The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable': Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*

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The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable': Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*[1]

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Events and characterization in Heldris's *Roman de Silence* are structured to allocate power by gender, as shown in the destabilizing of King Ebain's 'masculinity' and the empowerment of several female characters including the hero(ine).(LKS)

The *Roman de Silence* treats the allocation of authority and power by gender in late medieval culture. With its seemingly anachronistic[2] presentation of a 'naturally' female hero(ine) becoming a valiant male knight, this romance, which Bloch calls 'a keystone in the anthropology of the High Middle Ages' (81), hypothesizes that a female is capable of most activities that are culturally, if not biologically, gendered 'male'[3] and that, through appropriate 'nurture,' females can supersede the limitations of cultural determinism. These themes have elicited a body of critical commentary informed almost exclusively by feminist theory about the silencing of women by the patriarchy.[4] However, in establishing either the nascent protofeminism or the indigenous misogyny of this romance,[5] critics have concentrated primarily on one gender. Practicing a partisan version of gender studies, they have failed to recognize that the *Roman de Silence* exposes how power is allocated to and appropriated by *both* genders.

Indeed, this text employs the motif of transvestism to transgress and destabilize the most visible socially-encoded signifier of gender and sexuality, costume.[6] Donning 'fainte vesteüre' (6485, 6520) [false and lying dress][7] and posing as a male to claim her inheritance, Silence fools everybody and proves that clothes do not literally make the man. Suspecting no dissimulation, Eufeme especially reads the signifiers of Silence's male disguise so literally as to feel sexual desire for a 'vallés mescine' [boy-maiden] (3762).[8] Attracted by Silence's manly prowess, and overconfident in her own allure, Eufeme is confused and frustrated when Silence refuses physical consummation,

prompting her to ask if he is a monk or a hermit. Silence complains that she is making fun of him, but Eufeme's reply explicitly expresses her exasperation at the slipperiness of Silence's signifiers: '"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,'[9] is a multivalent code by which Heldris tests the boundaries of sex and gender. Eufeme's query about the stability of Silence's dubious masculinity gets to the heart of the poem's thorough exposure of the questionable firmness of *any* gender signifiers. Previous discussions of gender issues in this text have largely been limited to Silence's male impersonation, but I will analyze Heldris's representation of the gender construction of male and female characters to demonstrate how this romance ultimately repudiates the reliability of any stable system of gender difference.

The question of this text's genre provides a further complication. If its bending of gender rules erodes the dependability of gender signifiers, the sliding rules of its genre also destabilize audience reception of *Silence*. Despite multiple gender crossings in Shakespearean comedy, generic expectations promised Elizabethan audiences that 'all's well that ends well.' The audience of a medieval romance, which featured the rigorous testing (with no certainty of the outcome) of the virtue and valor of a male protagonist, had no such generic assurance.[10] This test might require the rescue of a distressed female from a dragon or other monster to demonstrate the knight's Christian virtue and masculine *virtus*.[11] Such a dragon rescue occurs in the *Roman de Silence*. However, in this romance, which refuses to 'behave according to our expectations, to fit into our categories' (Allen 103), the character distressed by the dragon is not a damsel, but the King of England. Later, casting off the generically determined role of damsel, the daughter of the King's dragonslayer champions the again-distressed King Ebain against the Count of Chester. Reinforcing the blatant destabilizing of the otherwise trustworthy costume signs of gender in the heroine's transvestism, such generically incorrect role reversals contribute to Heldris's consistently inconsistent system of feminine and masculine gender signifiers.

For example, this text endows its male rulers, the Kings of Norway, England, and France, and the Counts of Cornwall and Chester, with the phallocentric and patriarchal authority that was both a gender and occupational norm in medieval culture.[12] Participating in the recent critical discourse about medieval masculinities,[13] my comparative analysis of these rulers reveals that the *Roman de Silence* especially destabilizes the personal and political authority of Ebain,

who lacks the qualities expected of a king—decisiveness, physical dependability, and permanence. While Heldris presents male representatives of patriarchal political authority as mutual foils, the text also plays them against its female characters, who, as wives of rulers, also possess and exercise various types of power. However, the sovereignty attained through marriage by Eufeme, Eufemie, and Silence entails the loss of other kinds of power. Finally, mediating these gendered empowerments is the ambiguously gendered Merlin, whose role is literally to laugh at these characters and 'dis-cover' their false appropriations of power. However, even Merlin's authority as arbiter of gendered roles is secured paradoxically at the cost of yielding his own person (and magical force) to Silence. Merlin's revelations undermine any reliable model of gendered power and invite questioning of the presumed male gender of the otherwise unknown author,[14] who voices provocative questions about the gendering of the roles played and the power possessed by females *and* males in medieval society. Heldris's romance resists, destabilizes, and subverts the patriarchal silencing of feminine power typical of medieval literary texts.

I. EBAIN'S DECONSTRUCTED MASCULINITY IN THE *Roman de Silence*

The gender category of maleness and the concomitant proof of masculine power are measured in several arenas in the *Roman de Silence:* political authority, physical prowess, and sexual potency. The male character with the greatest ostensible power and plot longevity is Ebain, King of England. Seen against the gender signifiers assigned to the other hegemonic males (and females), however, King Ebain's masculinity, which should stabilize his kingdom, is consistently undermined.

Heldris takes every opportunity to deconstruct Ebain's political authority. Significantly, the *Roman de Silence* owes much to the Arthurian matter: the character Merlin; the Tristan and Iseult plot pattern in the Cador/Eufemie courtship; and Merlin's agency in Uther's impersonation of Silence's ancestor. In this Arthurian context, Arthur's mytho-political power is the yardstick against which all male authority figures are measured. Ebain alternates heroic feats with acts that diminish his regal image, a pattern already established when the narrator introduces Ebain as second to no ruler *except* Arthur (107–11). Damning with faint praise, Heldris proceeds to cancel whatever authority Ebain's 'roialtés' (6632) [royalty] is accorded elsewhere in the text.

Underlying this diminution of his stature as monarch is Ebain's ruling style, which is neither reasoned nor reasonable.[15] For example, before extolling Ebain's generosity to his warrior-band (121–139), the narrator exposes the King's capricious judgment; Ebain metes lifetime imprisonment to all lawbreakers,

whether rightly or wrongly accused (112–18). Despite his harsh laws, Ebain profits from his chivalric munificence when his vassals help him wage war against Norway (139–44). But the narrator challenges, even cancels, the positive signification of Ebain's judicial power or warrior fellowship by attributing the long, devastating war to some unspecified 'petite oquoison' (149) [trivial thing]. Regal petulance thus escalates into wholesale carnage:

> Puis en arst on mainte maison,
> Tante vile en fu mise en flamme,...
> Et colpé tant pié, tante hance,
> Et tante gens caitive esparse
> Dont la contreë en est arse
> Que nel vos puis demi conter.
> Li mals se prist si a monter
> Que Norouege en fu priés gaste,
> Atainte de fain et de laste,
> Et morte en fu la gens menue
> Et li autre priés confundue. (150–60)
>
> [(The war) lasted a very long time:
> there were many houses burned,
> many a city in flames—
> and so many feet were hacked, so many lances,
> so many people scattered and captured
> whose country had been burned,
> that I can't tell you the half of it.
> The situation became so desperate
> that Norway was nearly laid waste,
> overcome by hunger and weariness,
> with the common people dead from this
> and the others nearly defeated.]

The narrator emphasizes how the whims of figures at the top of the social scale can devastate those at the bottom.

The only other character in the text who regularly vents such rage over trivial matters is Eufeme, the text's quintessential *woman*. Ebain's recurring administration of extreme justice is a proclivity he shares with Eufeme.[16] The narrator and Ebain misogynistically classify her outbursts as typical of an emotionally *'enferme'* (3909) [unstable] woman;[17] by extension then, Ebain's own petty wrath undermines his regality and even feminizes him. The King's violent self-aggrandizement, required of feudal politics, extends to the outcome of this war, his acquisition of a bride (the traditional peace-weaver) sealing the treaty between victorious England and vanquished Norway. Of Ebain's motives, Kinoshita notes, 'Though [Ebain] 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' (398).

Ebain's penchant for rash judgments with far-reaching consequences is epitomized in his ban on female inheritance:

> '... Mais par le foi que doi Saint Pere,
> Ja feme n'iert mais iretere
> Ens el roiame d'Engletiere,
> *Por tant com j'aie a tenir tiere.*
> Et c'en iert ore *la venjance*
> De ceste nostre mesestance.'(313–18; my emphasis)
>
> [... 'but, by the faith I owe St. Peter,
> never again shall a woman inherit
> in the kingdom of England
> *as long as I hold this land.*
> This shall be my *vengeance*
> for this wretched situation.']

While the King's authoritarian pronouncement sounds conclusive, even this vengeful decree undermines Ebain's hegemony. Ebain ultimately rescinds this law which his proclamation inextricably tied to his possession of political power over England. When he decrees that '"Femes raront lor iretage"' (6643) [Women will have their inheritance back], he abjures, at least technically, the authority by which he swore the edict in the first place.[18] On a microcosmic plot level, Ebain's autocratic behavior belies the attribution of 'nobility' to this noble.[19]

On a macrocosmic plot level, moreover, these precipitous judgments and retaliatory acts early in the romance render even more inexplicable Ebain's later tolerance of Silence's alleged sexual betrayals. After two humiliatingly unsuccessful attempts to seduce the youth, the Queen impersonates a victim of sexual violence by injuring herself and tearing her clothing, in order to move her husband to punish her assailant. Resisting her, the King unaccountably spares Silence (who, for all he knows, nearly cuckolded him) by sending this misbehaving 'vallés ki est meschine' (3705, 3763, 3870) [boy who was a maiden] to the King of France, insuring his safety in a letter requesting that Silence be welcomed and knighted (4304–12). Enraged, Eufeme artfully substitutes her own letter ordering the execution of its bearer.

Silence's death warrant creates a diplomatic predicament for France. Attracted by her 'bialté' (4417) [beauty], the King himself 'l'acole dont et baize/ Si fort que il oblie enaize/ Le brief' (4423–25) [embraced and kissed him/ so warmly that he almost forgot the letter]. Reluctant to carry out his vassal's request, the French King and his privy council debate fine points of

mutually conflicting feudal obligations; by complying with his political ally's request, he reneges on the royal protection guaranteed by his kiss. Unlike Ebain's rash decrees, the decision to spare Silence's life is considered rationally and at great length, for over 300 lines of text (4520–4873).[20] Finally, the council recommends that the King send Ebain a letter denying his request. This rupture in feudal relations reveals what little respect Ebain commands among his noble peers and causes the embarrassed English monarch to be crimson-faced 'de maltalent, d'angoisce, et d'ire' (4909) [with rage, misery, chagrin]. The subplot of Silence's French exile tarnishes Ebain's reputation even as it enhances the stature of the young hero(ine). When recalled to England to render military service to King Ebain, Silence is so esteemed that the French monarch sends with her a contingent of his knights under her command. The war itself is another embarrassing sign of the continuing erosion of Ebain's political power.

If Heldris's account of Ebain's reign commences with a lengthy war (148), it comes full circle with another 'grant guierre' (5274) [great war], this time not an offensive campaign against an external enemy, but a defensive stand against an internal insurrection (5258–61). Such direct flouting of regal authority signifies the utter deterioration of any king's political status,[21] and it is only Silence who keeps Ebain from being deposed or killed. Ebain's adversary is the Count of Chester, a former supporter, 'ki li a fait et tort et honte' (5304) [who had done him wrong and shame].[22] The intensity of Ebain's desperation can be gauged by: his oath to give up all his worldly possessions if he does not exact revenge upon this traitor; his willingness to sacrifice many men, including Chester's son (5396); and his violation of the rules of chivalry (5319–26). No rogue malcontent, Chester has wide support resisting the harrassed King (5403–10, 5412) who is reluctant to 'perdre vilment sa droiture' (5410) [to lose his rights so basely]. Ebain's danger is so extreme that he is forced to recall the banished Silence from France. The romance's celebration of the warrior ethos in violent group battles and individual combat overshadows the political significance of the campaign between Ebain and Chester. Moreover, Silence's capture of the Count of Chester, securing England's ultimate victory, tends to valorize, even euphemize, Ebain's narrow escape from utter political debacle and possible death.

Thus, if maintaining political stability is any measure of Ebain's masculine power, Heldris presents considerable textual evidence to suggest its destabilization: his trivial war with Norway; his rash ban on female inheritance; his liege lord's refusal to honor his request to execute Silence; and his helplessness before the nearly catastrophic rebellion of his vassals. Overall, Ebain is treated with bemusement abroad and contempt at home. These

subplots demonstrate both his diminished credibility among his subjects and the decline in respect for his feudal authority among his peers. Each incident also threatens what Ebain or any medieval male ruler most fears: disgrace and a loss of power.

II. EBAIN'S PHYSICAL PROWESS

Ebain's repeated failure to equal or exceed the physical prowess of his vassals further undermines his male authority and incurs shame. En route to his court at Winchester, he meets a typical romance test of a fire-breathing, poisonous dragon in a deep forest. Since he has just promulgated his new misogynistic law, it is quite significant that the dragon's forest is named 'le bos de *malroi,*' [forest of the bad king] (559).[23] A personal and political disaster, the dragon episode reflects poorly upon Ebain's royal and masculine stature: thirty men are killed and eaten by the beast; his nephew and champion Cador nearly perishes from the dragon's venom; and he himself risks public disgrace. The narrator syntactically emphasizes Ebain's *un*kingly response by repeating the title 'li rois' [the King] in each of three closely-spaced lines which describe how Ebain 'fort s'esmarist.' (356) [was absolutely terrified], 'a... grant doute' (364) [was very frightened], and 'plaint et plore' (372) [wept and lamented]. Ebain wants less to avenge this affront to his personal and political authority than to practice damage control. Plaintively, he whines, '"Quelle feron?/ S'atant remaint, honi seron/ Se nos ensi nos en tornomes."' (375–77) ['What shall we do? If this goes on we shall be shamed/ because we turn back like this.']. His general helplessness is best summed up in his exclamation, '"Las! com ai fait pesme jornee!"' (506) ['Alas! what an evil day for me!']. Ebain is saved by a real hero, his nephew Cador, who is consistently described in epithets that accentuate his masculine prowess, 'Cador le preu' (392, 512) [Cador the valiant], and 'Cadors, qui le cors a gent' (526) [Cador of the noble person]. Cador slays the dragon, simultaneously affirming his own masculine power and negating that of Ebain.

The only force to conquer Cador's masculine puissance is 'fine amor' (1095, 1102) [noble love]. A long interlude depicts his developing passion with Eufemie, the physician engaged to heal his injuries. Like other valiant knights of Arthurian romance, Cador is nearly unmanned by his sexual desire. While this subplot primarily focusses on the pair of lovers, whose mutually shared passion contrasts markedly to the union of Ebain and Eufeme, even the relatively minor role here accorded Ebain discredits him. Despite his guarantee of a well-deserved reward to both Cador, for killing the dragon, and Eufemie, for curing Cador's illness, 'Tols ont les cols cargiés de soing/ Qu'il ne truisent le roi *estable,*/ Ne sa parolle veritable. (1162–64; emphasis added) [Both were

very anxious/ lest they not find the king *stable*[24] /and true to his word]. Even his loyal nephew doubts the stability of King Ebain's royal largesse. The dragon episode, integral for engendering the romance's real hero(ine), undermines the physical prowess that, as man and king, Ebain should demonstrate. It also provides a prototype for Silence as the King's savior from the rebellious barons.

Nurtured in the activities and attitudes gendered as male by her culture, when Silence inevitably joins the other retainers in Ebain's household, she 'siert le bien en mainte *guise*' (3693, emphasis added) [served him well in many ways].[25] She uses her childhood training in hunting, wrestling, jousting, and skirmishing (2492–96) to distinguishes herself in the activities practiced by 'bachelors' [young men]:

> Kil veïst joster sans mantel
> Et l'escu porter en cantiel
> Et faire donques l'ademise,
> La lance sor le faltre mise,
> Dire peüst que Noreture
> Puet moult ovrer contre Nature,
> Quant ele aprent si et escole
> A tel us fem et tendre et mole. (5149–56)
>
> [Anyone who saw him joust without a mantle,
> carrying a shield on his left arm,
> and set to the attack, lance on the lance-rest,
> would say that Nurture
> can do much against Nature,
> when she teaches and trains
> a tender, delicate woman in such behavior.]

Like her father, Silence is characterized in heroic epithets, 'pros, sages et hardis' (5194) [valiant, wise, and brave], and she is the only character allowed to have a ritual arming of the warrior passage (5336–68).[26] Again, these 'manly' attributes enhance her prowess, but do little to enhance Ebain, whom she rescues from a near-fatal conflict with another 'chevalier moult fort' (5503) [very powerful knight], the Count of Chester. Heldris emphasizes Ebain's physical disadvantage against Chester; a mere eleven lines are required to unhorse the King in battle (5485–96). Ebain is further devalued by the success of his female savior, who combats Chester for one hundred lines before severing Chester's right arm and handing him over to the King (5538–5638). Without a pause, Silence continues to slice off enemy legs, feet, and fists (5639–42). Ebain's masculine stature would suffer from the need of even a male warrior's aid; since the audience knows Silence is female, the King's masculine prowess is even more compromised. Because physical strength and courage are indices

of masculine power in the Middle Ages, in Ebain Heldris presents the equivalent of a king-in-distress who especially reveals his cowardice and helplessness in comparison with the physical mettle of Cador and his daughter.

III. EBAIN'S SEXUAL POTENCY

If the absence of physical puissance helps to undermine Ebain's power, sexual potency is an even more important index of the King's shaken masculinity. In the allegorical *psychomachia* between personified Nature and Nurture over possession of Silence, Nature ultimately emerges the winner, textually privileging the natural signifiers of sex over the cultural signifiers of gender in this romance's prescription for both femininity and masculinity. The primary measure of manhood in medieval culture, authorized by Aristotle and after him Albertus Magnus, was biological.[27] The most basic signifier of virility was potency in sexual intercourse. This criterion of manhood prevents Silence's charade as a male from being entirely successful. The narrator smirks on occasion (2477–78) about the absence of a penis that renders Silence at best a 'malvais home' (2602) [defective man].[28] And it is precisely 'la nonpossance de celui' (3875) [the impotence of the boy] that frustrates Eufeme in her attempt to seduce Silence. Thus, when Eufeme questions whether Silence is '*stables*' (3817) [stable], she acknowledges the anatomical formula for medieval masculinity: potency defines masculine stability.

Sexual performance was yoked with paternity as another requirement for male-gendered patriarchal privileges, especially the fathering of a *male* child, considered to be determined by the sperm.

> Strong male sperm tended to reproduce...the sex and characteristics of the individual from whom it had come....If the child was a son bearing the characteristics of his father, then the male sperm had proved dominant in all respects (Bullough, 40–41).

Throughout the *Roman de Silence*, the biological act of engendering is a measure explicitly of a man's fatherhood, implicitly of his maleness, and ultimately of his entitlement to the cultural privileges and powers of the patriarchy. These powers are symbolized by a father's authority over his children, represented in this text both in Begon's commodification of Eufeme and in Silence's acquiescence in her masquerade.

The moral and social worth of the progeny are also evaluated by the identity and status of the father and by how successfully he sired. The Old French verb *engendrer* denotes the biological act of begetting, but it is difficult not to see in it the male's responsibility to determine the *gender* (or rather biological sex) of the begotten. Social status and moral character are literally a matter of

good breeding. For female children in this text, breeding is measured in the obligatory, almost generic physical beauty[29] which makes them attractive to other men and therefore potentially good breeders themselves.[30]

For male children, on the other hand, physical beauty reflects qualitatively upon their fathers' engendering act. The French councilor's first impression of Silence, that the youth is a product of 'biele engendreüre' (4400) [noble engendering (my translation)], illustrates this patriarchal rule.[31] Similarly, as the court discusses whether to execute Silence, her 'halt parage' (4450) [high birth] is influential. Even Ebain, for whom Silence has been both a blessing and a curse, is obliged to observe this gender convention. After stripping away Silence's 'fainte vesteüre' (6485), Ebain pays Silence the highest compliment one man can pay another, even though he now discovers on the nude Silence the absence of the most important corporal signifier of maleness, a phallus:

> 'Silence, moult as esté prols,
> Bials *chevaliers, vallans* et buens;
> *Mellor n'engendra roi ne cuens.*' (6579–81; my emphasis)
>
> ['Silence, you have been most *valiant*,
> a fair *knight*, *valorous* and good;
> *no king or count ever sired a better.*']

Here Ebain inversely acknowledges his own most basic failing as a man and a king, the failure to sire an heir, especially a male heir. The successive Counts of Cornwall may have sired only female children, Eufemie and Silence, but Eufemie 'tols ses païs en abeli' (400) [graced his whole land] and Silence is arguably the best male *or* female in the entire romance. Moreover, Renald and Cador not only produced heirs, but by either dispensation or deception, managed to transmit their estates through their direct line, despite the King's ban on female inheritance. Compared with these other males who are successful engenderers, Ebain is less than masculine. Throughout the poem, Ebain's patriarchal power is consistently attenuated by his failure to be either a literal or figurative father.

Justifying her impersonation to King Ebain, Silence portrays herself as a dutiful daughter:

> '*Sire*, se Dex bien me consente
> Il n'est pas drois que je vos mente.
> *Mes pere fist de moi son buen...*
> Et quant jo ving a tel aäge
> Que gent commencent estre sage
> *Mes pere* me fist asavoir
> Que jo ja ne poroie avoir,

Sire, ireté en vostre tierre.
Et por mon iretage quierre
Me rova vivre al fuer de malle,
Fendre mes dras, aler al halle,
Et jo nel vol pas contredire.' (6590–6601; my emphasis)

['*Lord*, so help me God,
it is not right for me to lie to you.
My father made his benefit of me...
And when I reached the age
that people begin to gain wisdom
my father made me understand, *lord*,
that I could never inherit
property in your land.
And to secure my inheritance
he asked me to live as a male,
disguise my clothes, go out in all weather,
and I did not want to refuse.']

Balancing Silence's naming of her 'pere' twice in the speech are two seemingly respectful acknowledgments of Ebain as *Sire*. When compared to Cador's paternity and authority over his child, Ebain's sexual potency and political power seem feeble. Moreover, Cador's audacious stratagem to override Ebain's law, achieved through a girl's impersonation of a male knight, fundamentally challenges Ebain's royal authority. Silence's speech to her unsuccessful lord about her successful father eloquently limits Ebain's paternal powers both as a biological father and a symbolic 'sire' of his realm, further undermining Ebain's already wobbly masculinity.

The 'feudal politics of lineage' is, as Kinoshita compellingly argues, one of the most important themes of the *Roman de Silence*, which she claims redefines 'the function of the medieval nobility as not military service but genealogical reproduction' (398). Nevertheless, I disagree with her assertion that the conclusion, with 'the marriage of an old man to a young and beautiful wife,' is 'less subversive than first appearances suggest' (398). Declaring Silence the 'loser' and Ebain the 'winner' at the end of the romance, Kinoshita claims that, in exchanging the apparently barren Eufeme for Silence, 'the king redefines the strategic use of royal marriage.' The King wins, Kinoshita argues, because 'Silence, a young bride, renews his prospects of engendering an heir' (406).

However, the story of an elderly man who marries a young, attractive bride to engender an heir is a classic fabliau plot. The old husband is often outrageously cuckolded by the young wife, who thwarts his patriarchal ambitions, making him clearly the loser. Significantly, the manuscript in which the *Roman de Silence* is found, MS.Mi.LM.6, contains, along with several

other romances, ten fabliaux (Thorpe 3–6). The original reader/owner of this miscellany would encounter the example of Penthesilea, a brilliantly successful female warrior (and possible model for Silence) in the *Roman de Troie* at the beginning of the codex. Following the *Roman de Silence* and several other works are ten fabliaux placed at the end, with a fragment of a work by Marie de France. Readers receive Heldris's work with the generic conventions of both the epic and the fabliau, the generic bookends bracketing the *Roman de Silence*, as its context. One of the very earliest romances, the *Roman de Troie* features many of the conventions of the *chanson de geste* in its characterization of male (and female) heroism. Ebain does not match the epic-constructed masculinity of Achilles and the other male heroes of the Trojan War. Since Penthesilea exhibited her valor undisguised, her bellicose behavior is constructed as a signifier of femininity. Her model thus provides a textual precedent for an empowered Silence even *after* Nature has refeminized her. Moreover, the topsy-turvy world of the fabliau, in which women were often 'on top,' offers a significant textual afterthought to the denouement of Heldris's romance. In this context, for an audience reading the contents of MS.Mi.LM.6 consecutively, the elderly Ebain's marriage to the young Penthesilea-like Silence would hardly suggest that he is an ultimate winner in their union, and not for generic reasons alone.

On the contrary, in Silence Ebain has gained a queen whom he admits to be the best and most valiant *knight*, not breeder, any father ever sired (6579–81). If Heldris's romance truly charts the transition in the medieval aristocracy's source of power from military puissance to reproductive potency, then Ebain's gain is at best equivocal. Although Nature transforms the exterior of the former boy into a beautiful girl, Silence has never been nurtured to be a female. Having been raised, as Nature bitterly complained, 'contre nature' (2254) [against nature], Silence rejects a return to her natural sex since she is utterly unsuitable for female sexuality:

> 'Trop dure boche ai por baisier,
> Et trop rois bras por acoler.
> On me poroit tost afoler
> Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,
> *Car vallés sui et nient meschine.*' (2646–50, my emphasis)
>
> ['I have a mouth too hard for kissing,
> and arms too rough for embracing.
> I would quickly be beaten
> at the game people play under the covers,
> *for I am a boy, and not a girl at all.*']

By her own earlier admission and Ebain's tacit agreement, the games at which Silence excels are wrestling, tourneying, and warfare, not heterosexual sex play; military skill does not translate into erotic competence. The scenes with Eufeme demonstrate that Silence is an amatory amateur. In all her exhibited behavior, she clearly indicates that she identifies with the male half of the sexual hybrid Nurture has constructed. Ebain's dynastic hopes are thus more likely to be frustrated than fulfilled by a marriage to this boy-maiden.

Finally, although Eufeme's hyperlibidinality makes an easy target for traditional misogynistic projections of insatiable sexuality upon females, when considered in the context of her husband's failure to produce an heir, her characterization also destabilizes Ebain's masculinity.[32] Bullough notes that not only potency but also regular and skilled sexual performance were essential signifiers of masculinity in the Middle Ages.[33] Eufeme's desperate desire for Silence and her secret affair with the false nun suggest that Ebain falls short not only in paternity, but in potency and performance. Eufeme may be considered less a misogynist's virago than a disorderly 'woman on top' who displays surplus sexuality. If Ebain's masculinity is insufficient, Eufeme's sexual desires for Silence are hardly superfluous. As Davis has argued, one effect of the social inversion produced by such disorderliness could be to stabilize the status quo; another, however, might be to undermine it:

> ... the image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate, first, to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage, and second, to sanction riot... (131).

Beneath what appears to be token antifeminist troping, Heldris has inscribed in Eufeme's characterization an espression of marital insubordination and political 'riot.'[34] As Ebain's wife, Eufeme takes every opportunity to cuckold and dishonor him; her adultery threatens to thwart his dynastic imperative by sullying the bloodlines of any prospective heirs.[35] In either case, sexuality is a mode by which female characters express power in the *Roman de Silence*; other modes of female-gendered power were also available.

IV. CONSTRUCTED FEMININITY AND FEMALE POWER

Despite the narrator's and male characters' apparent endorsement of cultural misogyny, the romance's female characters demonstrate surprising resilience and empowerment both privately and publicly—but also at a certain price. Exemplifying such ambivalent female power is Eufeme, whose name allegorizes her as generic woman. As I have argued above, the challenge to patriarchal authority that Eufeme's dangerous expression of female sexuality represents

ultimately invites containment.[36] And the price is steep; she is executed by drawing and quartering. However, just as Ebain's characterization alternates between strength and weakness, the history of Eufeme reveals a waxing and waning of empowerment. Through an arranged marriage, this 'peace-weaving' Norwegian princess gains sociopolitical power as Queen of England at the cost of her freedom of choice.[37]

Eufem*ie*, whose name also contains 'woman' and literally denotes 'good or pleasant speech,' becomes Countess of Cornwall by being given in marriage—quite willingly—to the future Count. Through their homonymic names, identical but for one letter, and their similar roles, Eufeme and Eufemie initially seem set up as doubles.[38]Both women gain sociopolitical power through an arranged marriage, yet that very arrangement deprives them of personal power. This doubling is undercut by the way the text differentiates between them in more than the spelling of their respective names. The text conveys syntactically how Eufeme is awarded by her father as just one of a catalogue of other inducements (horses, bears, fowlers, and lions) to effect a truce between Norway and England (231–33).[39] Eufeme, whose characterization is shaped by the often negative medieval constructions of 'femaleness,'[40] is disempowered even as she becomes queen because she achieves this status at the expense of being 'the object of male lust and male barter, with no voice in determining her fate' (Roche-Mahdi, xx). Eufeme is also objectified by her future husband, who desires to have her in his 'saisine' (187) [possession] as a beautiful war trophy (179–85, 190).

Given her history as a prize traded between men, it is not surprising that later in the romance Eufeme uses an economic metaphor to characterize her love for the disguised Silence:

> 'Por .i. baisier vos donrai .ii.
> Et no vos sanble bien estrange
> Que vos avrés si riche cange?—' (3760–62)
>
> ['For one kiss I will give you two.
> Does it not seem strange to you
> that you should have such a rich exchange?']

For Silence's one chaste kiss, Eufeme gives five prolonged kisses (3771–75). Puzzled by the boy-maiden's discomfiture, she asks,

> 'Por Deu, fuiés?
> Comment? fait ele, est cho dangiers?
> Ene vos plaist si fais cangiers? [...]
> Eut home de vostre parage onques,
> Tant fust de pris, ensi grant don?
> Mon cors vos doinsc tolt a bandon!'(3776–78; 3782–84)

['By God, do you flee?
Why? Is that unpleasant?
Do you not like this exchange? [...]
Did any man of your lineage,
however valiant, ever receive so great a gift?
I give my heart to you completely!'].

At Silence's continued resistance, the Queen groans and nearly faints from sexual frustration (3881–82). She accuses Silence of commodifying himself, knowing how to 'acheter et vendre' (3886) [buy and sell]. Eufeme concludes that if he can resist her, he *must* be homosexual.[11] A mere object to men, Eufeme is the one who knows most about buying and selling. She further commodifies herself when she assumes that once having escaped her clutches, Silence will not enter her bedroom again even 'por plain bacin de deniers' (3967) [for piles of money]. Eufeme alternately gloats over her supposed leverage and grovels for any physical affection she can obtain. Even as Eufeme capitalizes on her political power (3973–76), she is reduced to begging for Silence's (impossible) reciprocation of sexual desire. Moreover, her attempt to retaliate against Silence's rejection is ultimately thwarted by Ebain and the French King.

Ebain enrages Eufeme by refusing to execute her accused assailant, merely exiling Silence to France.[12] Ebain's light sentence is puzzling: for virtually the same offense, Eufeme's disguised lover is later executed. Why is Silence spared? Perhaps Ebain is motivated by latent heterosexual attraction to the natural gender of Silence, whom he will marry a mere three days after learning of her feminine identity, just as he married Eufeme (also an object of sexual desire) three days after her arrival from Norway. Or perhaps he is motivated by latent homosocial (even homosexual) attraction to the nurtured male behavior of a transvestite, as well as by the bond of vassalage uniting comrades-in-arms. The Queen's plan to have Silence executed is thwarted once again by the French king, who is attracted to this charismatic transvestite. While France's failure to fulfill a vassal's request reflects badly on Ebain's political authority, it also disempowers Eufeme by denying her personal satisfaction.

Thus, for all her putative power as queen, Eufeme ultimately fails to achieve her desires. Although often dismissed as a collection of misogynist clichés, Eufeme's characterization is more complex than that stereotype allows. By permitting the audience to see the emotional effect of her own commodification through marriage, Heldris contextualizes Eufeme's attempt to purchase Silence's favors. While the doubts raised about Ebain's potency do not exactly justify her hyperlibidinality, they suggest a rationale for and render less grotesque her futile grasping after Silence's anatomically incorrect body. Thus, the

destabilization of Ebain's masculinity and Eufeme's sexual disorderliness mutually affect and enrich their respective gender constructions. Both considerations invite sympathy for the plight of a female character who is not a shrill virago after all.

While Eufeme is objectified as a precious gem (166), her foil, the more sympathetic Eufemie, is considered to be unequalled and the loveliest creature in the world (398–401). She is distinguished from Eufeme and empowered by her accomplishment in the seven arts (403).[43] This educational advantage allies her with the world of men and prefigures her daughter Silence's similar intellectual achievement. Eufemie's (and Silence's) education links them with Merlin, who embodies knowledge and power in the Arthurian corpus. Due to his knowledge, at the conclusion of the *Roman de Silence*, Merlin will be designated the arbiter of the text's complicated gender rearrangements.

Silence's mother also has a second source of authority: like Eufeme, by her marriage to Cador, Eufemie attains the sociopolitical power of the wife of the King's nephew.[44] For Eufemie this rise in social position is is offset by having to relinquish her status as wise healer, which had made her Cador's equal in her service to King Ebain (Lasry 228). She becomes not only the Countess of Cornwall, but a wife, whose husband could (like Ebain) send her to her room whenever he pleases (6407). As Renaut's sole heir, moreover, Eufemie would inherit Cornwall, were it not for King Ebain's precipitous and punitive ban on female inheritance.

However, unlike Eufeme, a mere commodity bartered for peace, Eufemie earns her status-endowing marriage through her talent as a physician (594), winning Cador as a reward for curing him. Moreover, as Heldris's embellishment of their relationship with the tropes of *fin amor* indicates, this union is a love match as much as it is a dynastic merger.[45] Cador suffers the physical pangs of love: sweating, trembling, groaning, fevers; passion similarly reduces Eufemie's strength. Though Cador can have no idea of 'son pooir' (828) [his own power] over Eufemie, her love for Cador is shown diminishing her intellectual capacity, the source of her authority (787–91). The force of love has obviously overridden both Cador's renowned physical prowess and Eufemie's intellectual acumen.

Although Cador and Eufemie were equals before their wedding, their agreement to disguise their daughter as a male reveals the redistribution of power and authority in their new relationship. Cador consults with Eufemie about the economic repercussions of having a female child (1672–94). She responds like the educated doctor she had been: rejecting any 'blasme' (1696) [blame] for the sex of their infant, she reminds him that the parents should be

pleased with any child (1695–1700). Cador superficially affirms their equality, but effectively coopts her agreement: since God made Eve from the rib of Adam, thus from 'une sustance' (1708) [one substance], husbands and wives should be of 'une voellance' (1707) [one will]. When Cador expresses the desire that, '"quant nostre cars est une,/ Soit nostre volentés commune"' (1721–22) ['since our flesh is one, let our will be one also'], Eufemie, as a good wife, agrees never to refuse him anything (1725–27). With her mother's complicity, Silence is consigned to a life of deceit, gender-impersonation, and cross-dressing. While Silence eventually appropriates the physical strength usually gendered male, the price for that invincibility, as symbolized in her name, is suppression of her natural female identity.

Silence's name, spelled 'Scilense,' resonates with the Latin and Old French root for 'knowledge,' 'scientia.'[16] Precociously early, Silence matches, even surpasses, her mother's potential for not only education, but self-education (2367–68, 2385–95). This inherited educability allows her to learn the unnatural male-gendered activities necessary to her pose as a boy and to imitate her father's valor.[17] Resisting the nurtured male behavior of jousting, hunting, and archery (2526) at which she excels, Silence's natural femininity, allegorized as the personification Nature, urges her to learn the female-gendered activity of sewing.

At puberty, a thoroughly confused Silence undergoes an identity crisis, whereupon allegorized Reason explains that Silence's rejection of her nurture for the habits of nature would be tantamount to suicide (2611–14). As Silence 'listens to reason,' she sees that

> ... miols valt li us d'ome
> Que l'us de feme, c'est la some.
> 'Voire,' fait il, 'a la male eure
> Irai desos, quant sui *deseure*.
> *Deseure* sui, s'irai desos?
> Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.' (2637–42, my emphasis)
>
> [... a man's life is better
> than a woman's, all things considered.
> 'Truly,' he said, 'in an evil hour
> will I go underneath, when I am *on top*.
> I am *on top* now, and I would have to go beneath.
> Now I am most valorous and strong... .']

This understandable gender confusion climaxes in Silence's decision to learn music, a skill she can use if she ever readopts a female persona; prodigy that she is, Silence soon surpasses her masters. In this period she maintains a male persona but renames herself 'Malduit' or 'badly brought up,' which reflects

her misgivings about being a sexual hybrid. Significantly, Silence has a natural talent for the activities required of minstrels, music and storytelling. Her stint as a minstrel allows her to subvert the suppression of speech necessary to her impersonation and symbolized in her old name.

Back in England as a retainer of King Ebain, she exhibits superb martial skill on the battle and jousting field, now wearing her male identity with gusto:

> Silences ne se repent rien
> De son usage, ains l'ainme bien.
> Chevaliers est vallans et buens
> Mellor n'engendra rois ne cuens. (5177–80)
>
> [Silence did not at all regret
> his habits; indeed, he loved them.
> He was a fine and valiant knight;
> no king or count ever sired a better.]

During her training in France and the civil war in England, Silence's physical stamina and courage thoroughly destabilize medieval gender constructions. Cultural assumptions that females are the 'gentle sex' are disproved, as the nurturing of Silence in the masculine pursuits of warfare endows her with such physical power and courage that the French knights, the Count of Chester, and Ebain are convinced of her masculinity. The plucky transvestite Silence proves that given the chance and the nurturing in male-gendered activities, a woman *can* succeed in a man's world—that is, among other men.

The limits of her power are revealed only in the other arena in which knights usually succeed, the lady's bower, a locus of severe anxiety for this maiden-knight. Because she successfully impersonates a male in other respects, she is expected to pursue male heterosexuality with equal triumph. Silence's exhibition of manly doughtiness inspires a second wave of desire in Eufeme. When the Queen again tries to seduce the boy-maiden, these two spheres of power, sexuality and physical prowess, irrevocably collide.

V. MERLIN'S BIVALENT GENDER CONSTRUCTION

The impossible quest Eufeme and Ebain impose on Silence as a penalty would doom even the best of *male* romance knights to certain failure. Silence must capture the elusive wizard Merlin, who lives in the woods as a Wild Man and is reputedly invulnerable to any attempt to capture him, except 'par engien de *feme*' (5803, my emphasis) [by a *woman's* trick]. Neither her nurtured prowess nor her natural intelligence are of any use; success in this test is biologically determined from the start. Moreover, Silence has understandably mixed feelings

about even attempting this quest: success means literally unveiling her 'fainte vesteüre' (6485, 6520) and thus losing her inheritance; failure means that Ebain will bar her from serving at other courts (5850–51). Silence so enjoys her life as a male knight that either success or failure amounts to the same thing. What is life without one's familiar, even if adopted, sexual identity? What is life for a knight, without being retained at the court of a feudal lord? Silence nevertheless embarks on her quest, and after half a year of searching meets a mysterious old man, Merlin himself in one of his many disguises.[48] He offers to help her trap the wizard, whose Wild Man existence includes a covering of fur, the speed of a deer, and a diet of 'natural' foods like roots and berries, rather than cooked meat (5929–32).

Although it appears late in the plot,[49] the Merlin episode is crucial to the structure of the *Roman de Silence*.[50] Heldris's incorporation of the story about Wild Man Merlin from the *Vulgate Cycle* seems to be connected more with the ultimate transformation of Silence than with Merlin himself. Coached by the mysterious old man, Silence for the first time practices the 'female' arts of cooking and nurturing as part of the 'engien' [trick] designed to lure Merlin back from wildness.[51] Blatant as this plot device may be, it insures Silence's transition from one gendered world to another. This prelude to her enforced abandonment of male behavior provides her formal introduction into the socially-gendered, if essentialized, behavior of women.

Heldris's choice of Merlin as arbiter of the clash between the various constructions of male and female power in the denouement is appropriate, most obviously because of the tradition that he is fated to be trapped by the *engien* of a female. In various Arthurian romances, Merlin relinquishes his own male-gendered knowledge to females who, empowered by that appropriated knowledge, use it against their teacher. In all versions, whether through 'dotage,' sexual 'assotment' (Malory 76), fatal attraction to Nineve/Vivian, or succumbing to a trick, Merlin voluntarily relinquishes his power and collaborates in his own undoing (Macdonald *passim*). Here too Merlin, disguised as the old man, literally gives Silence the edible props which will allow her to capture him (5944–86). Because he relinquishes male power to a female, Merlin appropriately breaks the emotional and sexual impasse between Eufeme and Silence and resolves the topsy-turvy marital imbalance between Eufeme and Ebain, featuring Eufeme as the 'woman on top' and Ebain as the royal cuckold. He shocks the entire court with a mad fit of laughter which explodes the poem's allocation of power by gender.

The most compelling argument for the aptness of Merlin's crucial role in the plot resolution of a romance about gender instability is his own vexed

gendering in the corpus of Arthurian romance. Nominally male, Merlin does not manifest his gender through expected cultural signifiers of masculinity: martial puissance, sexual virility, or potency. The knight's usual demonstration of force on the battlefield and finesse in the bower are not relevant to Merlin's function in the master plot of Arthur's story. Merlin offers his brains, not his brawn, to Arthur in the early episodes that establish Arthur's preeminence among his political rivals. In the *Roman de Silence*, however, Merlin's reputation for cleverness and wisdom aligns him with other female characters who are noted for this attribute, Eufeme, Eufemie and Silence.

Like Silence, Merlin is a master of impersonation. He projected that art on Uther Pendragon, disguising him as the Duke of Cornwall, to facilitate the engendering of Arthur. Silence refers to this incident when she captures Merlin (6144–54), acknowledging another ancient link between them. Merlin is thus associated with the male-gendered, engineered act of Arthur's conception. However, because he arranged for the baby's upbringing away from the court, Merlin also participated in the ordinarily female-gendered process of nurturing and education, much as Cador's cousin nurtured Silence away from the Count's court. Moreover, if the old man who tells Silence how to capture Merlin is really Merlin in disguise, then Merlin himself directly engineers this *engien de fame*. The signifiers of Merlin's gendering in Arthurian romance are bivalent, hovering in marginal gender space somewhere between masculine and feminine, an androgyny almost overcharged with gender affiliations. Like Silence, whom Merlin both aids and exposes, Merlin has participated in and exemplified both male and female gender constructions. Another gender hybrid, Merlin is the perfect figure to 'dis-cover' Silence's gender-bending.

The parallels between Merlin and Silence are refigured in significant parallels between Arthur and Silence as well. Both rise out of obscure but 'naturally' noble origins to become successful warriors.[52] But what a difference an accident of biology makes! As a natural male, endowed with the culturally constructed opportunities of and assumptions about males and male behavior, Arthur becomes (with Merlin's teaching and nurturing) the paradigm of the chivalric ethos. As a 'natural' female, but one nevertheless freed from cultural constructs about her sex, and nurtured within those same culturally constructed opportunities of and assumptions about males, Silence successfully appropriates male-gendered skills and behavior. However, instead of becoming the mirror of the chivalric ethos, Silence is fated to become the second wife of King Ebain of England. Merlin not only uncovers Silence's transvestism and impersonation, but he also reveals the male identity of Eufeme's constant companion, who cross-dresses as a nun to cover their affair. This second

divesting of *fainte vesteüre* leads to the execution of both Queen and 'nun,' opening a convenient niche for the newly feminized Silence to fill.

Although Nature works overtime to make plausible Silence's cosmetic transformation to femininity, the audience has seen Silence's enthusiastic participation in a culturally constructed man's world (5177–78). This leaves her, like Merlin, in a kind of gender no-man's-land. Naturally a woman, but nurtured a male, what kind of woman will she, can she, be? Silence considers herself an unlikely candidate for successful female sexuality. The force of education is demonstrably powerful, as Nurture's training of Silence in male behavior proved. However, it is unlikely that Nurture will actually cooperate in the reeducation of Silence as a female.

Fruitful heterosexuality between Ebain and his new bride is also unlikely. What Ebain admired and valued in the old 'masculine' Silence, courage, physical strength, feudal loyalty, perhaps even sexual potency (if he half-believed the Queen's allegations), will be excised from her newly feminized persona. The similarity between his courtship of Eufeme and Silence bodes ill for Ebain's second union. Through marriage, Ebain legally coopts his new wife's empowerment, but the unruliness of Cador, Euphemie, Eufeme, Silence, and Chester demonstrated how 'unstable' Ebain's 'rule' always was. Knowing how much Silence enjoys being 'on top' (2640–41), is it reasonable to expect her to accept being placed 'underneath' this consistently feeble king?

The improbably tidy, artificial felicity of the conclusion of the *Roman de Silence* disappoints after the strong feminist themes in the rest of the work. However, in a romance about several impersonations (Silence, the nun, Merlin), the happy ending itself may cover over a certain resistance on the part of the poet to his or her own material (Gaunt 213). When Merlin reverts to Nature by eating cooked meat, thus paradoxically privileging civilization or nature over the wild and nurture, and is brought captive from the wilderness to Ebain's court, what does he 'dis-cover' about the nature of civilization? He reveals that it thrives on deception: the Queen cuckolds the King with a male lover posing as a nun, a compounding of travesty, infidelity, and sacrilege; Eufeme also tried to seduce the King's most loyal vassal, who saved his literal and political life; the King's favorite vassal is a female impersonating a male in order to circumvent his law; the King will soon marry a virtual transsexual three days after her transformation into a female by the 'operation' of Nature; and his bride is the daughter of his nephew. Merlin's flight to the woods is thus not surprising. This romance is a primitivist manifesto revealing how infidelity, treachery, rapacious greed, transgressions against nature and religion, and violent warfare have destabilized the foundations of 'civilized' culture at Ebain's court.[53]

VI. AUTHORIAL GENDER AND POWER

Finally, in this essay on the destabilizing of gendered power in males and females, I close by speculating about the author's own relative empowerment and gender. Heldris incorporates many articulations of virulent misogyny (by the narrator and other characters) in the *Roman de Silence*, seemingly underwriting what critics have assumed to be 'the default mode, the unreflective reflex, of medieval literature' (Psaki xv). Against these traditionally male-gendered voicings of antifeminism, however, this author also expresses unexpectedly contradictory, 'feminized' points of view. Mitigating against the male glorification of warfare epitomized in Ebain's campaign against Norway is the passage (150–60) describing the homes burned, the wounds inflicted, the hunger and privations suffered, the lives lost, which seems to voice the view of mothers, wives, and daughters of the soon-to-be-killed males waging a war fought over a 'trivial occasion.' Similarly, in the graphic description of the battles in Chester's civil war, Heldris alternates between a heightened, supermilitant reportage of the combat successes of Silence and almost pacifist reminders of the folly of all wars: that someone always loses (5430); that the soldiers are out of control (5434); that the countryside which will soon be soaked in blood is very beautiful (5437); that thousands, whether they deserved it or not, would never return home to tell tales of who won or lost (5465–68, 5473); that this battle is nothing less than martyrdom (5470). If Heldris's accounts of warfare seem 'feminized,' the description of Eufemie's prolonged and agonized labor at Silence's birth seems also to reflect the writer's personal witnessing of what occurs in the birthing chamber, at this time the exclusive domain of women. Despite an announced intention to shorten the passage, Heldris details for a full twenty lines the kicks, contractions, contortions, and pains coursing through Eufemie's heart, bone, nerves, and veins, and the lonely fear of her midwife (1775–95). Added to these passages, the recognition given to Eufeme's feelings about her commodification and the surety with which the author describes a female pretending to be a male 'conteur' [taleteller] in the minstrel subplot also suggest that, though ultimately unprovable, female authorship of the *Roman de Silence* is not entirely untenable.[54]

And what of Heldris's controversial ending? As though relinquishing his or her own power over the text to the constructed authority of its written source, the author of the *Roman de Silence* concludes the plot with,

> Li rois le prist a feme puis,—
> Cho dist l'estorie u jo le truis,— (6677–78)
> [the king then took her to wife,
> so says the story I find it in].

Heldris, he or she, is not the only medieval author to disclaim responsibility for the way a work turns out by blaming an *auctor*. In light of Heldris's somewhat defensive explanation—not I, but my source, says the story ends this way—I would like to think that the author of this extraordinary romance was as skeptical as I am of Silence's silent acceptance of the limitations of being a female in the Middle Ages, especially after experiencing another gendered life.

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NOTES

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the twenty-ninth International Congress of Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 1994. Laura Hodges, Robert Sturges, and Regina Psaki made valuable suggestions about its final shape.

2 On the 'modernity' of this romance, see Cooper (342), Brahney (54), and Gallagher.

3 Here I believe Heldris observes not only the medieval notion of 'gender'—the grammatical categories of masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns—but anticipates modern denotations, including both the original grammatical definition and contemporary anthropologists' distinction between 'sex' (biological categories) and 'gender' (social or cultural categories). The grammatical denotation is observed in the 'us' and 'a' endings of Silence's name (2074–82). The text reflects both anthropological categories: the one limitation of Silence's 'sex' is the absence of a penis, making her incapable of performing intercourse with Eufeme (2475–80); having been nurtured in the masculine activities of hunting and jousting, as oppposed to sewing, Silence acknowledges she knows nothing about how to be a woman (2528).

4 Critics who raise feminist issues include: Lasry; Brahney; Gaunt; Psaki; Gallagher; Roche-Mahdi; Burns; Krueger. Cooper, Allen, and Bloch implicitly raise feminist issues while focussing on the indeterminacy of language and the relationship between language and desire. For socioeconomic themes, see Lloyd and Kinoshita.

5 Those who read the text as subverting misogyny include Brahney, Psaki, Burns, and Krueger. Those who claim the romance at least accepts prevalent medieval

misogyny include Allen, Gaunt, Kinoshita, and paradoxically also Krueger.

6 As Psaki notes, 'Silence's reality for almost all her interlocutors is constituted by clothing, manners, and activities she adopts—her social "language," her non-verbal signs' (xxix). Hotchkiss discusses Silence in her study of medieval female cross-dressing (105–13).

7 All quotations of the Old French text of *Silence* will be cited by line number from Thorpe's edition. Translations are usually by Psaki, although occasionally I interpolate my own rendering of crucial words or compare Psaki with Roche-Mahdi.

8 This is ironic because Eufeme is herself an expert at dissimulation. Like Merlin, she is an example of the 'deceiver deceived.'

9 See Greimas and Godefroy on *estables*.

10 Psaki attributes the relative lack of critical engagement with the *Roman de Silence*, even after a printed edition appeared, to the fact that it neither matched 'the description earlier current of the "canonical" romance,...nor responded particularly to the questions that readers (shapers) of the genre might want to ask of it....This text represented only an absence, a failure to conform to expectations' (xvi).

11 The Old French *vertu* derives etymologically from the Latin *virtus*, virile force.

12 The minstrels are an exception to this almost exclusively hegemonic male profile.

13 See Lees's *Medieval Masculinities*, ARTHURIANA 6:1 on 'Arthurian Masculinities,' and Cohen and Wheeler's *Becoming Male*.

14 Brahney 'fantasizes' female authorship, questioning whether 'the little bearded man pictured at the outset of the original manuscript is really a woman in disguise' (61). The textual model of Silence posing as a male jongleur, herself engaged in telling or singing stories under the guise of male 'authorship,' may legitimize such a fantasy.

15 Whereas Silence engages with and is influenced by the arguments of the allegorical character 'Raisons' [Reason] (2609–56), Ebain is never visited, either literally or metaphorically, by Reason.

16 Ebain decrees general execution (6655), martyrdom (6226), imprisonment and starvation (6288–91), beheading (6295, 6304), hanging (6295), and drawing and quartering (6556). Eufeme similarly threatens execution by hanging (3928, 4186, 4228), flaying alive (4090–91), burning to a crisp (4185, 4231), immediate execution without a trial (4147–48), drawing and quartering (4231), and death and imprisonment (6375–76, 6390).

17 Misogynistic speeches are articulated by Cador (667–76), by the narrator (3901–24; 4265–70; 5230–41), by Ebain (4265–71, 6397–6407), and by Ebain's Chancellor (5003–16).

18 This apparently generous repeal of his originally punitive law is more self-serving than it seems. He reverses the ban in honor of his new bride, Silence, who not coincidently is now the legal heiress of the rich county of Cornwall. As her husband, Ebain will automatically control this estate.

19 Part of the medieval belief in the biological superiority of males over females

resided in the male's greater rationality (Bullough 32). Ebain's unreasoned and rash edicts thus 'feminize' him.

20 If a king can be judged by the counsel he keeps, the contrast between the respective councils of England and France speaks volumes about these monarchs. When Ebain does solicit counsel about the impending union of Cador and Eufemie, the manipulative and self-serving Count of Chester, who will eventually front the rebellion against Ebain, dominates the process and takes credit for arranging what was essentially already a *fait accompli* (1399–1497).

21 Early in his career, Arthur too established himself by fighting wars against various other kings who threatened his hegemony. Ultimately, however, his loss of political power is revealed in defections by trusted vassals and the treachery of even his own illegitimate son.

22 The Count of Chester's increased empowerment and waning support of Ebain illustrate the cumulative destabilizing of Ebain's authority. First, the duel over the twin sisters' inheritance (prompting the ban on female inheritance) takes place in Chester. After the dragon episode just outside Chester, the Count credits himself with arranging Cador and Eufemie's betrothal. Finally, supported by three other counts, Chester rebels against Ebain.

23 Thorpe suggests, '*mal* = evil... and *roi* < OE *rod* = *a clearing in a forest*,... but for all that it seems to be a made-up name' (23).

24 Both Psaki and Roche-Mahdi translate *estable* as 'faithful.'

25 Given the text's other wordplay and several transvestisms, it is tempting to read 'guise' as 'disguises.'

26 For the classic discussion of the arming passage see Brewer. On the gendering of Silence's arming scene in the context of Camille, female warrior in the *Roman d'Eneas*, see Stock's 'Arms and the Wo(man).'

27 Bullough outlines medieval biological and physiological ideas of what constituted maleness, and especially male superiority to females, received largely from the classical period. Starting with Aristotle, the overwhelming importance of the male principle in reproduction owes to the active force in semen, which (ideally) produced a perfect likeness of the superior force of the father in the masculine sex of the child engendered. The production of a female resulted from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition. Albertus Magnus, expanding on ideas of Avicenna, believed the male contributed the essential material for generation. Aquinas, Albertus's pupil, agreed that the female prepares the matter of generation, which is then fashioned by the active power of the male (31–32).

28 Psaki, xxiv. Instead of Psaki's more literal 'bad,' I prefer Roche-Mahdi's rendering of *malvais* as 'defective,' which conveys the inversion of Aristotles's definition of females as 'defective males' because they lack a penis.

29 Eufeme is a beautiful gem (166); Eufemie is the most beautiful girl in the world (401); Silence is Nature's most beautiful creation (1866–68). What differentiates these beautiful females is their subsequent nurturing: Eufeme's early commodification teaches her to be virago-like; Eufemie's education in the seven

arts and in herbalism makes her almost the equal of Cador in value to the King; Silence's nurturing in masculine pastimes instead of sewing makes her a romance hero.

30 As Kinoshita observes, the female's role in this male biological imperative to engender progeny is crucial. Eufeme's childlessness may have made Ebain lose patience with her: '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' (406).

31 The concern with paternity is also reflected in the King of France's first question to Silence, 'Amis, frere,/ Car me di ore quist tes pere.' (4419–20) ['Friend, brother/ tell me who your father is.'].

32 Discussing the figure of the 'woman on top' or 'unruly woman,' Davis notes, 'Given over to the sway of her lower passions, she was not responsible for her actions; her husband was responsible, for she was subject to him' (146). Eufeme's actions are certainly 'unruly' by Davis's definition, and Ebain's failure to control her unruliness is another measure of his unstable masculinity.

33 Sexual performance ensured the health of a man's wife. Through frequent intercourse, her uterus could be kept moist and be less likely to 'wander.' The modern equivalent of foreplay and orgasm were thought to be essential for procreation, as the woman did not expel her 'seed,' making conception possible, unless she achieved orgasm (Bullough 39–41).

34 Krueger's interpretation supports this reading: 'Even as [Heldris] reimposes stable categories of gender, he opens a space for women's resistance to their cultural construction' (112).

35 For Krueger, the female body was the source of her power and of male anxiety: 'Within the nobility, a woman's central role as producer of male heirs made the female body a source of considerable anxiety, and female sexuality a force to be controlled' (106).

36 Most critics accept Eufeme as a stereotype of misogyny; Gaunt, for example, says she represents 'unbridled female sexuality' (210). However, Krueger acknowledges that the narrator's characterization of Eufeme is '... a problem. He makes us wonder what it is about Heldris' "blaming" of Eufeme that is itself blamable. Is it the cruel way she has been punished? Is it the way Heldris has portrayed a female character as villainous? Or does Heldris' culpability arise more broadly from the way he has defined "*nature de feme*" within the narrative?' (104). Kreuger suggests 'reading against the surface strategy of antifeminism' (105).

37 On women as peace-weavers, see Chance (1–11).

38 On the linguistic/thematic relationship of the names, see Lasry (231), Psaki (xxxii).

39 This illustrates what Lévi-Strauss termed 'male traffic in women,' as discussed by Rubin.

40 As Roche-Mahdi puts it, 'Her body ends a war. Her name hardly conceals *feme*; she embodies all the negative stereotypes traditionally associated with her sex: she is lustful, scheming, disloyal, and vengeful; she speaks only to deceive' (xx).

41 Psaki translates 'erite' (3935) as 'homosexual,' while Roche-Mahdi's rendering is 'queer.' Although both are anachronistic expressions, Eufeme clearly accuses Silence of the same defective 'manliness' with which Guenevere charges Lanval, who for different reasons also resists her seduction.

42 Predictably, Ebain tries to save face and avoid scandal: 'Mais or tornons cho a mençoige,/...a songe:/ Niens Fu, niens est, a rien ne tagne.' (4245–47) ['Let us scotch that as a lie,/...an invention;/ it was nothing, it is nothing, let it come to nothing.'].

43 While Eufeme is able to read and write, the text never makes a point of her education. Eufemie is associated with intellect, Eufeme with cunning.

44 As Ebain has no other heirs of either gender, Cador is presumably next in line for the throne.

45 On how Heldris 'euphemizes' this dynastic stratagem through the trappings of *fin amor*, see Kinoshita (398–400).

46 Cooper (359) notes that this wordplay is exploited in the rymed couplet ending 'science/Silence' (2395–96).

47 Heldris's emphasizes Silence's educational potential to make her adeptness at learning male behavior ring true.

48 Although the identity of the enigmatic figure is impossible to ascertain, he is usually assumed to be Merlin (Psaki xxxv; Roche-Mahdi 325). If the other mysterious old man who helps Silence in the minstrel subplot (3559) is also Merlin in disguise, his appearance has been prepared for textually (Roche-Mahdi 325).

49 The Merlin episode is the last of nine sections Thorpe identifies in the poem (28).

50 Editors assume that the Grisandole episode from the *L'Estoire Merlin* was the impetus for Heldris's fabrication of the entire plot of the *Roman de Silence* leading up to it (Thorpe 32; Lloyd 88).

51 The metaphor of food preparation—the baking of 'blanc pain et biel' (1810) [beautiful white bread]—dominates the account (1808–27) of Nature's creation of what she explicitly refers to as the essence of the feminine, 'ma mescine' (1873) [my girl], and 'ma fille' (1927) [my daughter]. For the historical association of nature and femaleness see Merchant. Ortner addresses the validity of these somewhat essentializing assumptions, arguing that that they are culturally constructed.

52 In fact, Merlin claims that his role in Uther's deceptive engendering of the child who even Silence admits becomes 'Artu le preu' [Arthur the valiant] was excusable because the glorious end justified the ignoble means (6156). Once again, the issue—literal and figurative—of male power is expressed through paternity. Implicit in this valorizing of Uther's illicit, but serendipitous, fathering of Arthur is a slur against the manliness of the Duke of Cornwall, who had only sired daughters (among them Morgan la Fay). Uther sired upon the unwitting Igraine the most glorious male hero in medieval culture. Neither Silence's own father, another Duke of Cornwall, nor his uncle, the present King of England, had

managed to fulfill this criterion of medieval 'masculinity,' the engendering of a male child.

53 On the late medieval expression of these tenets of primitivism see Stock 'Past and Present.'

54 Only Brahney has put this idea forward, and even she cloaks it as 'fantasy.' The fact that the manuscript containing the *Roman de Silence* concludes with part of a fable by Marie de France (Thorpe 6), one of the few unequivocally female medieval authors, may further authorize the female gender of its author, Heldris.