence* tries to pose and explore a problem, not to resolve it" ("The Modern Editor" 80), and she calls for a better method to participate in this exploration:

> If our questions and preoccupations regarding medieval literature have evolved, perhaps we should also reconsider the form in which we are accustomed to seeing medieval texts… *i.e.*, in diplomatic rather than critical editions. It would be fascinating to see the kinds of readings students and scholars would arrive at with a little less guidance than most modern editions offer. (81)

Silence scholars for the most part are already using their own translations in tandem with existing print editions, but these reader translations are scattered across the ether, lost like so many manuscript fragments, existing only in dusty copies in the backs of the drawers of the people who wrote them. This tense dialogue around the 'best' translation is already taking place tucked away in the footnotes, so why not create a space, a repository, a virtual archive perhaps, in which all these competing translations can be preserved to contend with each other directly?

Why the Digital-Medieval?

Psaki calls for a revisioning of traditional textual editing practices in general, and she suggests that because of traditional practices, "we have perhaps lost by trying to pin our texts down, to fix them, to make them say one thing or the other — but *not* a multiplicity of competing

or even contradictory things" ("The Modern Editor" 80). In place of critical editions, she advocates for a more diplomatic approach that would place more power in the hands of the modern reader as opposed to the editor who might otherwise prescribe a particular reading of a given text to a general audience.[9] Although Psaki was skeptical of the role "electronic media" (83) might play in resolving the mediation problem, a quality, flexible digital edition could be the answer to connecting modern audiences to the linguistic richness and ambiguity of texts like *Silence*. Unlike a critical print edition that might as well be etched in stone, an animate digital edition could reflect the mutability of Heldris's elusive language.

There are several advantages to engaging with the digital-medieval just as there are several pitfalls of which to be wary. First, it is certainly the case with WLC/LM/6 that access to the unique, original manuscript is highly limited as it has not been digitized and only a limited audience of scholars may have the means and expertise to engage with print photocopies of the manuscript available for purchase through the University of Nottingham. In her work on the manuscript's miniatures, Michelle Bolduc urges for the practical importance of engaging with the manuscript writing, "One might argue that this particular romance needs to be read, that the words on the page need to be seen, in order to avoid entangling the characters" (103), but barring future digitization efforts or a broadening of in-person visits by the general public, the general reader is left with what Elaine Treharne would call a fragment of the plenitext. Advocating for the superiority of the material object over all other mediations, Treharne writes:

> And while it is entirely possible to fragment the whole and discuss components individually, in order to acquire what I call *fulfillment* or *optimal interpretative potential*

[9] For example, Psaki poses the question, "To what extent do various modern editing practices (which are far from uniform) promote a perception of a misogynist Middle Ages well beyond what the original artifacts may support?" ("The Modern Editor" 78). She goes on to write, "The difficulty I have with modern editing practices, then, is that they bring often unintentional baggage to the meeting of the reader and the text" (85).

> it is essential to acknowledge that this, and possibly all, TEXT must include the thing itself in its entirety… for the greater proportion of a modern audience on any given day, one has necessarily to rely on the digital replication: the world of the ironically disembodied and defleshed simulacrum, avatar, surrogate. (470)

Drawing a boundary around what I propose can be done with digital editions, I agree that such digital editions cannot provide users with the TEXT in its entirety, but this 'fulfillment' is not the goal I propose. We are only beginning to realize the potential of the digital-medieval, and one-to-one replications of original manuscripts may be a fool's errand, but replication is not the only worthy goal worth working toward. What I propose is a much more modest objective: an animate partial edition of the TEXT, a bridge by which non-specialists and novices may cross over into the text as active participants in its modern construction. As Heather Bamford and Emily Francomano point out in their manifesto on the digital-medieval, "... we should be aware that we are creating, not reproducing or straightforwardly representing, manuscript cultures" (41).[10] In the absence of access to TEXT, the practical concession must be acknowledged that readers need a better user experience with the text.

Bamford and Francomano offer one key advantage of the virtual over the physical: survivability. They write:

> Scholars have tended to worry that intangibility of data and digitally archived texts is what also makes them ephemeral, vulnerable to loss when technologies for data

[10] It is interesting though to consider the ways in which digital editing practices may be seen to reflect medieval reading practices as readers download, edit, and comment upon their own copies in a similar way to how medieval readers made copies, made edits, and glossed their own versions of texts. Bamford and Francomano write, "Digital-medieval manuscript culture possesses a unique anachronic temporality that asks users to enter the medieval through modern technology that strangely also bears resemblance to medieval reading technologies" (36). Both Treharne and Bamford and Francomano make the connection between the "digital" as in the electronic and the "digital" as in the manual.

> management change… Yet, we know that entire libraries have been lost, and in the present day many more are vulnerable to destruction. Digitization may offer secure and lasting options for archiving, options that will outlive war, extreme weather, fire, and rising sea. (34)

For texts like *Silence* that survive in only one manuscript copy, the issue of survivability is paramount, but a digital edition does not only offer mere survival of the text; it keeps the text alive. As opposed to traditional print editions that set texts in stone and derive authority from their perceived permanence, an adaptable digital edition comprised of the efforts of many reader-contributors is a living document that — perhaps ironically — better reflects the flexibility that texts had for medieval readers than the modern, printed copy ever could.

Yes, print copies of texts may be edited and reprinted. They may be laid out together statically on a table before the reader, but the case of *Silence* alone is enough to see how this traditional method of printing and reprinting is inefficient — not without its advantages, but undeniably slow —, and the slowness of this process translates into delays in the production of meaningful scholarship. The Thorpe edition of *Silence* was first published in 1972 (sixty years after the manuscript's discovery in 1911), and another six years passed before Félix Lecoy responded with his "Corrections" (1978) pointing to the many errata of the Thorpe edition.[11] It would not be until 1992, *twenty years* after Thorpe, that *Silence* was reedited with these corrections, translated, and published by Roche-Mahdi (with Psaki's English translation — the first published modern language translation — appearing one year prior). Roche-Mahdi's work was republished in 1999 and 2007 (with Bouchet's modern French pose translation appearing in

[11] On these many corrections, Psaki quips, "As a footnote to the cruelty with which medievalists treat each other, the editors of *Romanian,* in which Lecoy's corrections appeared, regretted that Lewis Thorpe died before the issue appeared. For my money Thorpe was lucky, since the tone and volume of those corrections probably would have finished him off in short order" ("The Modern Editor" 86n4)

2000)[12], which means that the latest edition of *Silence* is already nearly fifteen years old. As I have already described above, these standalone editions have made their editors the punching bags of scholars who in part blame them as the source for the difficulties in interpreting *Silence*. A more diplomatic approach to editing would distribute both blame and acclaim by ensuring that readers have the power to make their own contributions to this living text be heard. Again, such a project does not call for a replacement of the original TEXT and is not an effort to recreate the original TEXT in the virtual space. Rather this project of shared digital editing may perhaps be understood as an imitation of the medieval scribal process of book distribution itself as readers make their own copies, their own glosses, their own translations, and their own performances of this unique narrative, accommodating all of this polyphony for the sake of more nuanced reading.

The platform I propose adopting for this digital editing project is GitHub because of the way it facilitates the building of a repository and the management of many versions of the text. With its version control features, users have total transparency and flexibility regarding the editing process as many versions of the text may exist at once with their relationships to one another clearly defined in a family tree of text. With the ability to pull content from the central

[12] Despite its many qualities, one major drawback I see in the modern French translation is the replacement of *Noreture* with *Culture* because this noun for "nurture" has not survived into Modern French with the same rhyming pattern. The problem with replacing the name *Noreture* with *Culture* is that it implies that *Dame Nature* is not a part of cultural reproduction too. It has been well argued (see for example Barr (2020) or Hess (2011)) that both Nature and Nurture in this text have a shared interest in influencing human society. With this example, we can see how Modern French may at times ironically not be the best choice of language for a modern translation of Old French as the rigidity of Modern French does not always accommodate the polysemy and word play of Heldris's text as easily as a language with more leeway to be flexible like Modern English might provide. However, there are plenty of moments, as I will later describe, where Modern French word choice is certainly superior to the options available in Modern English.

text repository and to push content back to the repository, all readers can be editors.[13] This process then creates a documented tree of scribal work, not with the goal of producing the most precise edition and translation of the text possible, but rather the most plurivocal, the most polysemous, the most nuanced, the most animated living edition of *Silence* imaginable.

On the pedagogical front, Bamford and Francomano highlight the importance of the digital to the medieval field writing, "Digitization and digital accessibility will be, if they are not already, the primary determinants of canonization in teaching and scholarly practice in Medieval Studies" (31). The pedagogical potential of the digital-medieval has been expanded upon greatly by the work of contributors to *The Routledge Research Companion to Digital Medieval Literature* (2018)[14] and by contributors to "Revisioning the Global Middle Ages: Immersive Environments for Teaching Medieval Languages and Culture" who introduce their piece writing, "We suggest that technology offers a unique method for experiencing the past; and when harnessed effectively, immersive environments can increase empathy and learning while appealing to a new generation of students" (Ramey et al. 86). When reflecting on the translation process itself, Psaki highlights the undergraduate audience as an excellent benchmark for assessing good translation:

> An undergraduate audience, especially if we are trying to cultivate their interest in the Middle Ages, needs to be able to see what the period has in common with them, and how momentous the issues discussed in narrative verse were, as well as how immediately they connect to modern concerns… Non-specialists certainly need this sense of immediacy

[13] It is worth noting that almost no knowledge of any coding language is required for such participation either. Although the bookdown package's inner workings are made up of HTML and the digital "book" is written using R Markdown script, readers would not need proficiency in these skills in order to play in the sand pit of this communal repository.
[14] See in particular the second chapter "Romancing the Portal" by Geraldine Heng.

> and relevance more than they need to know precisely how the word order and grammar structures worked in Old French. ("Verse Versus Poetry" 424)

Besides serving the text, it is evident that non-traditional editing methods are needed to ensure the future vitality of the field as students — who are, in theory, future scholars and experts — need bridges to access material that would be otherwise unintelligible to them. On this issue, Bamford and Francomano write, "... both material and digital medieval manuscripts remain physically and intellectually inscrutable for non-specialists, often little more than pretty pictures" (40). Thus, it is not mere digitization alone that is needed, but rather, new methods that engage the digital with the medieval.

On a micro level, the digital edition that encourages reader contributions encourages the novice reader to engage with the often intimidating left side of a facing page translation where the Old French sits always visible but mostly inscrutable to the non-specialist. On a macro level, the animate digital edition paves the way for more scholars to enter medieval studies by softening the barriers to entry, which in turn emboldens the interpretive choices that allow for innovative intellectual work. Intellectual richness is then derived from the close readings made possible by do-it-yourself editions and translations.

New Results from New Translations

Several scholars of *Silence* make clear the benefits of practicing text translation for the sake of a richer close reading. For example, Bouchet, the translator of the only published Modern French translation of *Silence*, offers a rich close reading in her chapter "L'écriture androgyne: le travestissement dans *Le Roman de Silene*" (2001) specifically concerning the leitmotif of "costume/coutume" that is so essential to understanding the text's meaning — or rather to understanding the text's ambiguity — with regards to concealing sex and performing gender.

Bouchet demonstrates in detail how the language in *Silence* is often so paradoxical and problematic as to render its meaning impossible to pin down. As Bouchet describes, it is not only Silence's outer disguise but also the body itself that is portrayed as the product of careful handicraft and revision, "...le corp n'est qu'une grossière enveloppe, un oripeau qui peut encore dissimuler la véritable nature d'un être" (par. 27). Bouchet's work makes it clear that it is the linguistic evasive maneuvering of the text that calls for an edition whose language is as mutable as the original.

In her phenomenal piece, "Translating Gender in Thirteenth-Century French Cross-Dressing Narratives: *La Vie de Sainte Euphrosine* and *Le Roman de Silence*" (2019), Emma Campbell further complicates the concept of translation to see how "both linguistic and nonlinguistic forms of translation offers additional perspectives on questions of gender which complicate even further the relationship between language and sexual difference" (248). Campbell's work brilliantly calls attention to the intertext between *Silence* and other contemporary gender bending narratives while also making clear the connection between premodern texts and postmodern questions that is made possible through the act of translation:

> ...the interest of Silence's name lies in its connection to translation… While bearing in mind the text's linguistic playfulness, seeing this episode in terms of both linguistic and nonlinguistic forms of translation offers additional perspectives on questions of gender which complicate even further the relationship between langauge and sexual difference. (248)

Campbell describes texts like *Silence* as "never quite being fully translatable" (257), but I posit that inviting all readers to the editing and translation process will provide us with a fuller view of the untranslatable.

Performing a fragmentary translation of my own on the allegorical Nature versus Noreture dispute (vv. 2439-2688)[15] has opened my eyes to many facets of this much commented-upon passage still yet to be satisfactorily addressed in the scholarship. This classic binary of nature versus nurture has been so wonderfully deconstructed by Jessica Barr in her piece "The Idea of the Wilderness: Gender and Resistance in *Le Roman de Silence*" (2016) which demonstrates the falsity of the Nature/Nurture binary in *Silence* as both allegorical figures ultimately work to solidify patriarchal lines of inheritance — one by securing an inheritance and the other by securing future heirs.[16] Barr suggests that trying to separate Nature from Nurture is somewhat of an unproductive distraction — one that many scholars have spilled a lot of ink trying to do — from the real meat of the text. Barr's work provokes the questions: If Nature and Nurture are both essentially working toward the same goal in the text, what is really fueling their dispute in this passage? and what are we meant to glean from it? Doing translation work on this passage first-hand is one avenue toward further unraveling the many knots this passage presents and thereby further unraveling the narrative as a whole.

In her 2007 piece, Psaki provides ample advice to approaching translation work and balancing the desire to craft a more literal, close translation of the original text (a method she associates with her own translation of *Silence*) with the desire to construct a looser passage that is fluidly intelligible to a modern ear (which she associates with Roche-Mahdi's approach to

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[15] My full translation of this passage with line-by-line commentary is available online at https://leeloren.github.io/silence/

[16] Barr considers another binary in the text: the wilderness/society binary, which ultimately collapses as well since the reader is made to see how the wilderness is not a sustainable living space for any human being, even Merlin. Barr suggests that *Silence* evokes a system of gender oppression for the sake of provoking an *imagined* space in which that system were no longer in power, a space that may be impossible to reach.

Silence).[17] A close translation not only "facilitates deciphering the original" (423) for non-specialist readers, but also:

> More importantly, perhaps, a very close translation helps the reader to track recurrences of lexical items and rhetorical structures. Since these patterns nearly always flag an author's thematic and ethical concerns, representing them recognizably gives readers a chance to reach their own conclusions about just what a literary text is exploring (425)

I have taken recurrences into account in my own translation in an effort to track Heldris's use of repetition. For example, I consistently use "custom" each time Heldris uses "us" and "usage" each time Heldris uses "usage." In my translation, I have made every effort to emphasize the polysemy of the text by engaging with the etymologies and genealogies of words, including meanings that can be extracted from prefixes, roots, and suffixes. I have also taken into consideration the neighboring connotations between words that may be associated with each other by sound (when read aloud) and spelling (when seen on the page). And finally, in an effort to remain in alignment with Heldris's text, I have attempted to respect word order and parts of speech, so that my word choice in English as best as possible reflects the functions of words in the original. But it must be emphasized that hypothetical future contributors to this on-going translation project would not have to share my translation principles as the purpose of this digital edition/repository is to encourage a plurivocal approach to translating *Silence*.

Before embarking on my own translation, I anticipated that I would be dwelling a lot on pronoun usage as this issue has been a major area of focus for previous scholars,[18] and so I was somewhat surprised to find that I did not personally glean anything new from the pronouns in

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[17] Psaki praises Roche-Mahdi's translation, but she also cautions against using more slangy language that can quickly feel dated. She writes, "...no audience is more unforgiving of passé slang than undergraduates" (431)

[18] See for example Kate Cooper's article, "Elle and L: Sexualized Textuality in *Le Roman de Silence*" (1985).

this passage, but perhaps this should not be surprising as so much has already been mulled over concerning the use of both Picard and Francian pronouns in *Silence*. Heldris's pronoun usage has been so well documented that it is hardly worth detailing further here. Additionally, there are certain lines from this passage alone that have been so frequently repeated as though learned by rote that I occasionally find that fresh engagement with them is lacking in the scholarship. Couplets from this passage almost obligatory to cite and provide a reading of include the following:

1. "Donques sui jo Scilentius / Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus." (2537-2538)[19]
2. "Por cho que l'-us est encontre us / N'a pas a non Scilentius." (2541-2542)
3. "Trop dure boche ai por baisier / Et trop rois bras por acoler." (2646-2647)

Despite the ink spilled on these undoubtedly important lines, other details from the passage have been neglected, and so, I will resist dwelling on these couplets too much here. What follows is a description of the rich details from vv. 2439-2688 that I was only able to notice from the practice of firsthand translation. My hope is that these examples will demonstrate the untapped potential of encouraging readers to be translators and to share such translations in the digital sphere.

In translating this passage, I found that subtle adjustments in tone can highlight Silence's ability to make decisions, thereby challenging much of the existing scholarship that would write on Silence as though (s)he were a mannequin forced to wear whatever role (s)he is made to perform. For example, I have translated the line "Ses pere l'a mis a raison" (2441) as "his father reasoned with him," (siding more with Roche-Mahdi's translation of "his father sat down to reason with him"), whereas Psaki offers "his father had a talk with him." It is a rather subtle

[19] Many have called attention to this word "nus" as implying nudity as well as negation. See for example McCracken (527) or Perret (332). I have rendered it as "nobody" in my translation as opposed to Psaki and Roche-Mahdi's "no one" to call attention to Silence's body, which will be made nude at the end of the narrative. Bouchet describes similar trouble with this line in a footnote, and she renders the line "ou je ne suis personne" (501).

distinction, but this line emphasizes how Silence has reached the age of reason and must therefore be convinced by her interlocutors to make a decision of his/her own. Plus, keeping the word "reason" is necessary to foreshadow the arrival of Reason who will ultimately sway Silence's decision making.

By setting existing translations side-by-side with Heldris's text, one can see how subtle changes in tone may be brought about simply by one's choice of verb:

line	Psaki (1991)	Heldris	Roche-Mahdi (2007)	Lee (2021)
2466	Everyone urged him to do right.	De faire bien cascun l'entice.	they all urged him to be good.	Each incited him to do well.

The English "entice" and "incite" share the Latin etymology of "titio" for "firebrand" with both metaphorically meaning "to fan the flames of." By using the verb "incite" which has a more negative connotation than "urge" or "encourage", I see some humor in this line as Silence's family are perhaps encouraging Silence to do the wrong thing but to do it well. In her prose translation, Bouchet offers "Chacun l'incite à bien agir…" (500). The use of "inciter" is perfect for expressing the ambiguity of tone here. What does doing the right thing mean for Silence? Listening to her family? This line makes that particularly unclear.

In a more lengthy example of the significance of tonal shifts in translation, after Silence has been visited by Dame Nature for the first time, the existing translations portray her as almost immediately accepting the demands of Nature. Pushing back against that interpretation, I see room here for Silence to be written in such a way that (s)he is not so easily convinced, and may thereby be perceived by the reader as having more agency and a stronger spine:

line	Psaki (1991)	Heldris	Roche-Mahdi (2007)	Lee (2021)
2539	He thought to himself	Dont se porpense en lui meïsme	But then she convinced herself	Then he reflected on it himself

2540	that Nature was speaking in sophistries;	Que Nature li fait sofime:	that Nature's spurious argument was plausible:	on the sophistry Nature made him:
2541	because the -us was against natural law,	Por cho que l'-us est encontre us	That because the -us was contrary to usage,	That this -us was contrary to custom,
2542	his name was not Silentius.	N'a pas a non Scilentius.	her name was not Silentius.	that his name was not Silentius,
2543	He wanted to stay in the chamber	Aler en violt a la costure	She wanted to go and learn to sew,	wanting him to go sew
2544	as Nature had entreated him to,	Si com li a rové Nature,	just as Nature demanded of her;	just as Nature had raved at him,
2545	because neither for a fief nor an inheritance	Car por fief, ne por iretage,	she should not cultivate such savage ways	that for neither fief nor heritage,
2546	should he keep up such a barbarous usage.	Ne doit mener us si salvage.	for fief or inheritance.	he must not manifest so savage a custom.

In the above lines, one can see Silence mulling over Nature's suggestions by repeating them, but because this repetition of Nature's demands is introduced by being called "sophistry" (v. 2540), the demands are undercut as fallacious and deceptive.[20] My translation of this excerpt resonates with Campbell's assessment of Silence's speech throughout the narrative:

> Silence's speech both 'translates' what others demand of him and frames a response to those competing demands in a way that associates them with a subjective reality that reformulates them, expressing them through a recontextualization of the language used by other characters (250)

Rather than immediately, passively adopting the demands of others without resistance, Silence translates what others say to him/her, assesses their language, and makes decisions based in reason and not mere submission.

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[20] Bouchet's translation is more aligned with Psaki's as Silence questions Nature's words briefly before quickly accepting them (501).

Similarly, moments of fear for Silence may be reinterpreted more complexly as thoughtful anxiety depending on how they are translated:

line	Psaki (1991)	Heldris	Roche-Mahdi (2007)	Lee (2021)
2571	If my garment opens by chance	Se me desful par aventure	Whenever I happen to get undressed,	If I undress myself for example
2572	I'm afraid my sex will show.	Dont ai paor de ma nature.	I am afraid my sex will be discovered.	I'm afraid of my nature.

The Matsumura dictionary includes "par exemple" as a possible interpretation of "par aventure," and so, here I do not see Silence simply being afraid of being seen nude by happenstance. Rather, I see space in these lines for Silence to be feeling anxiety about the uncanny fact that his/her 'nature' changes simply by the act of undressing. As opposed to either Psaki or Roche-Mahdi's translations which suggest the fear of discovery, there is potential to see the more private, psychological anxiety of gender mutability.

Word choice is also key to highlighting neighboring connotations between words and to marrying themes of the text. In many instances in this passage, humor especially via the use of sexual innuendo may be played up or down depending on translation choices. For Pratt, "... the narrator's mocking attitude towards Silence's 'artificial masculinity' is a device employed by Heldris to persuade his audience of the essentialism of gender" (95), but Heldris also seems to use sexual puns for the purpose of conceptually tying together issues of sex/gender and inheritance, which is the crux of the conflict in *Silence*. For example, I have translated the line "Por que on le coile si et cuevre." (2443) as "for which they cultivated and covered him so"[21] because there is an apparent play on words between the noun "coil" meaning "testicle" and the verb "coillier" meaning "to collect/to harvest/to gather." Here, we see a connection between

[21] Whereas Psaki offers "they concealed and hid him" and Roche-Mahdi gives "which had led them to conceal his identity this way."

raising Silence as a boy and his family's ability to protect the inheritance of their lands. In this same line, there is another apparent play on words between "cuevre" meaning "a quiver" (as in the object) and "cuivriier" meaning "to torment" and "covrir" meaning "to cover". The concealment of Silence's sex is like the tucking away of arrows in a quiver, and this concealment is a torment.

One particularly difficult couplet to translate includes the following by now notorious idiom:

line	Psaki (1991)	Heldris	Roche-Mahdi (2007)	Lee (2021)
2479	But he had other than masculine qualities in his makeup,	El a en tine que ferine:	But there's more to this than meets the eye —	But one cannot judge a book by its cover:
2480	for he was, beneath his clothes, a girl.	Il est desos les dras mescine.	the he's a she beneath the clothes.	Under the covers, he was a girl.

Although, I appreciate the way that my translation segues well from book covers to bed covers and evokes the motif of inscription, Bouchet's translation is perhaps the best of all for its combined connotations of concealment, containment, deceit, labeling, and fraud. She translates these lines as "Mais il y a tromperie sur la marchandise : sous ses vêtements, c'est une fille…" (501).

Another example of sexual innuendo used to connect themes of the text may be seen in the repeated use of the verb "converser," which Heldris uses to connect Silence's behaviors in the forest space with Silence's behaviors in the courtly space, thereby blurring the binary opposition between civilization and nature as performed by gendered behaviors. "Converser" may translate to Modern French as "demeurer", "fréquenter", "avoir des rapports", or "avoir des

relations charnelles." Thus, I have translated the two instances of this verb in the passage as follows:

line	Psaki (1991)	Heldris	Roche-Mahdi (2007)	Lee (2021)
2525	You must not travel the woods,	Ne dois pas en bos converser,	You have no business going off into the forest,	You should not be out cavorting in the woods,
2526	throw, or shoot, or hunt.	Lancier, ne traire, ne berser.	jousting, hunting, shooting off arrows.	lancing, nor traipsing, nor shooting.

line	Psaki (1991)	Heldris	Roche-Mahdi (2007)	Lee (2021)
2574	I used to frequent the court;	En cort aloie conversant,	I have been spending my time at court,	At court I used to go cavorting,
2575	but all this I have put behind me,	Tolt cho metrai ariere dos	but I will put all this behind me	I will put all of this behind me

The repetition of certain words and phrases in the passage further serves to connect ideas and motifs in the text. For example, I have rendered the line "Briément, al fuer de sage enfant" (2459) as "briefly, with the disposition of a refined child." "Fuer" may have the dual meaning of "price"/"rate" or "manner"/"fashion" depending on the context. Again we have a polysemous word connecting the ideas of behavior, character, and inheritance. My use of the word "disposition" is meant to reflect Silence's behavior and the legal situation (s)he finds him/herself in concerning the transfer of property rights. I also prefer to use "refined" here because it refers to how Silence has been fashioned by his/her environment both physically and mentally. Silence is "refined" as in "educated" and "refined" as in "processed." The word "fuer" appears multiple times elsewhere in this passage (see also vv. 2503 and 2561), such as in the following line "Se il de toi savoit le fuer," (2520), which I have translated as "if she knew about your lot" (as opposed to Psaki's "if she knew your real nature;" or Roche-Mahdi's "if they knew what you really are!").

My use of “lot” here is meant to convey the multiple meanings of “fuer,” while “lot” also conveys how Silence’s identity as a man is meant to secure a plot of land. Bouchet similarly includes the phrase “au fur et à mesure” (501) in her translation which captures this simultaneous sense of progression in identity creation and of financial concerns. For this same section, Bouchet uses “état” (501) which suggests a similar polysemy of meanings including one’s state of being and one’s inventory of goods. There are still moments, however, when English is able to transmit polysemy where Modern French does not as easily. For instance in the following line:

line	Psaki (1991)	Heldris	Roche-Mahdi (2007)	Lee (2021)
2528	“Stay in the side-chambers,	“Va en la cambre a la costure,	“Go to a chamber and learn to sew!	“Go sew in your chamber,”

There is a possible double meaning in “costure” which in the Old French can refer to sewing or the cultivation of land (which is also notably a common metaphor for reproduction). The Modern French translation offers “couture,” which is derived from “costure” but no longer includes the connotation of sowing and cultivation, though a reader familiar with the word’s history might still glean this meaning as well. With my translation, I invite the English reader to hear a play on “sew” and “sow” in this line as Silence’s identity is tied to his/her gendered behaviors and to the land that his/her identity is meant to secure.

In this passage, both Nature and Noreture are shown to be craftswomen and are therefore more akin to competitor artisans in a market place rather than opposing forces with totally different functions. In addition to metaphors of baking and writing, which have already been much commented upon, one can find language connecting the crafting of Silence to tanning, churning, and even horse training, as one may see in the line, “Por cho a il lassor assés” (2491),

which I have translated as “Because of this he had free rein.”[22] In the following lines one can see the invocation of tanning and churning:

line	Psaki (1991)	Heldris	Roche-Mahdi (2007)	Lee (2021)
2583	Was ever a woman so tormented	Fu ainc mais feme si tanee	Was any female ever so tormented	Was any woman ever so tanned
2584	and deceived by base treachery?	De vil barat, ne enganee	or deceived by such vile fraud	or engineered by such vile churning,
2585	To act out of greed	Que cho fesist par convoitise?	as to do what I did out of greed?	that she might act out of covetousness?
2586	I cannot tolerate in any way.”	Nel puis savoir en nule guise.”	I certainly never heard of one!”	I cannot think of one in such a guise.”

In the above, “tannee” can mean both “tanned” and “tormented,” and I maintain “tanned” here because the text spends so much time on describing the tanning of Silence’s skin in the sun as an essential part of his/her performance of masculinity. Plus, to “tan someone’s hide” is to punish them physically, which we see Silence undergoing as his/her body is molded by both Nature and Noreture in the likeness of a hide tanned for the production of leather. Again in the above, I have used “engineered” to connect “engan” meaning “tromperie” with “engin” meaning both “tromperie” and “ingénuosité.” Silence has been fooled and engineered by disingenuous actors. For “barat” meaning “commerce”, “agitation”, “confusion”, “tromperie”, or “voleur”, we also somewhat obliquely have the verb “barater” meaning “battre le crème dans une baratte.” Also, the word “guise” in Old French also exists with the alternative spellings “guige” or “guiche”

[22] Psaki gives “Thus he had sufficient inclination” and Roche-Mahdi has “Because of this, he was given a good deal of freedom.” Neither translator plays directly with the word “lassor” in this way. See Elizabeth Leet’s *Communicating With Horses: Women As Equestrians In 12th - Through 14th - Century Old French, Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (2016) for an expansive description of the motif of equestrianism in medieval romances.

which can refer to a “courroie qui sert à porter l’écu, le cor, etc.” or a “bande servant de cache-sexe.” Thus in one word, there exist connotations of heraldry, genitals, and dissimulation.

Finally, active participation in the translation of this passage allows the reader to see the ways in which Heldris is not so concerned with crafting Silence as a ‘he’ but rather as an ‘I’. In comparison with lines 2565 and 2649 in which Heldris spells the word for game “giu”, in line 2633, Heldris changes his spelling of the same word to “jus” as in “Des jus c’on siolt es cambres faire”, which I have perhaps unsatisfactorily translated as “the games people play alone in chambers”. Why change the spelling of “giu” to “ju” in this line? Is this merely scribal clumsiness? Is this a play on the first person singular pronoun, which along with other variants can be spelled “jo” (as Heldris uses elsewhere in this same passage) or “ju”? Are these games played in chambers games of self-fashioning rooted in one’s sexual performance? If so, Silence’s reasoning along these lines continues with the following self-assessment:

line	**Psaki (1991)**	**Heldris**	**Roche-Mahdi (2007)**	**Lee (2021)**
2639	“Truly,” he said, “in an evil hour	“Voire,” fait il, “a la male eure	“Indeed,” he said, “it would be too bad	“Truly,” he said, “in a malign hour
2640	will I go underneath, when I am on top.	Irai desos, quant sui deseure.	to step down when I’m on top.	will I bottom, when I’m a top.[23]
2641	I am on top now, and I would have to go beneath.	Deseure sui, s’irai desos?	If I’m on top, why should I step down?	I’m on top, am I going to bottom out?
2642	Now I am most valorous and strong,	Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.	Now I am honored and valiant.	Now I am so valiant and proud.
2643	but I wouldn’t be any longer; rather, in faith,	Nel sui, par foi, ains sui honis	No I’m not, upon my word — I’m a disgrace	No I’m not, in faith, rather I’m ahamed.

[23] I attempt to use queer slang here to combine Silence’s sexual/gender role with his/her position in the social hierarchy. This double entendre has been clear to readers for a long time, but without this more modern turn of phrase of bottoming and topping, I do not think existing translations have been able to convey it as naturally.

2644	I'd be shamed if I wanted to be like the women.	Quant as femes voel estre onis.	if I want to be one of the women.	When I wanted to be one with the women,
2645	I thought of it for my own pleasure.	Gel pensai por moi aäsier.	I was trying to make life easy for myself,	in that way I thought to put myself at ease.
2646	I have a mouth too hard for kissing,	Trop dure boche ai por baisier,	but I have a mouth too hard for kisses,	I have too hard a mouth for kissing,
2647	and arms too rough for embracing.	Et trop rois bras por acoler.	and arms too rough for embraces.	and too raw of arms for accolades.
2648	I would quickly be beaten	On me poroit tost afoler	One could easily make a fool of me	One could totally make a fool of me
2649	at the game people play under the covers,	Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,	in any game played under the covers,	at the game one plays under the curtains,[24]
2650	for I am a boy, and not a girl at all.	Car vallés sui et nient mescine.	for I'm a young man, not a girl.	for I am a boy and in no way a girl.

The play between "honis" (2643) and "onis" (2644) is so rich here. "(H)onir" can generally mean "couvrir de honte" and can have the usage with a woman "posséder contre sa volonté," but we also have the adjective "onis" meaning "identique", "à l'égalité", or "aimable". And perhaps obliquely we can add "oniier" meaning "s'aplanir." Thus in this couplet, Silence may be anxious of being shamed by women, may desire to be liked by women, and may desire to be like women all at once.

To conclude, there is a lot that can still be done with the couplet "Trop dure boche ai por baisier / Et trop rois bras por acoler." (vv. 2646-2647). First, the verb "acoler" can refer to any embrace about the neck, but here I find especially apt the possible use of "acoler" in reference to

[24] Although "gordine" (or "cortine") can refer to the "couverture" or the "rideau qui entoure un lit", I've decided to go with curtains for two reasons: 1.) to distinguish this word from the others the author uses to play with covering/uncovering literally and metaphorically and 2.) to call extra attention to the sexual innuendo here. The Godefroy dicitonary lists "gordine" as a "femme galante, femme de mauvaise vie." Plus, the vulva is often described as having "curtains."

the ceremony of being knighted, which no one in the scholarship on *Silence* has recognized. I have tried to accommodate both amorous embraces and knighthood with the word "accolades," but there must be a better translation that my reader can suggest. Also, the adjective "rois" meaning "dur"/"ferme", "impétueux"/"violent", or "rudement" when seen on the page is an evident visual pun on "roi" meaning "king", which again no one has recognized. I have landed on the word "raw" to refer to Silence's body as being one in constant development but never completed. With these lines, I see Silence lamenting his/her liminal position as she is too hard for lovemaking and he is too fresh for chivalry.

Conclusion

Traditional methods are not a bad thing. Decades long disagreements taking place in footnotes are not *necessarily* a bad thing. And nontraditional digital editions may not be the best method for every premodern text. But certainly, *Silence* is a text that particularly merits a plurivocal approach because of how its uniqueness, its ambiguity, and its mutability all defy the creation of any definitive edition. Translators know that their work is no substitute for the original, and so, quality translation requires many hands doing many revisions in perpetuity to convey the words of the past:

> The question in all of these cases is what we allow the people of the past to say, know, and be… In order to allow the medieval past to speak all of its lines, many more translations need to be done (that should go without saying), but texts we know have to be retranslated much more often than one might have hoped… Regular updatings might keep medieval texts in the delicate balance between language that preserves the vanished specificities of the past, and language that acknowledges the continued vitality of what past and present have in common. ("Verse Versus Poetry" 432-433)

The methods proposed in this paper are not a cure-all for the inherent issue of mediation that occurs when a premodern text is represented to a modern audience. However, I have proposed an 'edition' that would give the modern reader more agency in their reading and bring the reader closer to the text, all the while acknowledging that bridging the gap between modern reader and premodern manuscript is an asymptotic endeavor. We may inch ever closer to one-to-one engagement with the original TEXT, but no single edition could give full voice to a text as indiscernible as *Le Roman de Silence*.

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