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Author(s): Sharon Kinoshita

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Sharon Kinoshita

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SHARON KINOSHITA teaches medieval French literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She has written on Chrétien de Troyes's Le conte du graal *(*Littérature, *1988) and* Cligés *(*Exemplaria, *1995), on Marie de France (*Romance Notes, *1994), and on* La prise d'Orange *(*Romanic Review, *1995). She is completing a book entitled* The Feudal Imagination: History and the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes.

A THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ROMANCE virtually unknown until 1972, *Le roman de Silence*, by the otherwise unknown Heldris de Cornuälle, recounts the adventures of a heroine named Silence. Born at a time when women are barred from inheritance, she is brought up as a boy, winning great renown as a knight and a jongleur, to the gratification of Nurture and the consternation of Nature. Because Silence spurns the amorous advances of Queen Eufeme, "he" is twice accused of attempted rape and banished from court. In the end, however, her sex is revealed, and following the execution of the adulterous queen, Silence is married to the king, in a union acclaimed by the court.[1]

Even this short summary suggests why this text has attracted considerable critical attention. The allegorical promise in the names of Silence, Eufemie (her mother), and the lustful Queen Eufeme overdetermines the focus on women as speaking subjects, and the heroine's success at chivalry and minstrelsy challenges notions of biological determinism, overtly thematized in the poem's allegorical debates between "Nature" and "Noreture" (Nurture). Indeed, recent scholarship has read *Le roman de Silence* as an almost programmatic articulation of a range of contemporary critical interests.[2] Articles devoted to the romance tend to emphasize the gender politics of Silence's triumphs as a cross-dresser and the way the romance explicitly thematizes issues of textuality.[3] Though sometimes reaching contrary conclusions, the critics generally concur on the link between gender politics and questions of textuality and speech.[4]

While such readings elucidate the text's local effects, any attempt to gauge the political significance of *Silence* without taking into consideration the social institutions and practices by which feudal society reproduced itself is at best partial and at worst misleading. The enthusiasm for the romance's engagement with issues of subjectivity and discourse sometimes overlooks how profoundly the text's gender politics are tied

to the feudal institutions of marriage, lineage, and the transmission of property. The motor that drives the main plot is the prohibition on female inheritance. In this essay, I want to move from a poetics to a politics of *Silence*, to examine the way the cross-gendering of Silence renegotiates the overlapping, potentially conflictual relations between lords and vassals, husbands and wives, parents and children. Less subversive than first appearances suggest, the story concludes where lyric, lai, and fabliau frequently begin: with the marriage of an old man to a young and beautiful wife. This is not to say that the text merely returns to the status quo. For under the cover of Silence's cross-dressing and refeminization, the romance reformulates the way bodies matter in the thirteenth-century imaginary, redefining the function of the medieval nobility as not military service but genealogical reproduction.[5] What the romance ultimately silences—or, rather, euphemizes—is the feudal politics of lineage.

The initial sequence recounting the events leading up to the birth of the protagonist is crucial to *Silence*'s feudal politics of lineage (107–1650). This little-analyzed episode opens with the marriage of King Evan of England to a king's daughter named Eufeme and concludes with the marriage of Evan's nephew to a count's daughter named Eufemie. On the surface, nothing could be more dissimilar than these two alliances, despite the wives' virtually identical names. Evan, a stern law-and-order monarch who has laid waste to Norway "over something trivial" 'par petite oquoison' (149), accepts a peace settlement centered on his marriage to the Norwegian king's beautiful daughter Eufeme. Though Evan euphemizes the arrangement as a love match—affirming that he has long suffered for love of his intended bride (185)—it is clearly political, a homosocial compact in which the exchange of a woman guarantees the resolution of conflict.[6] Negotiations for the marriage are conducted publicly: Evan pointedly secures the approval of "two archbishops, his clergy, his bishops, barons, and counts of the palace" '.ii. archevesques, / Por son clergié, por ses evesques; / mande barons, contes palais' (193–95) for his plans to wed "la Noroise" (209) and announces his intention "to lie with her *according to church custom*" '[*p*]*ar us d'eglise* od li gesir' (184; emphasis added).[7] He first sets eyes on his bride three days before their wedding, and while the festivities are described in loving detail (249–77), no mention is made of the personal relation of the new couple.

In contrast, the marriage of Silence's parents is represented from the start as an elective affinity, unsullied by feudal or familial interests. Everything about their meeting and courtship seems outside the constraints of the politics of lineage. Soon after the king concludes his Norwegian alliance, his nephew Cador falls in love with Eufemie, daughter of Renald, the count of Cornwall. The passion is mutual: she chooses him as actively as he chooses her, and unlike her counterpart, Eufeme, she has a voice in her fate, literally in the extended interior monologues in which she agonizes over her desire. Though their timidity inhibits them at first, the two eventually confess their love. They are quickly married and, when the bride's father dies shortly thereafter, are proclaimed count and countess of Cornwall. Ostensibly, then, the two marriages stand in contrast, the first a match of political expediency, the second an affair of the heart. In reality, however, the alliance of Cador and Eufemie is as political as Evan and Eufeme's. The appearance to the contrary only underscores the romance's success in euphemizing the feudal politics of lineage, in conscripting even the lovers' uncontrollable passion in the service of monarchical interests.

The courtship of Cador and Eufemie, like the Tristan episode it closely resembles, seems regulated by the folktale logic of the bride-winning contest.[8] When Cador first falls in love with Eufemie, he despairs of ever winning her hand. Fortunately, Evan offers the reward of any woman in the kingdom to the man who kills a fearsome dragon haunting the forest. Cador eagerly undertakes the challenge: he slays the venomous beast, but he is gravely wounded in the attempt. As Cador languishes near death, the king sends for Eufemie, renowned for her wisdom, and makes her a remarkable pledge, if she cures his nephew:

> He quickly sent for three barons, and announced to them most solemnly that in his entire kingdom, where he had legions of followers, there was no prince so

rich that Eufemie couldn't have as lord the one she most desired and loved, as long as there was no prior claim. (601–08)

.iii. barons mande isnielement,
Si lor a dit moult bielement
Qu[e] en tote se regiön,
U il a mainte legiön,
N'i a prince si riche mie
Qu'a baron ne l'ait Eufemie
Celui que miols desire et ainme,
Por c'altres forçor droit n'i clainme.
(interpolation in orig.)

As Eufemie nurses Cador back to health, each sighs with love for the other, yet neither dares to reveal any sign of it; despite the royal mandate each has been granted, neither wants to possess the other merely on account of the boon. Cador, for example, thinks:

And if he doesn't ask her of the king, now that he has his choice of wife, won't he look the perfect fool! *Ask her of the king? Is this how he loves her?* There, seated beside her, he thought in his heart that such haughty behavior would never persuade her to marry him. But if he perceives that she likes him, and that her heart is not proud toward him, and that he might find love in there, he will ask her of the king. (560–70; emphasis added)

Et s'il nel rueve donc al roi
Puis qu'il puet feme prendre a chois,
Nel puet on bien tenir a mois?
Rover al roi? Ainme donc si?
Lu u se siet dejoste li,
Pense en son cuer que par halsage
Ne venra ja a mariäge;
Mais s'il s'aperçoit qu'el l'ait chier,
Et que son cuer n'ait viers lui fier,
Et que l'amor i quist trover,
Dolt le volra al roi rover.

Cador's interior monologue ostensibly negotiates the all-important transition from the feudal politics of marriage to a courtly mode of mutual consent.[9] Both lovers reject the idea of redeeming their boons without first making sure that their love is reciprocal. But this resolve means that, before they can be brought together, they must summon the courage to confess their passion. The revelation takes place gradually, in a series of precious Ovidian monologues and dialogues in which they sigh, lament lest the beloved love another, then dare to speak their love, and at last kiss.[10] By the time the lovers overcome their silence, the transition from the politics of lineage to the poetics of courtly passion seems complete.

Even in the fictive world of *Silence*, however, the love of Cador and Eufemie remains incongruous. In particular, their disregard for the feudal politics of lineage contrasts with the narrative's central pre-text, Evan's prohibition against female inheritance. Just after his marriage to Princess Eufeme, the king tries to regulate a dispute between two vassals married to twin sisters. At their father-in-law's death, the two quarrel over their wives' patrimony, disputing primogeniture:

Each one claimed to have the elder; nevertheless one had the younger. There was a quarrel over inheritance, for both of them wanted to have the land. One wanted to share it equally; the other said he would be a martyr and vile coward in battle before he would yield an inch of it. (281–88)

Cho dist cascuns qu'il a l'ainsnee;
Por quant li uns a la mainsnee.
Mellee i ot por son avoir,
Car cascuns [violt] la terre avoir.
Li uns le violt par mi partir;
Li altres dist qu'il iert martyr
E vis recreäns en batalle
Ançois qu'il a plain pié i falle.
(interpolation in orig.)

Unwilling to accept the king's mediation, the counts kill each other in combat; enraged at their deaths, the king issues a blanket decree against female inheritance:

[B]y the faith I owe Saint Peter, never shall a woman ever be an heiress in the kingdom of England as long as I reign over the land. (313–16)

[P]ar le foi que doi Saint Pere,
Ja feme n'iert mais iretere
Ens el roiame s'Engletiere,
Por tant com j'aie a tenir tiere.

The dispute between the two counts demonstrates the instability resulting from the failure of direct patrilineal succession and exposes the powerlessness of the king and his barons to resolve such intrafamilial conflicts. Extreme and nonnegotiable, Evan's ruling belatedly compensates for the monarchy's inability to control the violence unleashed by triangulated male desire—two indistinguishable counts vying for one piece of land—by stripping *women* of their customary rights of inheritance.[11] This anxiety surrounding noble heiresses is connected to inheritance practices in thirteenth-century England. The disadvantages of female succession were twofold. First was the obvious danger that the wife's patrimony would be absorbed by her husband's, resulting in the extinction of one patrilineage and the aggrandizement of another. Second, while male inheritance was governed by primogeniture, female inheritance was, by custom, partible: "from the late twelfth century onward, estates were divided equally among female heirs" (Waugh 16).[12] The practical effect of Evan's decree is apparently to reinforce the status quo among his vassals, by minimizing the aggrandizement or fragmentation of baronies.

Against this intensification of the feudal politics of lineage, the elective affinity of Cador and Eufemie is a striking anomaly. Not surprisingly, then, the lovers begin to worry that Evan might violate his oath, "that they will not find the king constant, nor his word truthful" 'Qu'il ne truisent le roi estable, / Ne sa parolle veritable' (1163–64). The narrator attributes their anxiety to the irrationality of lovers: "A person deeply in love is filled with doubt and cannot keep things straight" 'Car ki bien aime n'est sans dote, / Ne ne puet tenir droite rote' (1165–66). Cador and Eufemie are right to be concerned, though, for the moment they reach an understanding, the politics of lineage intrude: when they approach the king to make their requests, Evan welcomes them warmly but abruptly withdraws to take counsel with his barons, as if he might retract the boons he granted. It turns out, however, that he wants to enlist his vassals' assistance in convincing the lovers to choose what they already desire:

> Lords, hear me out. I do not wish to conceal from you that I want to make an alliance between Cador and the maiden. It would be a good thing if there were someone at this council who could explain the advantages to them, tell them that they are similar in age, beauty, and high lineage, and since they are equal in youth and beauty, it would not be surprising, since both are seeking their like, that they might be alike in love. Lords, *I want Cador to have this girl immediately.* I want to marry them without any delay or hesitation. (1262–78; emphasis added)

> Segnor, entendés me .i. petit.
> Jo ne vus quiier un point celer:
> De le feme et del baceler
> Cador voel faire aliëment.
> Si estevroit castiëment
> Al consel descovrir tel home
> Ki lor seüst mostrer la some,
> Die lor qu'il sunt d'un eäge,
> D'une bialté, de halt parage,
> Et quant eäges les ivuelle,
> Et bialtés, n'estroit pas mervelle
> S'andoi quesisent l'aparel
> Qu'il en amor fuscent parel.
> Segnor, *jo voel que Cador ait*
> *Iceste mescine entresait.*
> Jes voel ensamble marier
> Tolt sans respit, sans detrier.

If they comply with his wish, he continues, he will grant them a thousand pounds a year "and the territory of Cornwall upon the death of Renald, without fail" 'Et la tierre de Cornuälle / Apriés la mort Renalt sans falle' (1297–98).

Why is the king eager to engineer this match? Why do narrative detours systematically defer the marriage of two young persons passionately in love, whose union is overdetermined? The answer lies in the romance's euphemization of the feudal politics of marriage. Evan's vassals find his plan "bien roials" (1304), and no wonder: he is proposing the marriage of the heiress of one of the major fiefdoms of his realm to his nearest male relative. His insistence on how well matched they are obscures the political significance of their alliance. Since the marriage boon granted the lovers amounted to a license to choose their spouses without regard for the normal constraints of feudal society, Evan is fortunate that Cador and Eufemie have eyes only for each other. In urging the couple to choose what they crave, he inscribes their union within the bounds of

feudal politics.[13] If a king's greatness is measured by the recklessness of his generosity, Evan emerges from this episode a double winner, enhancing his reputation by granting the lovers the freedom to indulge their personal desires, while ultimately seeing those desires magnify his advantage in his relations with his Cornish vassal.

Evan's proposal comes at the expense of Count Renald's feudal prerogatives. In allowing Eufemie to choose her husband, the king usurps the father's familial authority; by promising to invest the couple with the county of Cornwall, Evan in effect affirms that patrimonies are transmitted not through the laws of inheritance but by royal decree. The king's apparently generous endorsement of young love is in fact a bold assertion of royal power: Evan arrogates the right to determine the succession of one of the major fiefdoms of his realm.

At the same time, the king's settlement offers Eufemie's father a way around the standing decree against female succession. As Evan points out to his assembled barons, "She is his daughter, he is her father; neither he nor the mother has any other child" 'Ceste est sa fille, il est ses pere, / N'ont plus d'enfans, il ne la mere' (1299–1300). Perhaps this explains why Renald, far from objecting when Eufemie's marriage is announced to him, by letter, as a fait accompli, hastens to court to ratify the match. He even thanks the king "for the honor he had done to his daughter" 'l'onor que sa fille a faite' (1579), presumably in marrying her to Evan's nearest male relative.[14] Any hint of irregularity or coercion surrounding the marriage settlement and Cornish succession is immediately euphemized by the narrator's insistence on the filial affection that develops between Cador and his new father-in-law:

> Cador honored and loved him greatly; he prayed to God to protect him; *they became father and son.* "Now," said the count, "I want you to see that you are in the hands of a worthy father." . . . *Cador held the count as dear as his own father; he loved the countess like a mother.*[15] (1583–87, 1609–10; emphasis added)

> Cador l'oneure moult et ainme.
> De lui desos Deu se reclaime,
> *Devient ses fils, et cil ses pere.*
> "Or voel," cho dist li cuens, "qu'il pere
> Que pris vos estes a prodome."
> . . . . . .
> *Cador le tient cier com son pere,*
> *La contesse ainme com sa mere.*

Renald regularizes this affective relation by treating Cador as his son juridically as well:

> In short, he took Cador to the king and invested him then and there with whatever he held in fief, provided that his daughter should have an heir. If she died without an heir, it should go to the rightful claimant. (1588–93)

> Al roi l'enmainne, c'est la some,
> Si l'a illueques ravestu
> De quanque il tient par un festu,
> Poruec que sa fille a oir viegne;
> Se sans oir muert, icil le tiegne
> Ki doit tenir. . . .

In this ceremony—reminiscent of the medieval practice of consecrating kings during their fathers' lifetime to ensure dynastic continuity—appearances are saved: it is Count Renald who invests his surrogate son with the county of Cornwall. Furthermore, the restriction that ties Cador's hold on Cornwall to the birth of an heir makes the fief hereditary after all, passed from Renald through Eufemie to her children. Yet the default provision is ambiguous: "If she died without heir, *it should go to the rightful claimant.*" Who would the rightful claimant be? Cador, ruling in his own right? Or perhaps Evan? If not secured by the birth of a son, would Cornwall come to the crown by escheat?[16]

The first part of the decree is quickly tested, for Count Renald survives the wedding celebration by only a year and a day. Cador leads the general mourning for his father-in-law but at the same time, leaving nothing to chance, secures Cornwall by a show of military force:

> Cador acted like a prudent man: as soon as the count died, to prevent any rash behavior, he stationed his guards in all the castles, the kind of men who are not cowards. (1646–50)

> Cador a fait com hom voisiés,
> Que anchois que li cuens morust,

Que folors n'i entrecorust,
En tols les castials mist ses gardes,
Tels gens ki ne sunt pas coärdes.

Que l'us de feme, c'est la some.
"Voire," fait il, "a la male eure
Irai desos, quant sui deseure."

The Cador episode thus concludes with the king's victory over the feudal aristocracy. The only uncertainty that remains is whether the new count and countess will secure the Cornish succession with an heir who, according to the terms of the king's proclamation, is not female. It is here that the story of Silence proper begins.

For the social order that derived its identity from its military function—the *bellatores*—a primary justification for excluding women from inheritance was the view that only men were capable of fulfilling the feudal obligations of lordship and vassalhood.[17] This assumption is tested when Cador and Eufemie, determined to bypass the prohibition against female succession, conspire to pass their daughter, Silence, off as a son. As Silence grows up, her successes in the forest and on the battlefield demonstrate that some of the "natural" differences between boys and girls derive from a conventional opposition between masculine and feminine practices. Privileging gender over sex does not prevent the text from treating masculinity as naturally superior to femininity.[18] On Silence's twelfth birthday, Nature scolds her for passing her days in the forest—"en bos converser" (2525)—and orders her, "Go in a chamber and sew!" 'Va en la cambre a la costure!' (2528).[19] Though momentarily swayed by Nature's reprimand, Silence comes to her senses when Nurture's argument is reinforced by Reason:

> Then he [i.e., Silence[20]] began to consider the pastimes of *the chamber*—which he had often heard about—and in his heart weighed all female customs against his current way of life, and saw, in short, that *men's customs were much better than women's*. "Indeed," he said, "it would be too bad to step down when I'm on top." (2632–40; emphases added)

Donques li prent a sovenir
Des jus c'on siolt *es cambres* faire
Dont a oï sovent retraire,
Et poise dont en son corage
Tolt l'us de feme a son usage,
Et voit que *miols valt li us d'ome*

In excelling at a range of masculine activities, Silence easily adapts to "a world in which 'masculinity' always has a plus value, even (or especially) when it is enacted by a woman."[21]

The narrative that unfolds invites two contrary conclusions. The first casts *Silence* as an oppositional text, focusing on how it renegotiates boundaries between sex and gender. The second, in contrast, emphasizes the way the text recontains the subversion it unleashes. Silence does not challenge socially constructed definitions of gender; she exploits them. In the end, Nature proves right and Nurture wrong, thanks to Merlin's (un)timely intervention: biological "truth" will out.

If the sexual politics of *Silence* are revolutionary, it is less for their troubling of medieval (or modern) discourses of gender than for their redefining of bodies in feudal society. In the light of this text, the feudal nobility ceases to be determined by its military function. The lesson implicit in Evan's decree against female inheritance is that vassals maintain the integrity of their fiefs not through military strength but through biological reproduction. Cador's decision to cross-dress his daughter in defiance of his uncle's decree elevates direct over collateral descent and therefore reformulates the romance's feudal politics of lineage. As Evan's closest male relative, Cador had figured as the childless king's likeliest successor (as well as the collateral descendent most threatening to any direct heir his uncle might subsequently sire); then, in a turnabout, Cador seems to adopt the fortunes of the house of Cornwall as his own, even resorting to deception to assure the continuity of the comital line.

From the beginning, *Le roman de Silence* is haunted by the erosion of traditional hierarchical distinctions: money, rather than honor, complains Heldris in his prologue, has become the universal standard by which nobles and nonnobles alike regulate their actions (1–101). The political threat of such social leveling, muted during the first half of the text, resurfaces in the body of the romance, in Silence's adventures as a minstrel and her French

exile and return. In all these episodes, the text's gender play both unsettles notions of feudal lordship and conceals the crises thus exposed, just as the tale of Cador and Eufemie euphemizes the politics of lineage.

Silence's stint as a jongleur—an interlude between her childhood exploits and her arrival at King Evan's court—confirms Michèle Perret's observation that while men in medieval romance cross-dress to gain sexual access to women, women cross-dress to obtain male privileges like inheritance and travel (329). When two wandering minstrels pass through Cornwall, Silence cannot resist the chance to augment her learning through foreign adventures. Convincing the pair to accept her as a servant and apprentice, she accompanies them on their travels throughout the continent. So thoroughly does she master their art, however, that they become jealous and plot to kill her. Silence escapes and returns home to Cornwall still in disguise, only to discover that Count Cador, infuriated by his daughter's disappearance, has pronounced a death sentence on any jongleur found in his lands. At first Silence inexplicably refuses to reveal her identity and risks being executed by her father's command. Brought before Cador, Silence finally asks his pity. By revealing herself to be the count's daughter, Silence is reinstated as his son.

On the surface, this episode intensifies the romance's self-conscious interrogation of gender. Silence adopts the pseudonym "Malduit," for example, "because he thought himself very badly brought up, very badly educated with regard to his nature" 'Car il se tient moult por mal duit, / Moult mal apris lonc sa nature' (3178–79). *Joglerie* itself seems to challenge the division between masculine and feminine; Silence sees the occupation as a fallback should she fail either as a man or as a woman:

> If you are slow at chivalry, minstrelsy will be of use to you. And if the king should happen to die, you will be able to practice your art in a chamber; you will have your harp and viele to make up for the fact that you don't know how to embroider a fringe or border. (2863–69)

> Se lens iés en chevalerie
> Si te valra la joglerie.
> Et s'il avient que li rois muire,
> Es cambres t'en poras deduire.
> Ta harpe et ta viële avras
> En liu de cho que ne savras
> Orfrois ne fresials manoier.

Yet Cador's hysterical response to Silence's flight—his injunction banning jongleurs from his land on pain of death is as arbitrary and extreme as Evan's prohibition against female inheritance—argues that the protagonist's transgression of class lines is more threatening than her manipulation of gender. In some ways, the two are analogized: Silence accomplishes both by darkening her complexion, first through exposure to the sun[22] and then by artificial means: "he stained and disguised his face with a herb he found in the woods" 'D'une herbe qu'ens el bos a prise / Desconoist sa face et deguise' (2909–10). Yet for Silence, class switching (life as a jongleur) affords greater freedom than gender bending (life as a noble princeling). Moreover, in incorporating the experience of a social other, Silence acquires a wisdom (and, presumably, a capacity for lordship) superior to that of other members of her class, regardless of sex. As the old courtier who first recognizes her notes,

> You will be all the wiser now for having endured greater hardships, for one cannot learn everything one needs to know by staying at court; in short, you will never see a well-learned man at court. (3583–88)

> Or serés plus senés
> Com plus avrés esté penés,
> Qu'en une cort ne puet avoir
> Quanque wés home a [a] savoir.
> Par une cort, cho est la some,
> Ne verrés ja bien apris home.
> (interpolation in orig.)

But the wisdom that Silence attains only leads her to confirm the sex discrimination of which she is both beneficiary and victim. In contrast to Nicolette, who uses her stint as a cross-dressed jongleur to return to Aucassin's court and serenade him incognito with a reminder of his *fainéance*,[23] Silence never takes advantage of her temporary disguise to tell the tale of her disenfranchisement. Despite critics' attempts to link the romance's subversion of

conventional gender roles to the construction of subjectivity through speech, the text does not exploit the irony of a jongleur named Silence. In a sense, the court's forgiveness of Silence's flirtation with downward mobility depends on her accepting both Evan's decree and her father's deception. Her sex seems to be the sign by which Cador recognizes his heir: as Silence says to her father, "You know my nature very well. . . . I have only the clothing and bearing and complexion that belong to a man" 'Vos savés bien de ma nature. / . . . / N'ai que les dras, / Et le contenance et le halle / Ki onques apartiegne a malle' (3640, 3644–46). In fact, however, Silence proves her identity by revealing, not her breasts (like Saint Eugenia, whose story resembles *Silence*[24]), but a birthmark: "He showed him a cross that he had as a birthmark on his right shoulder" 'Sor diestre espaule li ensegne / Une crois qu'il ot a ensegne' (3648–49). In comparison with the birthmarks sported by the heroines of other romances, this one is conspicuously nonsexual.[25] The truth that must be outed is less that of the protagonist's sex than that of her noble birth: Silence is not Eugenia but Eu-genia. Once her revelation defuses the threat posed by the intransigence of her father's decree, she is allowed to reassume the prerogatives of her class provided she relinquish once and for all any challenge to the privilege of her borrowed gender.

If in Silence's adventures as a minstrel the politics of gender are subtly overlaid by a preoccupation with class, the remainder of the romance underscores the interconnection between sexuality, dynastic legitimacy, and proper lordship. After her reconciliation with Cador, Silence, still in the guise of a young man, makes her way to the court of her great-uncle, King Evan. There the queen conceives a passion for the youth and twice tries to seduce her. Each time, after being spurned, Eufeme accuses Silence of attempted rape (once even bloodying her own nose and tearing her own clothes as evidence). Evan is reluctant to exact revenge for the alleged assaults lest his honor be compromised. The first time, Silence is exiled to France, returning to England only to put down a revolt by the king's rebellious barons. After the second false accusation, the king sentences his great-niece to do the seemingly impossible: to capture Merlin, who, tradition has it, can be taken only by a woman's ruse. At last, Silence's sex works to her advantage. She brings Merlin back to court, where, by his laughter, he exposes her as a woman and the queen as an adulteress (with a lover dressed as a nun in her entourage[26]). In a breathlessly rapid conclusion, Silence explains that her deception was not an attempt to contravene the king's injunction but simple obedience to her father (6630–38); Evan reverses the ban on female inheritance, framing his change of heart as the generous gesture of an unimpeachable sovereign, and then executes Queen Eufeme and marries Silence.

In the romance's complex politics of lineage, Queen Eufeme's attempted seductions of the *vallés mescine*[27] escalate the stakes of Silence's gender bending by exposing the instability of a social order based on an equilibrium between feudal loyalty and genealogical continuity. In the first sequence of seduction, accusation, and punishment, it is the propriety of the reciprocal bond between lord and vassal that is called into question. Like the young knight in Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* (*Lais* 72-92), Silence appeals to her feudal relation to the king in an effort to deflect the queen's advances, adding an allusion to familial connection: "I am your lord's vassal, and his kinsman (I don't know to what degree)" 'jo sui hom vostre segnor, / Et ses parens ne sai con priés' (3806–07). The Tristanesque plot circumvented earlier, when the king's nephew was provided with a love object whose name was nearly identical to the queen's, thus returns in an excessive form. Heldris compares Eufeme's illicit passion to that of the celebrated lovers:

> Tristan never suffered such anguish for Isolde nor Lady Isolde for Lord Tristan as did Queen Eufeme for this young man who was a girl. (3700–04)

> Car onques Tristrans por Izelt,
> Ne dame Izeuls por dant Tristran
> N'ot tele angoisse ne ahan
> Com eult Eufeme la roïne
> Por le vallet ki ert meschine.

In the face of the queen's explosive and embarrassing accusation, King Evan adopts a strategy of

silence, setting in motion a complicated plot in which his foolish credulity is unfavorably compared with the wisdom of his overlord, the king of France.[28] Against all expectations, Evan reacts to Eufeme's charges with a self-serving moderation that contrasts with the impulsiveness of his earlier decree against female succession.[29] Preferring "to retreat from justice rather than to do too much" 'miols retraire / De la justice que trop faire' (4197–98), Evan refrains from prosecuting Silence, explaining that the youth comes from "a very good family and is the son of a very important man" 'Cis est moult de halt parenté, / Et si est fils a moult prodome' (4234–35), that the alleged action was no more than a youthful transgression ("enfance"; 4237), and that public punishment would imply that the rape had been consummated. The decision is overdetermined and laced with ambiguity. Does Evan really fear offending Cador of Cornwall? Is the king defending his sexual honor, or is he equivocating to protect his presumed great-nephew, even against his own wife? Might he even be tempted to accept as his own an heir sired by a collateral descendant? In any event, the king opts for a cover-up, sending Silence to safety overseas. Outraged, the queen tampers with her husband's letter to the king of France, substituting one that requests that its bearer be executed. But the French king, heeding the *consilium* of his prudent counselors, refuses to compromise his honor by acceding to the request, even for the sake of feudal loyalty to his vassal. Instead, the French king knights Silence and takes her into his service. Silence proves an exemplary vassal throughout her exile and triumphant return, not only acquiring a considerable reputation in tournaments but also coming immediately to the rescue of Evan during the revolt. Demonstrating decisively that the military service required of feudal vassals is not biologically determined, Silence leads an assault on the renegade counts and stops their campaign "to usurp supreme power from the king, who didn't care to lose his rights illegitimately" 'par force segnor estre / Desor le roi, qui nen ot cure / De perdre vilment sa droiture' (5408–10).[30]

But it is precisely the military function of the feudal aristocracy that the romance displaces. In the High Middle Ages, as political stability came more and more to depend on dynastic continuity, a lineage that failed to reproduce itself failed in its political function. In the second occurrence of the Potiphar's-wife motif, both Eufeme and Silence come up against this biological imperative. The queen remains childless, a circumstance that jeopardizes Evan's lineage as surely as the prospect of female heirs had jeopardized Renald's. And whereas Silence previously appealed to her feudal relation to the king in deflecting the queen's advances, she now tries a different defense, one that precludes the accusation of homosexuality the queen earlier raised:[31] "I will never love you . . . for I have found a girlfriend elsewhere" 'A nul jor ne vos amerai, / . . . / Car allors ai faite une amie' (5724, 5726). The unwilling object of Eufeme's lust, Silence represents herself as the subject of desire. But this tactic only underscores her conspicuous lack of desire; even the dispute between Nature and Nurture on Silence's twelfth birthday has nothing to do with budding sexual impulses and everything to do with male prerogatives (2500–2604). However much Silence excels in the exercise of arms, she is unable to complete the plot perfectly fulfilled by Cador and Eufemie, the conscription of heterosexual desire into the service of the feudal politics of lineage.

The penalty imposed on Silence for her second alleged aggression against Eufeme—the capture of Merlin—likewise thematizes the biological limitations on social practices and conventions. Like Silence, Merlin has blurred the bounds between Nature and Nurture, denying his humanness by living like a wild, herbivorous beast. Acting on Nature's counsel, Silence succeeds in luring him out of the forest with roast meat, milk, and wine. (Ironically, in enticing Merlin to move from the raw to the cooked, Nature unwittingly shows that humankind's "natural" place is not in nature but in culture.) Back at court, Merlin's unmasking of Silence's sex and of Eufeme's infidelity produces a shocking result: the marriage of Silence to the old king, who is also her great-uncle. Merlin's laughter (unlike Iseut's at the testing ground of Mal Pas) does not disrupt patriarchy and hierarchy but reaffirms them.[32]

In the play of the feudal politics of lineage, Silence is the loser: the feudal unrest and the

genealogical crisis that threaten to destabilize Evan's rule are resolved at the expense of Silence and her patrilineage. As a man, Silence serves her lord with a loyalty that often goes unreciprocated, even saving the king's throne by crushing the vassals' revolt. As a woman, however, Silence is stripped of the prerogatives of gender that, if she had been a man, would have made her the future count of Cornwall, forestalling the monarchy's absorption of this important feudal fiefdom. Though the king's feudal barons ratify his decision to marry Silence, neither she nor her parents are asked for their consent. She becomes queen at the cost of living up to her name: whereas her predecessor, Eufeme, had been garrulous and slanderous, she falls silent. But, in a final indignity, Silence falsifies her nature in living up to her name, for, as the narrator concludes in a last misogynistic *idée reçue*, the notion of a "good woman" is paradoxical:

> Master Heldris says here and now that one should love a good woman more than one should hate or blame a bad one. And I will tell you why: a woman has less motivation, provided that she even has the choice, to be good than to be bad. Doing the right thing comes unnaturally to her. (6684–91)
>
> Maistre Heldris dist chi endroit
> C'on doit plus bone feme amer
> que haïr malvaise u blasmer.
> Si mosterroie bien raison:
> Car feme a menor oquoison,
> Por que ele ait le liu ne l'aise,
> De l'estre bone que malvaise,
> S'ele ouevre bien contre nature.

If Silence is the loser, Evan is the winner. In exchanging Eufeme for Silence, the king redefines the strategic use of royal marriage. The prize of his peace settlement with Norway, Eufeme had become a double dynastic liability, threatening the continuity of Evan's lineage by both her adultery and her barrenness. Silence, a young bride, renews his prospects of engendering an heir. At the same time, he exchanges an exogamous alliance to the daughter of an equal for a union that is politically and literally endogamous. As if no longer content to leave Cornwall to a collateral line, Evan reinstates Silence as heiress to one of the most powerful fiefs of his realm, then marries her. Arguably, the "heroine" of the romance's drama of lineage is Eufemie, who not only fervently and eloquently embraces the dynastically expedient match made for her but also condones her daughter's marriage to the king who had disinherited them both. But in this shift toward direct patrilineage, the king marries his great-niece. The text does not make explicit what would have been obvious to Heldris's thirteenth-century audience: Evan can exploit dynastic politics to consolidate monarchical power only by violating canon law.[33] The same king who earlier euphemized the politically advantageous match between Cador and Eufemie as romantic love now embarks on a more radical politics of lineage, for which his only recourse is Silence.

Le roman de Silence ultimately contests the historical role of the feudal aristocracy. According to the medieval ideology of trifunctionality, feudal nobles were the peacekeepers (and the war makers) of the social order, protecting peasants and clerics from the predatory raids of other nobles. As subversive as the cross-gendering of Silence might initially appear, it subscribes to this conservative definition of the feudal aristocracy: despite her biological sex, she more than adequately displays the military prowess required of a future count of Cornwall. But in the High Middle Ages, as fiefs became hereditary and monarchical power became centralized, the preservation of lineage came more and more to be the feudal aristocracy's primary function.[34] In this perspective, the recoding of Silence as female reflects a shift in the way aristocratic bodies mattered: less as *bellatores* charged with maintaining order in the land than as links in genealogical chains charged with maintaining dynastic legitimacy. By the close of the romance, Evan—his enemies put down, his feudal authority consolidated, Nature and Nurture in his kingdom restored to proper balance—triumphs by directing and exploiting this renegotiation, conscripting his great-niece and most valiant vassal into her new function in the politics of lineage. In the complex play of truths and falsehoods, disguise and revelation, sex and gender, it is not difficult to discern who has the last laugh.

Notes

[1]The romance exists in a single manuscript, Mi.LM.6 of the University of Nottingham (described in Thorpe 2–12), edited in its entirety by Lewis Thorpe in 1967. A paperback edition with facing-page translation by Sarah Roche-Mahdi appeared in 1992, making the work accessible to a general audience. All quotations from *Silence* in this essay and the translations of them are taken from this edition, unless otherwise noted. I have sometimes modified these translations. See also Regina Psaki's English version.

[2]For example, Peter Allen calls *Silence* a "*texte de jouissance*" that "confronts some of the major critical issues currently facing medieval studies . . . the claims of feminist criticism, the relationship between sexuality and literature, the role (and limitations) of the textual editor, the nature of the medieval 'canon' of texts, and the modern reader's relationship with older literature" (98). For Allen, the work refuses itself as object, resisting models of reading that seek to "disambiguate" medieval texts (99).

[3]For Simon Gaunt, articles by Bloch ("Silence"), Cooper, and Allen "offer stimulating analyses of the text's linguistic play, but . . . read sexual difference as a metaphor for linguistic difference, thereby divesting the narrative of referential import and of any implications it might have for sexual politics." In contrast, he says, Brahney and Lasry "see the representation of women in *Silence* as positive." Gaunt himself emphasizes the text's engagement with problems such as gender as a cultural construct, the indeterminacy of signifiers, the deconstructible opposition between nature and nurture, and the symbolic value of nature in sex-gender systems (202, 214n1).

[4]Thus a positive assessment of Silence's success as a man leads Kathleen Brahney to entertain a fantasy of female authorship, in which "the little bearded man pictured at the outset of the original manuscript is really a woman in disguise, about to engage in her own fantasy" (61). Others, more cautious about the extent of the text's subversiveness, still refer to the construction of subjectivity through speech in registering their skepticism. Gaunt sees the ultimate silencing of the heroine as a characteristically masculine move of suppression or repression that nevertheless leaves "traces of *voices* raised in opposition to this reflex" (213; emphasis added). E. Jane Burns, emphasizing that *Silence* completely forecloses the disruptive movements modern readers find appealing, notes that what its heroine lacks is "a way to be a subject without playing at being a male subject, a way to move from subjection to subjecthood without the transvestism that her story enacts" (245).

[5]On the materiality of the body and the construction of gender, see Judith Butler.

[6]"In the Middle Ages," writes the historian Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "alliance was primarily a 'peace pact' . . . initiating and sealing a truce. Giving a woman to the lineage with which a family was becoming reconciled placed the bride at the center of the entente. As a gage of peace and an instrument of concord, her role went beyond her individual destiny or her personal aspirations" (287).

[7]From the eleventh century onward, the church struggled to impose its definition of marriage on a resistant feudal aristocracy. Ecclesiastical authorities emphasized the mutual consent of the partners and their verbal vows (creating the possibility of "chaste" marriages). The nobility, in contrast, emphasized physical consummation. Ironically, Heldris associates physical consummation with church supervision. On the transformation of marriage practices in the High Middle Ages, see Georges Duby.

[8]*Silence*'s intertextual relation to the Tristan legend is overdetermined from the outset. Both author and heroine are associated with Cornwall, the kingdom ruled by the hapless King Mark. Like Mark, Evan marries a foreign princess for political expediency; like Tristan, Cador is the beloved nephew of the king, is wounded while slaying a fierce dragon, and is healed by the woman he loves.

[9]This mode parallels the ecclesiastical view that marriage requires the consent of the partners—a stipulation that empowers the two individuals at the expense of their families. Whereas political alliances like Evan's are social, publicly contracted acts, marriages of mutual consent could, at least in principle, be conducted in private, with only ecclesiastical sanction. Thus, they threatened patriarchal society's use of marriage as a strategic political tool. In practice, of course, most aristocratic marriages remained the political contracts described by Klapisch-Zuber (see n6, above).

[10]This sequence strongly resembles the opening episode of Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligés*, commonly referred to as his anti-*Tristan*.

[11]The decree naturally consternates great landholders who have only daughters (324–26). Not incidentally, the king's invocation of Saint Peter—Saint *Pere*—underscores the patriarchal nature of his oath, as well as alluding, perhaps, to the patrilineal apostolic succession of the all-male papacy.

[12]Compare the episode of Noire Espine in Chrétien de Troyes's *Le chevalier au lion*, in which two sisters dispute how much of the patrimony the elder must relinquish to the younger (4704–6509). King Arthur decides in favor of partible inheritance. Thus, the fact that the two sisters in *Silence* are twins is, strictly speaking, irrelevant: birth order is significant among sons but not among daughters. In the famous case of the Beaumont twins, scions of an important twelfth-century Anglo-Norman family, the elder, Waleran, held the patrimony of Meulan in Normandy; his younger brother, Robert, held the English honor of Leicester. In contrast, in Marie de France's *Fresne* (*Lais* 44–60), one twin daughter is spirited away to conceal the multiple birth, but no effort is made to determine which sister is the elder.

[13]But before he does so the lovers again affirm their love. As the king convenes his council, Cador and Eufemie, fearing the worst, decide they would prefer exile in the forest—another nod to the Tristan story—to being separated.

[14]In the mid–thirteenth century, when *Silence* was presumably composed, the earl of Cornwall was the nearest male relative—the brother—of the king, Henry III (1216–72). Normally, an overlord controlled the marriage of a vassal's heiress only after the death of her father. See Waugh (ch. 1) and, for France, Petot.

[15]Earlier, the text emphasizes Evan's role as his nephew's surrogate father—an effect of *nurture*: "Cador . . . qu'il fist *norir*"

(516; emphasis added). Throughout *Silence*, love and feudal loyalty speak the same language: "aimer" or "amor" is used in the feudal sense in (for example) 1493, 4288–89, 4512, and 5553.

[16]Escheat was the practice by which a vassal's fief, in the absence of viable heirs, reverted to the control of his overlord.

[17]Thus, southern France, which had a higher percentage of allods than the north, was more tolerant of female inheritance (Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny* 189, 267).

[18]Misogynistic clichés are attributed to Cador (667–75) and Evan's chancellor (5001–06) and pronounced by the narrator (3901–24, 4157–58, 4265–71, 5233–40). These clichés emphasize women's irrationality, mutability, contentiousness, malice, lust, and deceitfulness. On the stability of medieval misogynistic discourse and its relation to courtly discourse, see Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*.

[19]In the Middle Ages, men were associated with the outdoors and women with interiors. Interiors were suspect, moreover, because they were where women perpetrated deceptions around the biological functions of childbirth and sexual intercourse, deceptions in which silence was crucial: "My lady has no need of noise!" 'Ma dame n'a mestier de noise!' calls the official who announces the birth of Eufemie's daughter (1998). In the vita of Hugh of Lincoln, the young wife of an elderly husband feigns pregnancy, takes to her bed, and (with the complicity of her wet nurse) produces a baby girl whom she passes off as her own, an heiress to her husband's estates (L'Hermite-Leclerq 204–10). When plotting to seduce the youth in *Silence*, Queen Eufeme takes to her room on the pretext "that she couldn't stand the least bit of noise" 'qu'el ne puet sofrir le noise' (3733); what she needs, in other words, is Silence. On the literary representation of the "gynaeceum," see Danielle Régnier-Bohler.

[20]Roche-Mahdi calls attention to the "consistent use of . . . masculine pronouns" in the Old French text "to refer to a being we know to be female. The text itself thus interferes with the functioning of language as a code that upholds conventional distinctions, constantly challenges the legitimacy of social classification by gender" (xxi).

[21]This is Carol Clover's characterization of early northern Europe, which, she argues, functioned according to a "one-sex" logic in which (gendered) distinctions between "strong and weak, powerful and powerless or disempowered, swordworthy and unswordworthy, honored and unhonored or dishonored, winners and losers" were more important than biological distinctions between the sexes (372, 380). Clover's description of Scandinavian inheritance is apt here: "So compelling is the principle of patrilineage that, in the event of genealogical crisis, even a woman can be conscripted as a kind of pinch hitter. Better a son who is your daughter than no son at all" (370).

[22]Being male (*malle*) is associated with the tanned complexion (*halle*) of the outdoors in 2289–91, 2473–74, 2503–04, etc.

[23]For Kevin Brownlee, *Aucassin et Nicolette* registers the transition in which verbal skill, at which the wily Nicolette exceeds her hapless lover, came to be valued over physical prowess.

[24]Daughter of the governor of Alexandria, Eugenia, schooled in Greek philosophy and Latin rhetoric, dresses like a boy to learn about Christianity from a bishop named Helenus. Becoming a famous physician, she cures a widow, who falls in love with her. When Eugenia refuses her advances, the widow reports to the governor—Eugenia's father—that the physician tried to rape her. Eugenia bears her breast to expose the widow's lie. Once reinstated as a woman, Eugenia founds a female monastery. As Allen Frantzen puts it, "[A]fter her refeminization, her powers," like Silence's, "are contained within a woman's world" (463). Frantzen treats the Old English version from Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*.

[25]Compare the *Roman de la rose ou de Guillaume de Dole*—erotically centered on a rose on the heroine's thigh—or the *Roman de la violette*, centered on a violet on the heroine's breast. See Krueger; Solterer, "At the Bottom."

[26]This lover's masquerade exemplifies Perret's observation that men in medieval romances cross-dress to gain sexual access to women.

[27]The term "girl-boy," used in the seduction scene (3763, 3785), calls attention to the impossibility of the queen's passion.

[28]Though Henry III formally renounced his claim to Normandy and Anjou in 1258, he remained vassal of the French king for the duchy of Gascony.

[29]Silence's silence is likewise overdetermined. The youth could not prove her innocence without revealing her "nature," thereby losing her inheritance and shaming her father, and without disgracing her feudal mistress, the queen.

[30]For possible historical bases of literary representations of women warriors, see Solterer, "Figures," on the "mini-genre" of the *Tournoiement as dames* 'Ladies' Tournament.' The first manuscript she cites dates from 1261.

The reign of Henry III was marked by contentious relations between the king and his vassals. Henry came to the throne amidst baronial rebellion, one year after his father, King John, had been forced to sign Magna Carta. Henry's move to restore monarchical power prompted a barons' revolt in 1233. After suppressing the uprising, Henry enjoyed "[m]ore than twenty years of unprecedented power" (Clanchy 237). In 1258 the barons revolted again, led by Henry's brother-in-law Simon de Montford. This rebellion was ended by the Mise of Amiens (1264), Louis IX's arbitration in favor of Henry, and by Simon's death at the battle of Evesham (1265).

[31]"He's a fag [literally "heretic"], I'd swear to it" 'Herites est, gel sai de fi' (3947). Her charge recalls Guenevere's in Marie de France's *Lanval*: "You don't desire women. You love nice-looking boys. You take your pleasure with them" 'de femme n'avez talent. / Vaslez amez bien afaitiez, / ensemble od els vus deduiez' (282–84). Perret notes that homosexuality in medieval French literature is only virtual, evoked by groundless accusations. On the association between homosexuality and heretics, see Boswell (283–86).

[32]Burns offers this reading of Iseut's laughter and complicitous wink in Béroul's *Tristan* (3827, 3873): "Far from representing the aimless humor of women, inevitably recuperated by the logic of men, [Iseut's] laugh subverts the legal and linguistic codes previously written on the female body"; the laugh is the nonverbal articulation of the same impulse that undoes binary logic by (for example) bringing uncle and nephew together in the space between "Iseut's enormous thighs," thus dissolving the difference between husband and lover, guilt and innocence (ch. 5, esp. 229–30, 234–37).

[33]The union would have been a violation even after the Fourth Lateran Council, of 1215, which reduced the prohibition on consanguineous marriages from seven degrees of kinship to four. Recall Silence's first rejection of Queen Eufeme's advances: "jo sui hom vostre segnor, / *Et ses parens* ne sai con priés" (3806–07). Typically, kings and nobles invoked consanguinity as grounds for the dissolution of marriages that had ceased to be politically expedient (for example, when Louis VII divorced Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152). The church, despite its opposition to consanguineous marriages, tried to insist on their indissolubility once they were contracted. See Duby.

[34]Fiefdoms and vassalic ties were not initially hereditary; in principle, on the death of the vassal the fief reverted to his overlord, who was free to grant it to the candidate who would best fulfill the political and military functions it entailed.

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