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### **Bedrooms and Battlefields: Negotiating Gendered Arenas of Power Within Le Roman de Silence**

Anneka de Souza

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## Master of Philosophy

### **Bedrooms and Battlefields**

*Negotiating Gendered Arenas of Power within Le Roman de Silence*

Thesis submitted in the partial fulfilment of a

Master of Philosophy

Anneka de Souza

School of Arts and Sciences

The University of Notre Dame, Fremantle

August 2022



## **Declaration of Authorship**

This thesis is my own research, and its main content is work which had not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution. This thesis contains no material previously published by another person, except where due acknowledgement has been made.

Anneka de Souza

## Abstract

*Le Roman de Silence* is a strikingly modern, yet much overlooked, thirteenth-century French poem, detailing the life of Silence, a girl who is raised as a boy to circumvent the king's new ban on female inheritance. In exploring themes such as inheritance, justice and law, nature vs. nurture, cross-dressing heroines, morality and corruption, and what it means to be a good king, the poem raises intriguing questions about traditional medieval gender roles and power structures. The thesis examines the poem's diverse expressions of masculinity and femininity within the gendered arenas of the battlefield and the bedroom. Drawing on the History of Experience as a methodology, it seeks to understand the extent to which the author's literary imagination reflected aspects of life as it was lived by his contemporaries. It interrogates the world that influenced the poem, the author's perceptions of that world as witnessed in the poem, and the degree to which those perceptions reflect the lived experiences of noblemen and women in the twelfth to thirteenth century Anglo-French sphere. Ultimately, the thesis examines the extent to which literary productions can assist historians in reconstructing the lived experience of past people. By approaching the study through the unique intersection of literature and the History of Experiences, this thesis aims to bring a new perspective to the growing body of literature on *Silence*.

## Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

Master Heldris of Cornwall  
Is writing these verses strictly to measure.  
As for those who possess them, he commands and requests,  
That anyone who has them should burn them  
Rather than share them with the kind of people  
Who don't know a good story  
When they hear one.<sup>1</sup>

Heldris de Cornuâlle's *Le Roman de Silence* is a complicated early thirteenth-century poem detailing the life of Silence, a girl who is raised as a boy to circumvent the King's new ban on female inheritance. It opens with a war between Norway and England; a long war begun over 'something trivial', which is only resolved when the king of Norway offers his daughter Eupheme as part of the peace treaty. Ebain, the king of England, is delighted and marries Eupheme in a lavish ceremony. Following their marriage, a rich English lord dies, leaving his twin daughters to inherit. Their husbands then fight a duel over the inheritance, each claiming to have married the elder twin so he can collect the full inheritance. In the fight, the men kill one another. Enraged by the senseless loss, King Ebain commands that no woman shall inherit any land or property, as long as he is king of England. Later, whilst travelling to his capital, Ebain and his knights are attacked by a dragon. Ebain retreats, and his young nephew Cador defeats the dragon, but he is poisoned by the dragon's fumes and falls gravely ill. Ebain summons Euphemie, one of the queen's ladies, who is the most skilled healer in the land. She cares for Cador and they both fall in love yet hesitate to admit their feelings. Eventually, they are married, Cador is endowed with the Earldom of Cornwall, and soon Euphemie is pregnant. They worry that their child will be a girl, and therefore will not be able to inherit, and so they devise a plan to raise their child as a boy no matter its birth sex. A daughter is born, Silence, who is considered to be Nature's most beautiful creation. Hidden in the woods, Silence is raised as a boy and learns the arts of the knight, until just after her twelfth birthday, when the personifications of Nature and Nurture appear before her and argue over the way she is being raised. Restless, Silence runs away with some travelling minstrels, eventually finding her way to the court of her great-uncle, King Ebain of Cornwall.

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<sup>1</sup> *Silence.*, trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1992): 1-8.

## Introduction

Silence also becomes a celebrated knight, defeating the Count of Chester who revolts against the king. At the court, Silence attracts the eye of Queen Eupheme, who attempts to seduce ‘the boy’ Silence on several occasions. Enraged at being turned down, the Queen ultimately persuades Ebain to set Silence the seemingly impossible task of capturing the wizard Merlin, who, legend has it, can only be captured by a ‘woman’s trick’. Silence succeeds, and brings Merlin back to court, where he uncovers her secret and reveals that Eupheme has been having an affair with a man dressed as a nun. Eupheme is executed, and Silence marries King Ebain.

Although a work of fiction, as Heldris pointedly declares in the opening lines, his ‘story’ doesn’t have ‘any less truth in it, for truth should not be silenced’.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, throughout the poem he overtly probes into several matters of significance to his contemporaries, including the issues of inheritance, questions on the primacy of nature vs nurture, morality, good governance, and corruption. In doing so, some key insights come to the fore concerning how gender is constructed and how power is negotiated during the High Middle Ages. These subjects are the focus of this thesis.

## *Research Context*

There are many themes that run through this poem. I have chosen to focus on the performance of power and gender within two specific arenas: the battlefield and the bedroom. Much of the action of the poem takes place in these two domains, which therefore offers convenient parameters for study. Further, it is within these arenas that Heldris seems to explore and challenge medieval constructs of gender and power. I aim to analyse the poet’s perceptions of gender and power, considering them within the situated historical context in which the poem was written. It is my intention to explore the extent to which Heldris’ literary imagination reflected aspects of life as it was lived by his contemporaries; that is, to understand if the complexity of power and gender presented in *Silence* captures something of the lived experience of noblemen and noblewomen in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Anglo-French sphere. Through the framework offered by the History of Experience methodology, this thesis aims to bring a new perspective to the growing body of literature on *Silence*.

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<sup>2</sup> *Silence*, L1669.

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‘Go to a chamber and learn to sew!’ is Nature’s admonishment to Silence for her masculine behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the attitude of this character towards Silence is suggestive of wider attitudes towards women in a traditionally male domain, *Le Roman de Silence* as a whole presents a far more fluid position on gender roles and how power is allocated to and appropriated by men and women.<sup>4</sup>

Deviations from gender norms of power and authority play out particularly clearly in the battlefield scenes. In France, Silence is hailed as the greatest knight in the kingdom and wins several jousting competitions. Later, the author dedicates over a hundred lines to Silence’s fight with the rebellious Chester, following King Ebain’s defeat described in a mere eleven. Alternately, when a dragon attacks the king’s entourage, King Ebain merely ‘wept and lamented’ leaving his nephew Cador to fight it.<sup>5</sup> If Silence is the ideal knight, King Ebain is much less than the ideal king. His position is constantly undermined by all around him, showing him to be far less than a strong, competent ruler. He fails in two of the arenas where masculinity is usually put to the test: the battlefield and the bedroom.<sup>6</sup> Doreen Ransom has written about the source of King Ebain’s regal authority, and the ways in which it is undermined, noting that Ebain’s power is not assured merely because he is king, as ‘it is not power that a king inherits, but a throne.’<sup>7</sup> For Lorraine Stock, by inciting trivial wars, handing out harsh punishments for criminals whether guilty or innocent and rashly creating the ban on female inheritance, Ebain represents the antithesis of kingship.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Katie Keene notes that an adulterous queen’s behaviour, both fictional and real, is an indictment of the king’s ability to rule; the disorder within his private household mirrors the misrule of his kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, these two spheres, bedroom and battlefield, domestic and public life, intersect and overlap and neither maintain specific boundaries throughout history. From the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, the increase, and subsequent decrease, of women’s military activity parallels a blurring of the boundaries between these two spheres.<sup>10</sup> Megan McLaughlin hypothesises that when knights and soldiers were trained by their feudal lord, and armies were made up of individual

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<sup>3</sup> *Silence*, L2528.

<sup>4</sup> Lorraine Kochanske Stock, “The Importance of Being Gender ‘Stable’: Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in “Le Roman de Silence”,” *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (1997): 7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869252>.

<sup>5</sup> *Silence*, L372.

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Kinoshita, “Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the “Roman de Silence”,” *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (2002): 72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870414>.

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Ransom, “Negotiating Kingly Power in the Roman de Silence” (MPhil University of Alaska, 2000): 6

<sup>8</sup> Stock, “The Importance of Being Gender ‘Stable,’” 9

<sup>9</sup> Katie Keene, “Cherchez Eufeme’: The Evil Queen in “Le Roman de Silence”,” *Arthuriana* 14, no. 3 (2004): 4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870628>.

<sup>10</sup> Megan McLaughlin, “The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe,” *Women’s Studies* 17, no. 3-4 (1990): 201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1990.9978805>.

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lords' retinues, there was more opportunity for women to share in military activities. Thus, when the training of armies became more organised and centralised, the chance for women to participate diminished.<sup>11</sup> Given the fluctuating historical realities noted even in passing here, perhaps it is reasonable to consider that Heldris' shifting depiction reflects something much more precise about his times. Although Nature argues for set gender boundaries in the text, Heldris' narrative seems to self-consciously disrupt such standards.

## *Research Problem and Aims*

Since its rediscovery in 1911, *Silence* has risen in academic prominence, but little research has sought to place it within its historical context. By using the History of Experience as a methodology, I aim to explore Heldris' poem and what it can reveal about the lived experience of gender and power in the High Middle Ages. The research questions that frame this thesis are - can literary productions, such as *Le Roman de Silence*, assist in reconstructing the lived experience of past people? And, if so, does *Le Roman de Silence* disrupt or conform to our understandings of how gender and power were embodied in medieval society?

This thesis intends, therefore, to explore how literature can help modern audiences to understand and interpret diverse expressions of gender and negotiations of power in the past by focusing on a single text, *Le Roman de Silence*.

Using the History of Experience methodology, I aim to

- analyse the dominant structures in the Anglo-Norman sphere of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that impact notions of power and gender;
- evaluate Heldris' perceptions of power and gender in *Silence* within the arenas of the battlefield and the bedroom;
- determine the degree to which Heldris' perceptions reflect lived reality and therefore to what extent his poem is a useful tool in determining the lived experience of gender and power in the High Middle Ages.

Given I am relying primarily on a translation, I anticipate certain limitations in regard to fully understanding the poem's meaning. To begin, there are a number of translations of *Silence*. The Roche-Mahdi 1992 translation was chosen because of its general availability, and because it incorporates the parallel Old French text alongside the English translation. This will allow for

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<sup>11</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior," 205-206.

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precise interrogation of the translation. It has received generally favourable reviews but has also been criticised for occasional anachronistic phrases.<sup>12</sup> Thorpe's 1972 translation has long been out of print and is therefore hard to obtain, and several scholars have recently pointed out some inconsistencies and shortcomings of his translation. F. Regina Psaki, who is soon to publish her own prose translation, states that the Thorpe translation is more misogynistic than Roche-Mahdi's. She also notes several instances where Thorpe attempts to rehabilitate the author as a credible and competent storyteller, rather than reflecting the slightly bumbling, self-righteous man Psaki finds within the text.<sup>13</sup> Roche-Mahdi's is also the most frequently consulted and quoted translation within recent scholarship.

Further, it is important to note that much of the aesthetic dimension of the poem has potentially been lost in translation, such as its meter and rhyme, the use of onomatopoeia and consonance, as well as puns and the many and varied connotations of certain specific words. In addition, French is a language that utilises grammatical gender – which Heldris often uses to his advantage – and which an English translation can never fully reflect. There is also an intrinsic connection between language and culture, which cannot be overlooked. Michele Perret and Katherine Terrell have explored the limitations of an English translation, and their findings will inform the historical and textual analysis of this thesis.<sup>14</sup> Both highlight the importance of language in context and the ways in which Heldris' language both reaffirms and destabilises traditional roles of gender and power.<sup>15</sup> In certain places, I have therefore interrogated the meanings of the Old French and English words in order to better understand both the situated meaning of the original and the choices of the translation.

## *Methodology and Structure*

My intention is not to conduct a literary analysis of *Le Roman de Silence* but rather a historical and textual analysis through the anthropological framework offered by the History of Experience. The chosen methodology will help to facilitate a better understanding of lived reality through the literary imagination. Drawing on the vast legacy of Jacques le Goff, I conceive of

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<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Brown-Grant, "'Silence': A Thirteenth-Century French Romance," *The Modern Language Review*: 90, no. 4, (1995): 995.

<sup>13</sup> F. Regina Psaki, "The Modern Editor and Medieval 'Misogyny': Text Editing and 'Le Roman de Silence,'" *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (1997): 3-4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869256>.

<sup>14</sup> Michèle Perret, "Travesties et Transexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine," *Romance Notes* 25, no. 3 (1985).

Katherine H. Terrell, "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in Le Roman de Silence," *Romance Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2008): 35-48. <https://doi.org/10.3200/RQTR.55.1>.

<sup>15</sup> Terrell, Competing Gender Ideologies: 37.

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both imagination and literary creations (ie. the literary imagination) as a reflection of culture within the tropes, structures, and conventions of contemporary storytelling.<sup>16</sup> An exemplary case, of course, is the figure of the legendary King Arthur, ‘one of those medieval heroes who, exist[s] between reality and the imaginary, between history and fiction....’<sup>17</sup> Therefore, understanding the cultural conventions and context of literary creations is key to understanding the literary imagination of the High Middle Ages. Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy have had recent success in excavating historical reality from literature, in their book *Medieval Sensibilities*, where they discuss the role of literature in recording the emotions and experiences of the times in which it was written.<sup>18</sup> In particular, they mention the role of the minstrel and the bard, who, in bringing communities together through poetry and song, facilitated communal expressions and shared cultural experiences.<sup>19</sup>

The History of Experience (HEX) is a developing methodology that places an emphasis on the individual or group to understand their lived experience within their situated context, and to use experience as a means of historical analysis. It avoids viewing history and historical events through modern lenses and seeks to understand the learned, lived, embodied, and felt experience of past people.<sup>20</sup> It is governed by a set of generally accepted key assumptions. Firstly, practitioners argue that experience is situational, and secondly, that it is relational. This means that experience involves the dynamic interactions of various cultural layers and societal frameworks or structures, past, present, and future, brain and body, senses and emotions, at all levels of the social stratum. Thus, practitioners conclude that experience is dynamic and unstable, always changing and evolving. HEX aims to examine the whole human being, rather than individual aspects, in order to excavate experience.

As Rob Boddice and Mark Smith observe, humans are biocultural beings who are influenced by, and in turn influence, the world around them. Therefore, experience and emotion are not discreet elements of the human experience, but must be seen as culturally contingent and dynamically connected parts of the whole.<sup>21</sup> Boddice and Smith have developed the framework of ‘world-brain-body’ to better explore this complexity. First, they encourage an examination of

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Le Goff and Teresa Lavender Fagan, *Heroes and Marvels of the Middle Ages* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2020): 9. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=6222950>.

<sup>17</sup> Le Goff and Fagan, *Heroes and Marvels of the Middle Ages*. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, "Introduction," in *Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018): 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> Boquet and Nagy, "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Aristocratic Emotions in Feudal Society (Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries)," 105.

<sup>20</sup> Rob Boddice, "What Is the History of Experience?," *Centre for Excellence in History of Experience*, 2018: 35-48. <https://www.tuni.fi/alustalehti/2019/04/18/what-is-the-history-of-experience/>.

<sup>21</sup> Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion Sense Experience*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 30.

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socio-political and cultural structures that govern a given world. Next, they suggest an exploration of the ways in which these structures were understood within the mind of individuals and groups who inhabited that world. Finally, they advise an interrogation of the ways in which these perceptions were then embodied in daily acts of living.<sup>22</sup> They acknowledge that this process is not linear and highlight the necessity to view all three aspects of the framework simultaneously.

In this way, the term ‘lived experience’ aims to capture something more than just information or fact. ‘Experience’ offers an authenticity that pure research does not, but must also be used with care.<sup>23</sup> As Ian Wright and Sharon McIntosh state, ‘lived experience’ is an indeterminate construct that continues to evolve and develop.<sup>24</sup> Carr further explains that ‘experience’ is more than observation, rather, it highlights the involvement and interaction of people, within their world and to each other.<sup>25</sup> Using the phrase ‘lived gender’, Raisa Toivo and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa view the late-medieval experience of gender not as a static concept but as a series of expectations, roles, practices, and possibilities, which, in turn, is used, re-created and reinterpreted in ways that are both performative and structural.<sup>26</sup> As Boddice and Smith note, evaluating the re-entanglement of set structures, emotions and senses, mind and body will assist in moving towards a fuller, ‘more textured understanding of practices of being human.’<sup>27</sup>

This thesis has been strongly informed by these studies. It interprets an individual’s concept of gender, of feminine and masculine roles and behaviours, as shaped by their experiences, by religious dialogue, and by the socio-political landscape of the place in which they live. These abstract ideas and individual experiences are internalised through the brain, entangled with emotions, senses, concepts of identity and culture and so on, ultimately forming an individual response. The response is expressed through embodied actions, reactions, and thought processes, which, in turn, influence both the individual’s and the collective’s perceptions of the world; that is, their lived realities. Thus, the cycle continues. Therefore, the HEX methodology can help to move beyond normative understandings of the past, and to engage more openly in conversations about difference, nuance, and divergence.

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<sup>22</sup> Boddice and Smith, *Emotion Sense Experience*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ian McIntosh and Sharon Wright, "Exploring what the Notion of 'Lived Experience' Offers for Social Policy Analysis," *Urban Studies, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* (2018), 4.

<sup>24</sup> McIntosh and Wright, "Exploring what the Notion of 'Lived Experience' Offers for Social Policy Analysis." 6

<sup>25</sup> David Carr, "Experience and History" in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2012): 1.

<sup>26</sup> Raisa Maria Toivo and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, *Lived Religion and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Themes in Medieval and Early Modern History, (Milton: Taylor & Francis, 2020): 10. [https://tandfbis.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/rt-files/docs/Open+Access+Chapters/9781351003384\\_aintroduction.pdf](https://tandfbis.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/rt-files/docs/Open+Access+Chapters/9781351003384_aintroduction.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Boddice and Smith, *Emotion Sense Experience*, 18.

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The intersection between the History of Experience and literature has not yet been thoroughly investigated. Boquet and Nagy's work on the understanding medieval perceptions of emotions through literature has revealed the potential for excavating historical reality from literature.<sup>28</sup> Through the themes and issues explored within literature, it is possible to gain an understanding of contemporary reactions to and understandings of certain emotions. By investigating the literary imagination of Heldris de Cornuâlle through the framework offered by the History of Experience, this thesis will explore the potential role of fiction in reconstructing the lived experience of power and gender in the High Middle Ages.

This thesis will utilise Boddice and Smith's approach to the History of Experience, the world-brain-body framework, as both an analytical and structural tool. The first chapter of this thesis will therefore engage with the World, that is, the dominant structures and expectations of Heldris' society, the religious and socio-political discourses that influenced the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the contemporary ideals of gender and power. By identifying the standards first, the framework will help the analysis to move beyond normative understandings of medieval power and gender, and to engage more openly in a discussion about Heldris' interpretation of that context, including the exceptional and peculiar. This chapter tackles the first research aim.

The second and third chapters will jointly address the second part of the framework: Brain. Together, they will explore how worldly structures and expectations were perceived, at least by one author, Heldris de Cornuâlle. Here, Heldris' *Le Roman de Silence* will be used as a window into the situated world of the High Middle Ages. Chapter 2 will discuss the gendered arena of the 'bedroom', and the way Heldris allocates power within the domestic sphere portrayed in the poem. The bedroom represents the restrictive domesticity that Silence wishes to escape by continuing to cross-dress, the place in which Eupheme twice attempts to seduce Silence, and the domestic role to which Silence ultimately acquiesces in marrying the king. Chapter 3 will explore the gendered arena of the 'battlefield' and Heldris' portrayal of power in scenes of warfare. The battlefield is where Silence shines, where she enjoys honour and victory, perks only available to her through cross-dressing and her performance of masculinity. The dominant perception noted here is that Heldris' world is not one of simple oppositions, but one that consists of manifold nuances and mutable boundaries. Together, these two chapters will address my second aim.

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<sup>28</sup> Boquet and Nagy, "Introduction," 7.

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The fourth chapter will explore the final aspect of the framework: Body, or Embodied Realities, which will explore the ways in which power and gender were embodied during the High Middle Ages, focusing on those individuals, both historical and literary, who challenged societal expectations. It seeks to uncover potential parallels between reality and Heldris' literary imagination thus achieving the final research aim.

The conclusion will then explore my findings and determine the degree to which literary works can assist our understanding of the varied lived experiences of historical actors. It will discuss the possibilities and limitations of such an approach by evaluating highly subjective concepts such as perception and embodiment as they were expressed in both a fictional work and in extant historical evidence. It will conclude my observations on the degree to which Heldris' poem *Le Roman de Silence* was found to disrupt, or maintain, our understandings of how gender and power were embodied in medieval society.

The overall aim is to situate *Le Roman de Silence* within the historical context of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by applying a History of Experience framework to a literary work, *Silence*. This will enable a deeper reading of the text, and a more nuanced understanding of the medieval world in which it was written, including the interconnection of the macro level (the structures of society) and the micro (group and individual levels or the level of the human being and its relationships with others).

## Literature

Written by Heldris de Cornuâlle, *Le Roman de Silence* was forgotten for centuries, only rediscovered in 1911 in Wollaton Hall in Nottingham, England, in a box marked 'old papers – no value'. It rose to academic prominence in the 1970s, coinciding with the rise of interest in gendered experience and women's narratives. The manuscript now resides in the Wollaton Library Collection (WLC/LM/6), held by the Manuscripts and Special Collections, at the University of Nottingham.<sup>29</sup>

Sarah Roche-Mahdi believes the Wollaton Manuscript to be the well-worn anthology collection of a professional entertainer.<sup>30</sup> The manuscript contains several other poems and stories, many of which have received far less academic attention than Silence. Of the eighteen stories

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<sup>29</sup> "Romances and Fabliaux (WLC/LM/6)," Manuscripts and Special Collections, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/collectionsindepth/medievalliterarymanuscripts/wollatonlibrarycollection/wlclm6.aspx>.

<sup>30</sup> *Silence*, Introduction. xi

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within the manuscript, six are French romances, including Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* and Raoul de Houdenc's *La Vengeance Raguidel*. The manuscript also contains twelve other stories, mostly fabliaux, including seven by Gautier le Leu and a fragment by Marie de France.<sup>31</sup> Several of the fabliaux boast titles like *D[ ou] prestre ki perdi les colles* (*The Priest Who Lost His Balls*), and the intriguing *De la dame escolliee*, (*The Castrated Lady*), where a rebellious woman is cut open and bull's testicles are produced by sleight of hand to show that her insubordination was due to her inappropriate masculine characteristics. At just over 6700 lines long, *Silence* is one of the longest poems within the manuscript and is written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets. The poem is untitled within the manuscript and is best known by its modern title, *le Roman de Silence*.<sup>32</sup>

Recent scholarship has sought to understand both the poem and its main character, Silence, through queer theory and gender theory, but little research has sought to understand the historical context in which the poem was written. The story is notable for many reasons, not least Silence's diverse performance of gender, and the ways in which the narrative subverts traditional allocations of power. Kristin L. Burr calls the tale ambiguous,<sup>33</sup> perhaps the only thing on which academics agree.

### *Medieval Gender Roles*

Scholarship regarding medieval gender roles has grown vast in recent decades, far beyond the scope of this literature review. It is important to note that 'gender studies' is not a substitute for 'women's studies'.<sup>34</sup> Instead, it explores the intersection of femininity and masculinity, and the social and cultural structures that shape gender roles. In seeking to reinsert women into the historical narrative, many scholarly works focused solely on the role women played in medieval society, to the exclusion of examining men and performances of masculinity. As Dawn Hadley states, 'valuable feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages... has tended to ignore the gendered status of men; ironically privileging 'men' as universal, ahistorical, atemporal, and genderless...' <sup>35</sup> Thus, gender studies aims to redress this imbalance. Indeed, ground-breaking sociologist Raewyn

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<sup>31</sup> "Romances and Fabliaux (WLC/LM/6),"

<sup>32</sup> Helen Fulton. "Gender and Jealousy in "Gereint Uab Erbin" and "Le Roman De Silence"." Arthuriana 24, no. 2 (2014): 43-70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44697423>. 59

<sup>33</sup> Kristin L. Burr, "Nurturing Debate in Le Roman De Silence," ed. Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan, *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY, USA: Boydell & Brewer, 2016): 44.

<sup>34</sup> Katherine Weikert and Elena Woodacre, "Gender and Status in the Medieval World," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historique* 42, no. 1 (2016): 2. <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/24720611>.

<sup>35</sup> Dawn Hadley, "Introduction," in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1999). 3

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Connell insists on the importance of giving equal weight to all gender perspectives and not prioritising one over another.<sup>36</sup> Following the definitions offered by Ruth Mazo Karras, this thesis will use ‘sex’ to refer to physical characteristics, and ‘gender’ to mean socially constructed roles and behaviours.<sup>37</sup>

The place of women in medieval society has long been relegated to the domestic sphere, but much recent research has sought to examine the roles women played in wider society, their involvement in domestic and international affairs, and the gendered limitations placed upon their actions.<sup>38</sup> The contributions of women to military affairs is another area of growing scholarship.<sup>39</sup> Collectively, these works have demonstrated the range of roles women played in medieval society, and the varying constructions of medieval femininity.

The construction and multiplicity of medieval masculinity has also received much recent attention. Clare A. Lees, Thelma S. Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara’s work, *Medieval Masculinities*, highlights the need to move from the view of medieval masculinity as one hegemonic structure, and instead to see the diversity of experiences that embody medieval masculinity.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, ‘gender studies’ is no longer a niche subject, but part of the wider landscape of not just medieval studies but scholarship in general.<sup>41</sup> As Simon Gaunt notes, gender systems are cultural constructs, and therefore the symbolic value different cultures place on gender varies enormously.<sup>42</sup> Rather than looking for the singular medieval view of gender, Mazo Karras instead states the necessity to search for the multiplicity of views that describe the medieval experience.<sup>43</sup>

Medieval gender roles and ideas were not fixed categories, but rather evolving concepts, experienced and enacted on a daily basis.<sup>44</sup> A fundamental belief was that men were not only physically different from women – but were also the superior sex. This belief led to gender roles

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<sup>36</sup> Raewyn Connell, "The Study of Masculinities," *Qualitative Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (2014): 5-6. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-03-2014-0006>.

<sup>37</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (Florence: Routledge, 2012). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=957048>.

<sup>38</sup> Kimberly A. Lo Prete, "Women, Gender and Lordship in France, c.1050–1250," *History Compass* 5, no. 6 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00474.x>; Susan M. Johns et al., *Noblewomen. Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=242640>.

<sup>39</sup> Natasha R. Hodgson, *Women, Crusading and the Holy Land in Historical Narrative*, vol. 25 (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2007). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81mst>; Helen Solterer, "Figures of Female Militancy in Medieval France," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16, no. 3 (1991). <https://doi.org/10.1086/494682>.

<sup>40</sup> Clare A. Lees, Thelma S. Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara, *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): xi. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=310285>.

<sup>41</sup> Weikert and Woodacre, "Gender and Status in the Medieval World." 1.

<sup>42</sup> Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). 15

<sup>43</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Other*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Toivo and Katajala-Peltomaa, *Lived Religion and Gender*, 2-3.

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that segregated the behaviours of men and women.<sup>45</sup> However, medieval ideas surrounding gender were not purely determined based on physical characteristics; instead, gender was inflected by other systems of difference, such as social status, religion, sexuality, and one's behaviours and actions, revealing a fluidity and multiplicity in medieval perceptions of gender roles.<sup>46</sup> Spheres of action were also highly gendered, for example the battlefield was associated with males, the home with females.

Megan McLaughlin identifies warfare as a quintessential masculine activity during the Middle Ages, through which 'manhood' was demonstrated, and those who failed in warfare were ridiculed for 'effeminate' behaviour.<sup>47</sup> Louise J. Wilkinson highlights the gendered roles men and women played on the battlefield and in times of war, with men being the active party and women taking the passive role of the viewer, occasionally allowed to assist a knight to don his armour or to offer water.<sup>48</sup> If a woman fought, she was noted as fighting manfully, despite the disadvantage of her sex.<sup>49</sup> Despite this, McLaughlin notes several instances of women actively leading a military force, both for defence and offence, with most instances being recorded between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>50</sup>

As the Crusades have often been seen as a purely masculine military affair, the traditional historical focus has been on the actions of men. However, recent work has sought to uncover the roles women played during the crusades. As the ideal crusader was a male, the lived experience of the female crusader has been hard to fully establish.<sup>51</sup> Christopher Maier has analysed records of the crusades, revealing the strong presence of women in organising and coordinating the crusades, demonstrating that the crusades were not an entirely masculine affair.<sup>52</sup> During the Crusades, as Keren Caspi-Reisfeld notes, both Christian and Muslim writers used the idea of woman warriors to discredit their enemy as 'barbarian' for allowing women to fight, or else as an explanation for their own side's defeat.<sup>53</sup> Such scholarship can help us to understand more fully the context of Heldris' characterisations.

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<sup>45</sup> Christoph Maier, "The Roles of Women in the Crusade Movement: A Survey," *Journal of Medieval History* 30 (03/01 2004): 81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2003.12.003>.

<sup>46</sup> Carol Braun Pasternack and Sharon A. Farmer, *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, Medieval Cultures; Vol 32, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): ix.

<sup>47</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior." 202-203.

<sup>48</sup> Louise J. Wilkinson, "Gendered Chivalry," in *A Companion to Chivalry*, ed. Peter Coss and Robert W. Jones (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2019). 225.

<sup>49</sup> Michael R. Evans, "'Unfit to bear arms': the Gendering of Arms and Armour in Accounts of Women on the Crusades," in *Gendering the Crusades* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). 55.

<sup>50</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior." 200.

<sup>51</sup> Maier, "Women in the Crusade Movement." 62.

<sup>52</sup> Maier, "Women in the Crusade Movement." 81.

<sup>53</sup> Keren Caspi-Reisfeld, "Woman Warriors during the Crusades. 1095-1254," in *Gendering the Crusades*. Columbia University Press: New York, 2002. 96.

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Whilst warfare was largely considered the domain of men, the domestic sphere of household and bedroom was considered the domain of women. Traditional historical analyses, such as the work of Pollock and Maitland, tended to ignore the actions of medieval women on the assumption that they played no public role, stating ‘[a]s regards private rights women [widows] are on the same level as men...but public functions they have none. In the camp, at the council board, on the bench, in the jury box there is no place for them.’<sup>54</sup> Recent historians such as Kimberley Lo Prete disagree, pointing to sources such as charters and chronicles as evidence that women could and did wield power and authority, which often extended far beyond the domestic sphere.<sup>55</sup> Emilie Amt has compiled a sourcebook of primary records documenting the everyday lives of medieval women, revealing that, whilst their gender may have prohibited their full inclusion, they nevertheless participated in – and contributed to – the world around them.<sup>56</sup> Medieval women did face significant barriers to their participation in society, however there were other ways in which they could exert power and authority. Susan M. Johns et al. have successfully demonstrated the power and authority a medieval noblewoman could wield. By focusing on the issuing of charters by women, they have begun to uncover the complexities of medieval power.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz have focused specifically on medieval queenship, noting that queens serve a unique role within medieval society, and are often the most visible example of conforming to, or indeed rejecting, medieval gender roles and ideals. The intersecting analysis of both historical queens and literary depictions of queens will greatly contribute to understandings of the interplay of gender and power in politics and culture.<sup>58</sup>

### *Medieval Literature*

Literature played an important role for medieval societies. It was a means by which ideas and social norms were created, promulgated, and reinforced. Ideas such as chivalry, or the gendered roles within a romantic relationship, were conceptualised and then reinforced through

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<sup>54</sup> Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Incorporated, 2010): 511. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=3327255>.

<sup>55</sup> Lo Prete, "Women, Gender and Lordship in France, c.1050–1250."; Kimberly A. Lo Prete, "Public' Aspects Of Lordly Women's Domestic Activities In France, C.1050–1200," in *Gender and Historiography*, ed. Janet L. Nelson, Susan Reynolds, and Susan M. Johns, *Studies In The Earlier Middle Ages In Honour Of Pauline Stafford* (University of London Press, 2012).

<sup>56</sup> Emilie Amt, *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010): 7. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=1397360>.

<sup>57</sup> Johns et al., *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm*. 13

<sup>58</sup> Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz, *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009): xiv. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=452123>.

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these narratives.<sup>59</sup> As many of these poems and stories were performed and sung before large audiences, Boquet and Nagy have noted the central role literature played in shaping medieval ideas, fostering a communal language and set of societal beliefs and expectations.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, Gaile Ashton states that communal literary experiences in the face of external conflict helped shape ideas of nation and nation building.<sup>61</sup>

Literary themes and tropes developed as a kind of shorthand by which authors could discuss characters and issues through literary devices familiar to their audiences. A key example is the arming scene – whereby honour is given to literary knights when the knight ceremonially dons armour before a battle. Derek Brewer's seminal work explores the arming scenes of several famous knights, from the *Aeneid* through to Chaucer and Chrétien de Troyes. Brewer focuses on elements such as the order of arming, the equipment involved and the position of the arming scene within the narrative, noting that the literary arming scene serves to honour and acknowledge the hero of the narrative, and to highlight both the hero and the combat to be of significance.<sup>62</sup> Lorraine Kochanske Stock has analysed depictions of women in battle, noting a tendency of male authors to over-feminise their armour and actions. She argues that medieval poems are unable to perceive a character as both a warrior *and* a woman.<sup>63</sup> Whilst many Romances did uphold and reinforce the gender hierarchy of the Middle Ages, many others feature gender ambiguities, demonstrating that medieval authors did not always represent gender as a stable, immutable category.<sup>64</sup> Normative categories of gender are rarely, if ever, permanently overturned, but through their very discourse, they open the possibility for wider interpretations and discussions of gender and power within both literature and wider society.

Valerie R. Hotchkiss describes cross-dressing women as a common literary device in the Middle Ages, in which a woman performs the literary functions of a male character, such as the warrior, minstrel, or even her own husband, in order to achieve her own goals.<sup>65</sup> In addition to assuming male dress, she often adopts masculine traits, behaving in a decisive, strong, and

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<sup>59</sup> Joanna Bellis and Megan G. Leitch, "Chivalric Literature," in *A Companion to Chivalry*, ed. Peter Coss and Robert W. Jones (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2019): 241.

<sup>60</sup> Boquet and Nagy, "Ethics and Aesthetics of Aristocratic Emotions." 105.

<sup>61</sup> Gail Ashton, "Social and Cultural Context," in *Medieval English Romance in Context* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010): 13.

<sup>62</sup> Derek. Brewer, "The Arming of the Warrior in European Literature and Chaucer.,," in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 222.

<sup>63</sup> Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "'Arms and the (Wo)man' in Medieval Romance: The Gendered Arming of Female Warriors in the 'Roman d'Eneas' and Héldrīs's 'Roman de Silence',," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 4 (1995): 57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869148>.

<sup>64</sup> Roberta L. Krueger, "Beyond Debate: Gender in Play in Old French Courtly Fiction," in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. T. Fenster and C. Lees (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2002): 80.

<sup>65</sup> Valerie R. Hotchkiss, "Cross Dressing and Sexuality," in *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1996): 83.

proactive way. Conversely, Busby notes that men who cross-dress as women often adopt a more feminine mindset and behaviour.<sup>66</sup> These characters suggest a more fluid attitude towards gender categories. As Penny Schine Gold states, medieval literature should not be taken literally, but rather investigated for themes and ideas that may reflect perceptions of reality.<sup>67</sup>

### *Le Roman de Silence*

Given its late discovery and translation, current literature on *Le Roman de Silence* is relatively scarce. In 1986, R. Howard Bloch referred to *Silence* as the most neglected of medieval literary works.<sup>68</sup> Since then, the body of literature has grown somewhat, with an increase in publications covering Medieval views and depictions of diverse sexuality often featuring *Silence*. Several scholarly journals have begun publishing articles, including two issues of the Arthuriana publication, in 1997 and 2002, and several articles in the Medieval Feminist Forum and PMLA. However, as Roberta L. Krueger states, no discussion of gender debates in courtly literature would be complete without mentioning Heldris de Cornuâlle's *Roman de Silence*.<sup>69</sup>

Much of the current literature regarding *Silence* focuses on Silence's gender presentation, often through the lens of queer theory or gender theory, the ways in which Heldris reinforces or undermines the gender of his characters, and its language and stylistic similarities to other Arthurian romances. Bloch describes Heldris' depiction of women to be virulently misogynistic, highlighting his frequent rants about unfaithful women and his tendency to generalise and extrapolate the behaviours of all women from the behaviours of one.<sup>70</sup>

Ransom focuses on the ways in which King Ebain exerts power and authority, noting that, whilst Ebain may see his power as absolute, the actions of Cador, Silence, and Eupheme prove that he is far from the sole source of power within the poem.<sup>71</sup> Heather Tanner agrees, stating that Ebain falls short of the standards of behaviour Heldris establishes in his prologue, and is frequently revealed to be a weak and ineffectual king.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Keith Busby, "'Plus acesmez qu'une popine' Male Cross-Dressing in Medieval French Narrative," in *Gender Transgressions: Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998): 46.

<sup>67</sup> Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 1-4. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/undaf/detail.action?docID=488097>.

<sup>68</sup> R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The Roman de Silence and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies*, no. 70 (1986): 81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929850>.

<sup>69</sup> Krueger, "Gender in Play." 87.

<sup>70</sup> Bloch, "Silence and Holes." 85.

<sup>71</sup> Ransom, "Negotiating Kingly Power." 7.

<sup>72</sup> Heather Tanner, "Lords, Wives and Vassals in the Roman de Silence," *The Journal of Women's History* 24 (2011): 141. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2012.0004>.

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The ending of the poem, where Silence gives up men's clothes and marries King Ebain, her great-uncle, has opinions divided on whether it supports or subverts the gender norms.<sup>73</sup> Whilst Sharon Kinoshita claims that King Ebain is the winner of the story, exchanging an old, unfaithful wife for a young, beautiful one who is more likely to produce an heir,<sup>74</sup> Stock suggests that the ending is more enigmatic. Through events such as revolts, continuous questioning of his authority, his wife's adultery, and Silence's deception, King Ebain's position is more tenuous than it might appear,<sup>75</sup> and his marriage to Silence might signal the start of some stability within his reign. Keene presents Eupheme's brutal execution as symbolic of the fractured nature of Ebain's kingdom, which his marriage to Silence heals.<sup>76</sup> As Weisl points out, the marriage at the end is necessary to re-establish the order and harmony in the kingdom, and that, despite blatantly flouting the king's authority, Silence is welcomed back to court and takes up the role of queen.<sup>77</sup> Whilst Brahney argues that Silence's marriage to Ebain is disappointing to a modern reader, who may have been expecting a more progressive ending for the heroine, she adds that, within the world of the romance, Silence has proved to be valiant and loyal, and is rewarded by becoming Queen.<sup>78</sup> Kinoshita notes that Silence, so vocal and proactive as a man, loses her voice as soon as Merlin reveals her identity, and does not actively consent to the marriage to her great-uncle.<sup>79</sup>

Kathleen M. Blumreich identifies that, through her marriage and child, Euphemie is seen to have fulfilled her societal expectations, whilst Eupheme is sexually perverse and undermines the security of the kingdom.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, like Guinevere and other adulterous queens, Eupheme remains barren.<sup>81</sup> Her execution at the climax of the story is notably brutal. Her cross-dressing lover is merely beheaded, where Eupheme is torn apart by wild horses, an execution normally reserved for the worst of criminals.<sup>82</sup> Whilst acknowledging the stock nature of the adulterous queen trope, Keene offers a more sympathetic view of Eupheme. She notes that Eupheme is

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<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth A. Waters, "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in "Le Roman de Silence"," *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (1997): 37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869253>.

<sup>74</sup> Sharon Kinoshita, "Heldris de Cornuâlle's Roman de Silence and the Feudal Politics of Lineage," *PMLA* 110, no. 3 (1995): 406. <https://doi.org/10.2307/462935>.

<sup>75</sup> Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable'." 16.

<sup>76</sup> Keene, "'Cherchez Eufeme': The Evil Queen in "Le Roman de Silence"." 18.

<sup>77</sup> Angela Jane Weisl, "How to be a Man, Though Female: Changing Sex in Medieval Romance," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45, no. 2 (2009); 131.

<sup>78</sup> Kathleen J. Brahney, "When Silence was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*" (paper presented at the The Spirit of the Court. Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, Toronto, 1983): 60.

<sup>79</sup> Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the "Roman de Silence"." 70-71.

<sup>80</sup> Kathleen M. Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire in the Old French "Roman de Silence"," *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (1997): 48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869254>.

<sup>81</sup> Kristin L. Burr, "A Question of Honor: Eufeme's Transgressions in Le Roman De Silence," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 30, no. 1 (2004): 28. <https://doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.1160>.

<sup>82</sup> Burr, "A Question of Honor: Eufeme's Transgressions in Le Roman De Silence." 35.

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unique amongst stories of adulterous queens, as she is both a paragon of beauty and an irredeemable seductress.<sup>83</sup> However, in Eupheme's case, her physical beauty is not a reflection of her inner virtue.

It is important to view Silence within the context of other medieval narratives of cross-dressing female warriors. As Hotchkiss states, whilst these stories may seem subversive, the cross-dressing hero is always integrated back into aristocratic society through marriage, either by returning to their birth sex or by physically transitioning sex through the divine intervention of an angel or, in one poem, Christ himself.<sup>84</sup> These poems all serve to illustrate the vast body of medieval literature discussing multiple and varying perceptions of medieval gender and power.

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<sup>83</sup> Keene, "'Cherchez Eufeme': The Evil Queen in "Le Roman de Silence"." 4-5.

<sup>84</sup> Hotchkiss, "Cross Dressing." 116.

## *Significance*

It is my aim to contextualise *Le Roman de Silence* within the historical and literary structures of its time; to analyse Heldris' perceptions of gender and power through his depictions of Silence, Ebain, Eupheme, Cador, and Euphemie; and to explore parallels between Heldris' literary imagination and historical reality.

*Le Roman de Silence* is a little-known poem that has the potential to greatly alter current views on medieval power and gender roles. Whilst it has been explored as a literary source, little research has sought to interrogate its historical parallels. An interrogation of *Le Roman de Silence* through the framework of the History of Experience is a significant contribution to current scholarship. My work will increase our understandings of the poem within its historical context and, through the lens of the History of Experience, examine the role of literature in reconstructing the lived experience of medieval people. Further, through the application of the History of Experience framework on a literary text, my research contributes meaningfully to existing scholarship, viewing a little-known yet significant poem through a new lens, and testing an emerging framework against a new subject.

# Chapter One – Heldris’ World

Since its rediscovery, *Le Roman de Silence* has risen in academic prominence, but little research has sought to place it within its historical context. To better understand the context in which *Silence* was written, this chapter will explore the dominant structures that shaped the world in which Heldris likely lived, highlighting specifically the prevailing social expectations and legal-political arrangements of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Anglo-French sphere, and the literary traditions and conventions which dominated it. Rob Boddice and Mark Smith state that the historian can neither re-experience, nor re-enact the past, but only reconstruct it as far as possible.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, as far as it is possible, it is necessary to reconstruct the world in which Heldris lived and wrote, the structures and principles that governed his world, and the ideas, concepts, and discourses that were central to the world. It is these structures that no doubt informed his poem, either through replication of them or resistance to them.

In addition, understanding the chivalric and romance literature that permeated Heldris’ own experience will help shape an understanding of the literary models which may have influenced *Silence*. Medieval literature is full of its own specific genre limitations, traditions, and conventions to which authors conform - but which they also challenge. It is easy to see *Silence* as an outlier, but in many ways, Heldris’ tale of chivalry, adulterous queens, bad governance, and redemption bears many similarities to other medieval tales, and considering *Silence* within the context of other stories will provide a better framework with which to view and understand Heldris’ literary decisions. Examining the political, cultural, and literary structures of Heldris’ world through the History of Experience framework will enable a deeper understanding of literary imagination, and therefore aid in examining the poem’s depictions of diverse expressions of gender and negotiations of power within the battlefield and bedroom.

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<sup>1</sup> Boddice and Smith, *Emotion Sense Experience*. 23.

## *Religious and Political Structures*

Once upon a time Ebain was king of England.  
He maintained peace in his land;  
With the sole exception of King Arthur  
There never was his equal  
In the land of the English.<sup>1</sup>

The world of Heldris de Cornuâlle, in which *Le Roman de Silence* was written, was a world governed by hierarchy, patriarchal lineage, religion, and assigned and prescribed gender roles and ideals. Conventionally, the period is referred to as the High Middle Ages, an era typically dated to between 1066 and 1272 CE. Geographically and culturally, the poem was written within the bounds of the Anglo-French sphere. Anglo-French generally refers to matters concerning both England and France. Following the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, many French and Norman traditions became interwoven with local Anglo-Saxon traditions, as the duchy of Normandy and various other French territories were under the control of the English monarch. It is therefore ineffective to consider England and France as separate entities, and more productive to consider an Anglo-French realm or sphere with shared and intermingling traditions, cultures, and ideals. This blending of cultures extended to literature.

During the twelfth century, the aristocracy's literary vernacular, French, began flowering into new forms and genres in both England and France. Yet despite this shared, aristocratic, Francophone audience, these two literary cultures, insular and continental, were different from the very beginnings; above all, in the shape taken by that most influential new genre, the romance.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Heldris, an author who claims to be from Cornwall, writes in Francien and Picard.<sup>3</sup> It is not known when exactly when *Silence* was written, and so fully contextualising its story is difficult. Roche-Mahdi and Frederic Cowper believe the manuscript to have been copied out for the marriage of Guy IX of Laval to Beatrice de Gavre, c.1286.<sup>4</sup> Whether the story itself is older than the manuscript is still open for debate, but the University of Nottingham dates its manuscript it to around 1200-1250.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Silence*, L107-112.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Ashe, "The Anomalous King of Conquered England," in *Every Inch a King : Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, ed. Lynette Mitchell and Charles Melville (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 176-8

<sup>3</sup> *Silence*, xxiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Silence*, xxiii; Frederick A. G. Cowper, "Origins and Peregrinations of the Laval-Middleton Manuscript," *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 3 (1959): 4.

<sup>5</sup> "Romances and Fabliaux (WLC/LM/6)."

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Either way, it seems likely that the politico-cultural milieu between the mid-twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries is the context for Heldris' activity. Indeed, this time period was very busy in terms of Anglo-French affairs, and if Heldris sought historical inspiration, the High Middle Ages had no shortage of rebellions, strong and weak rulers, noblewomen who challenged the status quo, and a flourishing of interest in chivalric and romance literature.

From the early eleventh century, the functional social order that divided men into those who pray, those who fight, and those who labour came under attack before the developing urban professions, culminating in ideas of what was appropriate and acceptable behaviour for each class, and the development of noble ideals, driven by the upper-class aristocrats who wished to maintain their long-held dominance over the rest of society. For noblemen, ideals of behaviour centred around their ability to protect their dependants, sire children, and their military competence. Noblewomen were expected to marry, bear children, and maintain their husband's household and land, or else to join a convent.<sup>6</sup> Around the same time, Geoffrey of Monmouth's famous epic *The History of the Kings of Britain* was written (c.1138), contributing to an influx of Arthurian tales and codified concepts of noble behaviour. Roche-Mahdi, drawing on the work of Geltzer, points to the possibility of Heldris being a *nom de plume*, a name picked from the pages of Geoffrey of Monmouth, possibly with a desire to please a patron, or to disguise female authorship.<sup>7</sup> Chrétien de Troyes also contributed greatly to the rise in Arthurian myth, and was the first to feature characters such as Lancelot and Percival, and the quest for the Holy Grail.

Medieval literature also promulgated Christian ideals, reflecting the Catholic Church's position as one of the most dominant socio-political structures of the Middle Ages. It is hard to overestimate the central role Christianity played in the lives of most medieval people, or to underestimate the impact Church teachings had on daily life, especially on ideals of masculine and feminine behaviour. Medieval concepts of gender, both anatomical and physiological, were mostly inherited from Greco-Roman ideas, and filtered through Christian doctrine, resulting in the belief that men were not only physically different from women, but were also superior.<sup>8</sup> Church traditions held that men and women were created physically unequal, that women should be subject to men's rule. If women were equal in God's image, it was in soul, not in body.<sup>9</sup> That men and women were considered to be *spiritually* equal in God's image was in many ways a

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<sup>6</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M.M. Postan (Cambridge University Press, 1975): 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Silence*, Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Vern L Bullough, "On Being a Man in the Middle Ages," ed. Clare A. Lees, Thelma Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara., vol. 7, *Medieval Masculinities. Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994): 31

<sup>9</sup> Gary Macy, "The Treatment of Women in the Scriptural Commentaries of the Twelfth–Thirteenth Centuries," in *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015): 38

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theological technicality; in all aspects of daily life, and certainly as far as embodied gender roles went, men were considered the superior sex. This core assumption of superiority came to dominate society, from government and the right to rule, to inheritance and the division of labour. Additionally, warfare and sexual competence were seen as masculine domains, whilst child-rearing and housekeeping were feminine. These anatomical and physiological assumptions helped establish strict gender roles and expectations.

Much of the extant written record was, of course, created by ordained priests, monks, and other clerical writers whose own opinions and prejudices on gender coloured their accounts. These chroniclers were often influenced by theological teachings that portrayed Eve as a temptress, the origin of sin, and therefore portrayed all women as Eve's daughters, and thus as having inherited her nature as a source of wickedness and disorder.<sup>10</sup> Vern L. Bullough identifies the triad of medieval masculinity as protecting, providing, and procreating.<sup>11</sup> Patricia Simons adds that virility, not necessarily siring children, was a crucial element of manliness and social power.<sup>12</sup> For a man to be seen as 'masculine' he must constantly prove his manliness, which any sign of weakness or 'femininity' would instantly undermine. This view of masculine and feminine traits can be extended to the bedroom. For men, the transgression was not in the act of homosexual sex, but in being the passive (i.e. 'female') partner in any coupling.<sup>13</sup> This transgression overtly announces by inversion how the structure understood women – as weak and passive both in public life, and in private relations.

For both churchmen and noblemen, wielding authority became so closely associated with purely masculine military matters, commanding knights in battle and besieging castles, that it became almost unimaginable to see a woman as a strong ruler.<sup>14</sup> However, in certain instances, a lady's noble blood could triumph over her 'feminine weakness', especially when in competition with a man of inferior social status.<sup>15</sup> This was particularly so when a woman was needed to govern in a man's stead: to act as regent if her husband had been called to fight, or for a son too young to rule. In such cases, it was acceptable for a woman to rule over her husband's land, to raise armies and ransoms, and to administer justice. However, this was often done in the name of her husband

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph V. Turner, "Eleanor of Aquitaine, Twelfth-Century English Chroniclers and her 'Black Legend,'" *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, no. 52 (2008): <https://doi.org/10.1484/j.nms.3.427>.

<sup>11</sup> Bullough, "On Being a Man in the Middle Ages." 34.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 16.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 81.

<sup>14</sup> Turner, "Eleanor of Aquitaine, Twelfth-Century English Chroniclers and her 'Black Legend'." 24.

<sup>15</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, "The Herrenfrage: the Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150," in *Medieval Masculinities : Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): 4.

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or son, and rarely in her own name. A key example of the gendered realities facing women who tried to assert power can be found in chroniclers' and contemporaries' treatment of the Empress Matilda and her cousin and rival, Matilda of Boulogne. Both women governed territories, acted as regent, raised and led armies, and were named as sole heirs in their father's wills. The epitaph for the Empress Matilda (1102-1167) defines her entirely by the men in her life – her father, King Henry I of England, her husband, the Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich V, and her son, King Henry II – and by the values dictated by the structures of a male-dominated feudal society.<sup>16</sup> It reads,

Here lies Henry's daughter,  
wife and mother,  
great by birth, greater by marriage,  
But greatest by motherhood.

It is perhaps unsurprising that this epitaph was chosen by her son. Matilda had been recognised as her father's heir, yet when Henry died, his nephew Stephen claimed the throne. During the conflict known as the Anarchy, Matilda defeated Stephen and was on the verge of being crowned Queen regnant when the people of London, upset at her harsh taxes, rebelled, and forced her from the capital. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz note that contemporary chroniclers, mostly monks with varying degrees of misogynistic tendencies, were quite clear on what went wrong: unfeminine behaviour. Matilda acted with the ruthlessness and force of personality for which her father Henry I had been known and praised, behaviours which scandalised her contemporaries as a shocking deviation from proper womanly behaviour.<sup>17</sup> The *Gesta Stephani* chronicles Stephen's reign, and generally depicts the Empress as arrogant, masculine and unwomanly: 'She began immediately to assume the loftiest haughtiness of the greatest arrogance-not now the humble gestures and gait of feminine docility; but she began to walk and talk more severely and more arrogantly than was customary, and to do everything herself.'<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Stephen's queen Matilda of Boulogne was praised for her feminine piety and submissiveness. Lisa Hilton highlights the gendered praise of this Matilda within the *Gesta Stephani*, who describes her as having the virile, courageous breast of a man, but the constancy or fortitude of a woman.<sup>19</sup> To her contemporaries, Matilda's courage made her 'manlike', but unlike the Empress, Matilda of

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Beem, "'Greater by Marriage' The Matrimonial Career of the Empress Matilda," in *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009): 1.

<sup>17</sup> Beem, "'Greater by Marriage' The Matrimonial Career of the Empress Matilda." 12.

<sup>18</sup> Gesta Stephani, as quoted Betty Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 1 (1955): 117. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707530>.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Hilton, "Matilda of Boulogne" in *Queens Consort: England's Medieval Queens* (London: Phoenix Paperback, 2008): 107.

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Boulogne was able to temper her conduct with acceptable feminine traits. For contemporary chroniclers, the balance of the two was critical.

Thus, the gender roles facing these two powerful women are clearly evident: whilst Matilda of Boulogne was praised for raising armies and negotiating treaties on behalf of her husband King Stephen, the Empress Matilda was censured for doing so in her own name. Betty Bandel notes that both women were described in masculine terms, which was intended both to complement and to undermine their femininity.<sup>20</sup> English queens had wielded effective political power for centuries, but it was their relationship to male gendered power that made their actions legitimate (or indeed illegitimate, if they overstepped the boundaries). Queens could render assistance to their fathers, husbands, and sons, or rule in their place temporarily as regents, but women were not supposed to pursue political power for themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Within the feudal structures of the Middle Ages, the king was theoretically sovereign of all England, but was extremely dependent on his barons and vassals to maintain his power and authority. A king's coronation stressed both the king's God-given authority over his subjects and his responsibility as a Christian to protect his subjects and the Church.<sup>22</sup> The ideal king was expected to exemplify a dizzying, and sometimes conflicting, array of qualities and behaviours. As exemplified by the relationship between King Arthur and Merlin, a good king seeks and listens to council; a weak king will be governed by his subordinates.<sup>23</sup> Weak kings tended to attract wild and sordid tales regarding their wife's or their own sexual proclivities, in an attempt to explain the failures of the king. Although the poem's focus is on Silence, Heldris also explores the actions of Ebain and Cador, and what it means to be a good ruler. Heldris likely lived and wrote within the living memory of some of England and France's most and least celebrated monarchs – the likes of Henry II, John, Philip Augustus, Henry III, and Edward I – and Ebain's rule reflects the tension between the notion and the perception of a king's sovereignty, and the vigilance, judgment, and action necessary to create and preserve power.<sup>24</sup>

Queens also had their prescribed roles within the feudal structure. As noted above, with regard to Matilda of Boulogne, a queen was meant to uphold her husband's majesty whilst not overstepping her gender role. Significantly, the behaviour of queens, good or bad, was often directly linked with their husbands' rule. For example, an association between adulterous queens

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<sup>20</sup> Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women." 113.

<sup>21</sup> Levin and Bucholz, *Queens and Power*, xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Turner, "England Under the Angevin Kings," in *Magna Carta* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003): 11.

<sup>23</sup> Louis J. Boyle, "Ruled by Merlin: Mirrors for Princes, Counseling Patterns, and Malory's 'Tale of King Arthur'," *Arthuriana* 23, no. 2 (2013), <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/43855444>; Ransom, "Negotiating Kingly Power."

<sup>24</sup> Ransom, "Negotiating Kingly Power." 2.

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and failing kingship can be found in the earliest references to British royalty.<sup>25</sup> Early Anglo-Saxon King Eadwig's queen Ælfgifu, and Edgar's queen Ælfthryth, were both involved in political controversies and opposed the actions of St Dunstan, and both were later depicted as sexual predators by his hagiographers.<sup>26</sup> Adulterous tales also proliferated around the lives of famous medieval queens. Eleanor of Aquitaine was accused of having affairs with her uncle Raymond of Poitiers, the father of her second husband, the then-teenage Muslim sultan Saladin, an unnamed bishop, and even an alleged affair with Robin Hood.<sup>27</sup> In examining some of the numerous rumours levelled at Eleanor, McCracken and Karras note the way rumours reveal contemporary views on medieval queenship.<sup>28</sup> Eleanor is hailed as a powerful and successful queen, but her reign as consort and then as queen mother is littered with accusations of improper behaviour. During the rebellion against Henry II, Eleanor is said to have dressed in men's clothing to avoid being recognised as she journeyed to join her sons in Paris. Her ruse was not successful, however, and Eleanor was captured and sent to Henry. For Gervais of Canterbury, Eleanor's arrest is less significant than her transgression.<sup>29</sup> That Eleanor was prepared to adopt such a sinful disguise proves to Gervase the lengths to which she was willing to go to seize power. This story, like many others, is likely to have developed later, in the decades and centuries following Eleanor's death, as monks and chroniclers attempted to explain the collapse of Eleanor's two marriages and the disastrous end to Henry II's rule.

Accusing a queen of adultery, whether fictional or not, was a way of undermining the rule of her husband. Reports of Eleanor's conduct stress the importance of the queen's chastity, the threat that his wife's sexual transgression posed to the king's honour, and the importance of undisputed royal succession.<sup>30</sup> Many stories developed in later decades and centuries, often as a reaction to the queen's having overstepped her perceived gender boundaries. In having an affair, the queen is seen to undermine both the authority and the masculinity of the king, and the upheaval within the royal household generally symbolises the upheaval within the kingdom.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Joanna Laynesmith, "Telling Tales of Adulterous Queens in Medieval England: From Olympias of Macedonia to Elizabeth Woodville," in *Every Inch a King : Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, ed. Lynette Mitchell and Charles Melville (Leiden, United States: Brill, 2012):19.

<sup>26</sup> Laynesmith, "Telling Tales of Adulterous Queens ", 202.

<sup>27</sup> Turner, "Eleanor of Aquitaine, Twelfth-Century English Chroniclers and her 'Black Legend'." 30.

<sup>28</sup> Peggy McCracken and Ruth Mazo Karras, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998): 1.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=3442099>.

<sup>29</sup> Lisa Hilton, "Eleanor of Aquitaine " in *Queens Consort: England's Medieval Queens* (London: Phoenix Paperback, 2008): 135.

<sup>30</sup> Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, America: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998): 2. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=3442099>.

<sup>31</sup> Keene, "'Cherchez Eufeme': The Evil Queen in "Le Roman de Silence"." 4.

## *The Rule of Law*

His rules were not just idle talk—  
There wasn't a man in his kingdom,  
From Winchester to Durham,  
Whom he wouldn't have thrown in jail  
If he dared to break his law,  
On such terms that, right or wrong,  
He wouldn't get out till he was dead.<sup>32</sup>

Laws can be problematic, as Heldris notes in the quote above, for they are habitually based on the whims of men. It is also difficult to quantify the extent to which they were followed. Yet laws do offer snapshots into the life and society for which they were written and therefore the concomitant expectations.<sup>33</sup> Laws can also offer insight into the world of an individual, as structures that shape and influence their lives. Different countries, and indeed different regions of the same country, could and did have different laws.<sup>34</sup> Kingdoms had statutory laws, but customary laws and canon laws were also important. Ruth Mazo Karras identifies three main areas of medieval law, all of which contribute to shaping an understanding of the Anglo-French world. First, papal decrees and royal decrees demonstrate how lawmakers *wanted* their society to function, rather than reflecting how society actually functioned. Secondly, treatises on laws and their functions are both descriptive and prescriptive, often trying to reconcile the ideal with the reality, and thus distorting their representation of the world. Thirdly, documents such as wills, court records and dispute litigations, offer a glimpse at how people experienced the law. However, as court was an expensive option, the records of such disputes are an unrepresentative sample of the population, as many of the lower classes would have been unable to afford such disputes.<sup>35</sup>

Cador's determination to raise Silence as a boy stems from his fear that he and his wife will never conceive a boy, and that the duchy of Cornwall will instead regress into Crown property. Laws and regulations regarding inheritance varied across Europe, with differing rules

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<sup>32</sup> *Silence*, L112-118.

<sup>33</sup> Fiona Harris-Stoertz, "Pregnancy and Childbirth in Twelfth-and Thirteenth-Century French and English Law," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 2 (2012): 225-226. <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/41475080>.

<sup>34</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, "Law in the Lives of Medieval Women: Beyond the Magna Carta," (The Library of Congress, 2015), video.

<sup>35</sup> Karras, "Beyond the Magna Carta."

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regarding the distribution of moveable property, such as slaves and jewellery, and immovables such as land and titles. English nobles tended to favour primogeniture, where the eldest son received everything, whereas the French tended to divide land equally between sons. A daughter could inherit if she had no brothers, but often the property passed from her father to her husband, as is the case in *Silence*, where Cador inherits the title and duchy of Cornwall on his father-in-law's death. Some have argued that the distinction was not between men and women as female inheritance itself was not equal, and therefore the distinction was rather between the rights of unmarried women, married women, and widows.<sup>36</sup> Daughters, especially those of the aristocracy, could and did inherit lands and oversee landed estates, although the titles associated with these often passed to her husband. An example of this is Matilda of Boulogne, who was Countess of Boulogne in her own right and joint ruler of the territory with her husband Stephen. However, in England and France, the vast majority of inheritance favoured the male line, with only moveable property and dower rights going to women.<sup>37</sup>

The legitimacy of inheritance was also a key issue, exemplified by the many laws surrounding the legitimacy of children and those intended to protect the survival of unborn children. From the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Fiona Harris-Stoertz has identified an increase in intrusive laws regulating pregnancy and childbirth, which later helped pave the way for a loss of female hegemony.<sup>38</sup> Whilst some attempt to give greater privileges to pregnant women, many sought to protect the foetus and imposed penalties for any harm to the foetus, or to a man's fertility.

The Frankish Salic Law may be a source of inspiration for King Ebain's ban on female inheritance. Codified around 476 – 96 C.E. and expanded in the following centuries, Salic Law prevented women from inheriting landed titles or property, limiting them to personal, moveable, inheritance instead. John Milton Potter argues that the Salic Law was held among Frenchmen to have been one of the most important sustaining aspects of the monarchical structure.<sup>39</sup> Often, the Salic Law was enforced by soldiers acclaining a king rather than a queen, to ensure that France had a king to lead armies in times of war.<sup>40</sup> That the laws regarding female inheritance and succession were little argued over may have largely been because, until 1317, there was always a

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<sup>36</sup> Janet L. Nelson and Alice Rio, "Women and Laws in Early Medieval Europe," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M. Bennet and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 108

<sup>37</sup> Karras, "Beyond the Magna Carta."

<sup>38</sup> Harris-Stoertz, "Pregnancy and Childbirth." 263

<sup>39</sup> John Milton Potter, "The Development and Significance of the Salic Law of the French," *The English Historical Review* 52, no. 206 (1937): 235. <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/554261>.

<sup>40</sup> Potter, "The Development and Significance of the Salic Law of the French." 238.

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royal prince to succeed as king. Craig Taylor states that, although still applied to royal inheritance, the Salic Law fell out of common use in the Early and High Middle Ages. It later grew in prominence, as the Valois dynasty sought to consolidate power in the fifteenth century.

Within the High Middle Ages, excessive taxation and land rights were major concerns raised by the barons in the Magna Carta. Clauses 7 and 8 of the Magna Carta specifically mention widows' land rights following their father's or husband's death. John is infamous for being perceived as a bad king, and his signing of the *Magna Carta Libertatum* in 1215 highlights the qualities to which a king should strive, and the ones for which he should be condemned. The Magna Carta was not intended to be the great cornerstone of British justice it has come to be regarded as, but rather a way for the barons to air their grievances and attempt to curtail the all-encompassing power of the king.<sup>41</sup> The Magna Carta reveals the extent to which John overstepped his authority as king. That the barons felt it necessary to include a clause on widows' rights to her dower lands and the lands and income to which she was entitled upon her husband's death suggests that the King had been putting obstacles in the way of women getting their property back after their husband's death, or that he charged them for getting their property back. Undoubtedly, this interest in widows' rights stemmed from the barons' fears that King John would mistreat their own wives and daughters after their deaths, but it also reflects that inheritance, and the issue of over-taxation, were key issues that English barons wished enshrined in law.

It is likely that Heldris lived and wrote within living memory of King John, and the various reissues of the Magna Carta. Indeed, in the opening lines of the poem, Heldris identifies avarice as the most destructive force of his time. He laments the lords and barons, those 'greedy, nasty, petty people' who 'prize money more than honour', hoarding their coins and robbing the world of all pleasures.<sup>42</sup> His anger seems to stem from those lords who refuse to pay minstrels for their services, yet he echoes the sentiments expressed by the English barons noted above.

Law codes and compensation tariffs can offer a map of legal and social hierarchies, and the values a society placed upon certain crimes. The use of masculine grammar as the default means that, quite often, when referring to *si quis* (if anyone...), the law was intended to apply to women as much as to men. If a law code does not offer a separate punishment or tariff for women, it may simply have been that there was no difference. Often, women were only specified in cases

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<sup>41</sup> Ralph Turner, *Magna Carta* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003); 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Silence*, L29-55

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such as abortion or infanticide, or when their gender may impact the punishment, such as when the punishment was castration for a man.<sup>43</sup>

For a man, treason and disrupting the king's peace were the ultimate crimes, punishable by blinding and castration within Anglo-French sphere.<sup>44</sup> This punishment, introduced by William the Conqueror, spared the man's life but stripped him of the very basis for his social existence by depriving him of two vital parts of his body: his eyes and his testicles. As physical and political impotence were considered two sides of the same coin – and as a man's sexual organs were considered proof of his manhood, his honour, and his warrior status – this punishment castrated the man both physically and politically. Since rebellion and treason were seen to threaten the king's own masculinity, such punishments were not considered overly violent or unrelated, but an appropriate response of royal revenge.<sup>45</sup> At the end of the poem, Silence is metaphorically castrated: she is stripped of her arms, all evidence of her masculinity is erased, and the masculine suffix of -us is removed from her name, to be replaced with the feminine -a. Thereafter Silence, or Silentia as she is now called, is silent, dons a dress, and marries the king.<sup>46</sup> This metaphorical castration is reminiscent of the physical castration meted out to those who disobeyed their king.

Many law codes also included compensation for mutilating or piercing male genitals, and for assaults on pregnant women, although these often focused on the loss of the foetus.<sup>47</sup> Court records show that women were typically defined by their nearest male relative, that is, as the daughter of her father, or the wife (or widow) of her husband.<sup>48</sup> Her male relatives were often responsible for punishing an errant woman, and many law codes also gave the husband or father to right to kill the lover if caught in the act in their own house. For cases of *raptus* – a wide category ranging from abduction to rape – the crime was seen more as a disruption to a noble family's marriage plans, or a slight to their honour, than a specific attack against a woman.<sup>49</sup> In light of this, Silence's two punishments for the alleged rape of Queen Eupheme are remarkably lenient. The first time, she is exiled to France; the second, she is sent on an impossible quest, a very different punishment to Queen Eupheme's nun lover who is executed. Whilst law codes

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<sup>43</sup> Nelson and Rio, "Women and Laws." 105.

<sup>44</sup> Klaus Van Eickels, "Gendered Violence: Castration and Blinding as Punishment for Treason in Normandy and Anglo-Norman England," *Gender & history* 16, no. 3 (2004): 589. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0953-5233.2004.00357.x>.

<sup>45</sup> Van Eickels, "Gendered Violence." 591.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Allen, "The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing, and Le Roman de Silence," in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse. Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Juliann Wasserman and Lois Roney (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989): 108.

<sup>47</sup> Harris-Stoertz, "Pregnancy and Childbirth." 266.

<sup>48</sup> Toivo and Katajala-Peltomaa, *Lived Religion and Gender*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Nelson and Rio, "Women and Laws." 105.

clearly favour men in all aspects of society, there are often allowances for noble women to act with a limited degree of autonomy.

Religious and political doctrine helped shape the dominant beliefs and attitudes of the Middle Ages, but it is difficult to gain an understanding of the everyday interactions, conversations, and anxieties, the emotions and experiences, that coloured medieval life. Surviving personal documents and records are scarce for medieval nobility and clergy, and even rarer for those lower down in society. Therefore, as Penny Schine Gold highlights, literature and narrative fiction are some of the few sources that better enable the reconstruction of the concerns and sentiments of the Middle Ages.<sup>50</sup>

### *Literary Traditions*

During the period in which Heldris lived and wrote, the two dominant literary genres were chivalric and romance literature. Although separate bodies of literature, chivalric and romance are closely linked and share many similar themes and conventions. Chivalric literature drew on centuries of shared stories and commonly held ideas about narrative and character. Chivalric ideals became more than a set of expectations and practices, they became an enduring literary culture. It engendered, and then drew upon, a huge literary corpus, of which its practitioners were simultaneously authors and audience, creators and consumers.<sup>51</sup> Chivalry as a theme, rather than a genre, was immensely popular with medieval audiences, and tales featuring noble knights, heroic quests, love, and honour proliferated during the Middle Ages.

Similarly, romance literature, or *romans*, often used the ancient or recent past to contextualise itself, to lend an air of truth or gravity to its narrative, or even to draw parallels to contemporary events through the lens of the past.<sup>52</sup> They encouraged their audience to emulate examples of bravery, martial prowess, and service to ladies, tests, and to espouse values such as loyalty and courtesy, serving as ‘models of cultural, intellectual and social authority’.<sup>53</sup> The proliferation and quantity of surviving manuscripts have led some to speculate that romances were the largest and most popular genre of medieval literature.<sup>54</sup> Whilst both chivalric and romance literature focus on historical narratives, romance tends to weave elements like the clash of good

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<sup>50</sup> Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Bellis and Leitch, "Chivalric Literature." 241.

<sup>52</sup> Bellis and Leitch, "Chivalric Literature." 249.

<sup>53</sup> Amy N. Vines, *Women's Power in Late Medieval Romance* (New York: D.S. Brewer., 2011): 6.

<sup>54</sup> Ashton, "Social and Cultural Context."; 21. Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2004): 46-47.

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against evil, quests, protagonists of mysterious birth, monsters, and the supernatural into the historical narrative.<sup>55</sup> Just as knights borrowed from the worship of Mother Mary in their worship and devotion to their lady, chivalric and romance traditions borrowed from, and helped inspire, tales of chivalric love, duty, and heroism.

A common trope was to set the tale in the past in order to draw attention to, and critique, the present. Stories were set in Ancient Rome, such as retellings of the *Aeneid*, the Trojan War, and Greek myths; in Charlemagne's France, through the adventures of his twelve Paladins; or in King Arthur's England and with the Knights of the Round Table. Invoking these figures and myths became so common, they developed into a recognisable shorthand for an ideological framework within which chivalric and romance literature operated.<sup>56</sup> For example, Sir Lancelot was held to be the paragon of chivalry; Tristan and Iseult were the pinnacle of devotion and secret love; no woman was as beautiful as Helen of Troy, none so fair and faithless as Guinevere, or as devious as Morgana. Therefore, to associate a character with the legend of Sir Lancelot, for example, was to highlight the character's chivalric honour, but also to draw upon the audience's shared views of Lancelot. Helen Cooper highlights the importance of studying themes and motifs within the wider social and literary contexts in which it was written, as this can often lead to a deeper understanding of the theme, and of the work itself.<sup>57</sup>

One of the most dominant motifs of medieval literature was the story of King Arthur, and his Knights of the Round Table. In modern depictions, Arthur is the ideal king: strong, wise, and just, under whose rule the country prospers and flourishes. However, in many of the earliest Welsh sources, Arthur is a more complex and enigmatic character, who is sparsely mentioned in narratives and rarely the hero. Geoffrey of Monmouth's pseudohistorical *The History of the Kings of Britain* brought Arthur to a wider, non-Welsh audience, elevating him to an Anglo-Norman hero, and offered a link between Arthur's conquests and the anticipation of an Angevin empire under Henry II. For the new and foreign ruling dynasty, Geoffrey's Arthur offered a lineage and legitimacy they had yet to firmly establish.<sup>58</sup> Arthur's declining reputation is often linked to Chrétien de Troyes' epic romances, where Arthur is depicted as a court-bound, weak, and somewhat peripheral figure.<sup>59</sup> Within Chrétien's works, Arthur progressively surrenders control of his court to a select band of heroic knights, whose adventures and successes overshadow

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<sup>55</sup> Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Bellis and Leitch, "Chivalric Literature," 245.

<sup>57</sup> Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Kristen Lee Over, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Politicization of King Arthur," in *Kingship, Conquest, and Patria: Literary and Cultural Identities in Medieval French and Welsh Arthurian Romance* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005): 45.

<sup>59</sup> Over, "Progressive Royal Decline in Arthurian Romance," 97.

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Arthur's own. Modern scholars have linked his failure as a monarch to his inability to keep the peace and maintain social order.<sup>60</sup> The comparison to Heldris' Ebain is obvious. Both rely on nobles to secure their kingdom and position as king, and fail to defeat rebellions and to produce a legitimate heir. Whilst difficult to verify, it is possible that Heldris read and was inspired by Chrétien de Troyes' works. Heldris was certainly aware of, and twice references, the story of Tristan and Iseult, of which a version has been attributed to Chrétien, and of Chrétien's *Erec and Enid*.<sup>61</sup>

One feature of troubadour and romance verse is the idea of courtly love, a limited sort of romance which generally occurred between a high-born, noble woman and a knight of more modest rank. Often, this love was unrequited on the part of the knight.<sup>62</sup> Silence and Eupheme's relationship is an inversion of this trope, where the noble woman is in love the knight, but the knight is unable to reciprocate her feelings.

Stories of adulterous love are as common as those about unrequited love. Again, Christian values divided women into either paragons of beauty and chastity, or scheming, lustful, unfaithful harlots. Descriptions of a lady's beauty are usually positive, meant to enhance an audience's response and engagement, but not always. Outer beauty is usually assumed to be an indication of inner purity and virtue, and can often lead to surprise when it is discovered to be missing.<sup>63</sup> Thus, beauty can sometimes function as dramatic irony: to set up assumptions, then challenge them. Beautiful villainesses abound in medieval romances, from Morgana le Fay to Gawain's temptress, and to those women who turn out not to be heroines, but the rather cheap and sexually available women of the fabliaux tradition.<sup>64</sup> Heldris' Eupheme, the world's most 'beautiful gem', is one such beautiful villainess.<sup>65</sup> She is said to be the fairest woman in the world, but her actions show her to be scheming, unfaithful and secretive.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* contains the first reference to Queen Guinevere's adultery. However, this is not the familiar romance with Lancelot, but a rather more sordid affair with Arthur's nephew, and eventual usurper, Mordred.<sup>66</sup> This early version of Guinevere's affair bears a striking similarity to Queen Eupheme's attempted seduction of Silence, the child of her husband's nephew. McCracken notes the similarities between

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<sup>60</sup> Over, "Progressive Royal Decline," 99.

<sup>61</sup> *Silence*. Notes on the Translation, 324.

<sup>62</sup> Boquet and Nagy, "Ethics and Aesthetics of Aristocratic Emotions," 110.

<sup>63</sup> Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 19-21.

<sup>64</sup> Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> *Silence*, L166.

<sup>66</sup> Laynesmith, "Telling Tales of Adulterous Queens," 200.

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Eupheme's story and other medieval narratives of adulterous queens who attempt to seduce a vassal of the king, are spurned, and then accuse the vassal of assault. Commonly known as the Potiphar's Wife trope, an adulterous queen offers the opportunity to explore the implicit link between transgressive sexuality and women's political authority.<sup>67</sup> This literary trope of adulterous queens reflects the reality of criticisms so often levelled at powerful women within the dominant political structures of the Middle Ages.

Heldris also draws inspiration from historical and pseudo-historical narratives. There is a Cador, Earl of Cornwall, who features prominently in Layamon's narrative *Brut*, where he is a trusted adviser and military companion of Arthur.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, it is his son who inherits the kingdom of England following Arthur's death. Silence makes reference to Merlin's involvement in the death of her ancestor Gorlain, duke of Cornwall, the first husband of Igraine, Arthur's mother. Merlin enchanters Uther to resemble Gorlain, enabling him to enter Tintagel Castle and seduce Igraine, thus conceiving Arthur, and leading to Gorlain's death. Again, this familiarity with Arthurian tradition and myth suggests that Heldris had access to a wide range of sources.

Personifications of ideals such as Peace or Beauty were common in medieval literature, and Nature often features as an allegorical figure, but Heldris' personification of Nurture, or Noreture, is unusual. Indeed, R. Howard Bloch believes Heldris' depiction of Nurture in opposition to Nature to possibly be unique.<sup>69</sup> Both Bloch and Simon Gaunt compare Heldris' personifications of Nature and Nurture to Alain de Lille's *De planctu naturae (the Complaint of Nature)*, and the allegorical poem *Roman de la Rose*, as Heldris' Nature, like Alain's, represents innate qualities, whilst Nurture represents education and upbringing.<sup>70</sup>

Having established the story within the context of its historical and literary conventions, the author is left free to explore and play variations upon the very conventions which give the story its shape. By playing on themes, tropes, and conventions that are familiar to an audience, the author can be far more effective than trying to completely reinvent a trope, and the variations to familiar themes leave the audience in suspense. Variations on conventions happen not only synchronically, within a time, as authors choose the particular angle on an idea that suits them and their purposes, but also diachronically, across time, as cultural, historical, and political change alters beliefs and expectations.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery*, 146.

<sup>68</sup> Layamon, *Brut*, trans. Eugene Mason.

<sup>69</sup> Bloch, "Silence and Holes," 204

<sup>70</sup> Simon Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," *Paragraph (Modern Critical Theory Group)* 13, no. 2 (1990): 204  
<https://doi.org/10.3366/para.1990.0015.84-85>: Bloch, "Silence and Holes," 202

<sup>71</sup> Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 22.

The ending of a story, the way in which the author ties together the errant threads of narrative and character, can speak volumes about the author's, or even their patron's, beliefs, values, and intent. That a story must end is accepted by an audience, but it is the journey towards that ending that makes a story worth listening to. Whilst heroes sometimes failed, authors would often privilege a comic resolution or happy ending.<sup>72</sup> Sometimes, these happy endings, like *Silence*'s, have an almost *deus ex machina* feel, where the character must be rescued by God, Merlin, or a fortuitously timed revelation, in order for the expected happy ending to take place.

### *Cross-Dressing within Literature*

Surviving medieval romance and chivalric literature provides a fascinating picture of cross-dressing in the Middle Ages. In literature, the distinction between one's birth sex and one's assumed sex later in life is more blurred, as a character's birth sex can often be obscured by gendered clothing and behaviours.<sup>73</sup> Valerie R. Hotchkiss describes cross-dressing women as a common literary device in the Middle Ages. In her view, women cross-dress for many different reasons: escape from sexual abuse, following a loved one, and simply desire for worldly adventure.<sup>74</sup> Within literature, many women who cross-dress are made to renounce their male dress, adopt female clothing, and marry, thus re-establishing order within their world, order which their cross-dressing temporarily upset. Keith Busby views cross-dressing within literature not as manifestations of diverse sexual or gender inclination, but as a way for authors to develop narratives, and for comedic purposes.<sup>75</sup>

Conversely, Busby discusses the rarity of men cross-dressing as women within literature.<sup>76</sup> Men tend to be looked down on for cross-dressing as women, or else seen as comic relief.<sup>77</sup> Michelle Szkilnik notes the shame associated for a man to cross-dress, even in literature, stating, 'for a man, to dress as a woman is to debase himself'.<sup>78</sup> An outlier to this statement is the autobiography of Ulrich von Lichtenstein, *Frauendienst*, or Service of Ladies, in which the author dresses as the goddess Venus and jousts in tournaments to win the hand of his beloved. Both Busby and Szkilnik have noted that narratives where women cross-dress as men are more common

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<sup>72</sup> Bellis and Leitch, "Chivalric Literature," 251.

<sup>73</sup> Weisl, "How to be a Man, Though Female: Changing Sex in Medieval Romance," 112-113.

<sup>74</sup> Hotchkiss, "Cross Dressing," 83.

<sup>75</sup> Busby, "Male Cross-Dressing," 57.

<sup>76</sup> Busby, "Male Cross-Dressing," 45.

<sup>77</sup> Busby, "Male Cross-Dressing," 57.

<sup>78</sup> Michelle Szkilnik, "The Grammar of the Sexes in Medieval French Romance" in *Gender Transgressions: Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998): 62.

than those containing men cross-dressing as women.<sup>79</sup> As Hotchkiss notes, when women cross-dress and perform as men within literature, they invariably find enthusiastic approbation.<sup>80</sup> Silence receives glowing praise from both other characters within the poem, and from Heldris himself. She successfully assimilates into the dominant male sphere, where she is accepted and gains a level of respect and authority that would have been impossible had her secret been known. It is possible Heldris was inspired partly by tales of transvestite saints escaping accusations of rape and also by chivalric legends of chaste knights, when telling of Silence's interactions with Queen Eupheme. Eupheme's lover, the cross-dressing nun, fits into Busby's pattern of men who cross-dress in medieval narratives in order to access relationships that would otherwise be forbidden.<sup>81</sup>

Whilst Heldris' depiction of Silence's life may seem extraordinary, recent research has uncovered several other poems in which the heroine spends some or most of the story in male clothing. *Le Roman de Silence* is often compared to the narrative of Grisandole, which follows a princess who disguises herself as a man and serves Julius Caesar. She is sent on a quest to capture Merlin, who laughs and reveals her identity. He reveals that the queen's twelve ladies-in-waiting are actually men, leading to the queen's execution and allowing Grisandole to marry Caesar.<sup>82</sup> Lewis Thorpe, who first translated *Silence* into English, saw Grisandole as the 'only real literary source' for *Silence*, however Sarah Roche-Mahdi believes Heldris had a much wider pool of sources.<sup>83</sup> *Roman d'Enéas* is clearly a source, as are other Arthurian legends, the works of Alain de Lille, and Chretien de Troyes. Thematically, Silence also bears resemblance to other medieval narratives. The literary trope of a disguised maiden in the service of a king emerges in several other medieval stories. Lucy Paton has identified seven narratives aside from Silence and Grisandole that include such storylines, like *Le Capitaine Lixur ou Le Satyr*, a Breton tale, and *Piera*, a Tuscan tale, many of whom also include elements such as the jealous and spurned queen, Merlin's laughter revealing hidden secrets, and the maiden marrying the king.<sup>84</sup>

Whilst many medieval tales feature characters acting beyond their gendered roles, clarification should be drawn on the medieval perception of gender as fixed binary. There is no evidence to suggest that medieval writers considered the concept of a gender spectrum, or that a gendered disguise might indicate a sexual preference. In the aristocratic society of romance

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<sup>79</sup> Busby, "Male Cross-Dressing." 45; Szkilnik, "The Grammar of the Sexes in Medieval French Romance," 62.

<sup>80</sup> Hotchkiss, "Introduction." 3.

<sup>81</sup> Busby, "Male Cross-Dressing." 57.

<sup>82</sup> Lucy Allen Paton, "The Story of Grisandole: A Study in the Legend of Merlin," *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 22, no. 2 (1907): 235. <https://doi.org/10.2307/456828>, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/article/viithe-story-of-grisandole-a-study-in-the-legend-of-merlin/F23887B83A2E795BE52DB458B8533BDF>.

<sup>83</sup> *Silence*, xii.

<sup>84</sup> Paton, "The Story of Grisandole," 239.

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legends, those who dress as men are perceived to be men, and those in women's dress are accepted as women.<sup>85</sup> Jane Burns also notes that most of medieval literature concerning women was written by men, and therefore may reflect more of men's attitudes towards women than of women themselves.<sup>86</sup>

Blake Gutt asserts that it is impossible to view these medieval narratives of cross-dressing and sex-change through the lens of modern gender and transgender theory.<sup>87</sup> However, whether or not Silence can be considered transgender is still open for interpretation. She does not physically transition to being a man, as Blachandine does, but having chosen to live her life as a man, it is certainly possible to consider Silence as transgender. It is difficult to assign a gender or sexuality on someone so historically distant, particularly when the person in question is fictional. Alex Meyer sees Silence as transgender, noting the gender dysphoria Silence experiences when faced with Nature and Nurture, whilst others refute this, believing Silence to be a woman playing a masculine role.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, as Blake Gutt points out, *what* one finds and reads within a text is reflective of *how* one sees.<sup>89</sup>

Whilst stories of woman dressing as, and behaving like, men may seem subversive, the cross-dressing hero is always integrated back into aristocratic society through marriage, either by returning to their birth sex or by physically transitioning sex. Nor is Silence the only character whose gender is 'miraculously' revealed by a wise man, thus enabling a proper marriage and resolution to the story. The device of the happy ending allows the author to explore possibly subversive themes and ideas without incurring wrath or censure, for order is restored to the world. That *Silence* bears resemblance to these traditional and contemporary stories and themes suggests that Heldris was fully aware of, and indeed inspired by, the dominant literary traditions in which he was writing.

By comparing these works, it is possible to examine how each author can rework the same themes and ideas to develop new meanings, whilst maintaining their symbolic effectiveness.<sup>90</sup> These similarities do not take away from each narrative, but rather enable a deeper understanding

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<sup>85</sup> Peggy McCracken, "'The Boy Who Was a Girl': Reading Gender in the 'Roman de Silence,'" *Romanic Review* 85, Iss. 4 (1994): 520.

<sup>86</sup> E. Jane Burns and Ruth Mazo Karras, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture : Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005): 5. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=3442390>.

<sup>87</sup> Blake Gutt, "Transgender Genealogy in *Tristan de Nanteuil*," *Exemplaria* 30, no. 2 (2018): 129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10412573.2018.1453652>.

<sup>88</sup> Alex Myers, *The Story of Silence* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2020). Introduction.

<sup>89</sup> Blake Gutt, "Medieval Trans Lives in Anamorphosis: Looking Back and Seeing Differently (Pregnant Men and Backward Birth)," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 55, No. 1 (2019): 177.

<sup>90</sup> Mary-Ann Constantine, "Neither Flesh nor Fowl: Merlin as Bird-Man in Breton Folk Tradition," in *Arthurian Literature* xxi, ed. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, Keith Busby, and Roger Dalrymple, Celtic Arthurian Material (Boydell & Brewer, 2004): 105.

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of contemporary themes and ideas. Nor is Heldris merely repeating and refashioning contemporary themes. Elements such as the ban on female inheritance, Silence's arming scene and success as a knight, and the personifications of Nature and Nurture appear unique to Heldris' narrative.<sup>91</sup>

The world of the Anglo-French sphere is impossible to condense down into a short summary. However, this chapter has explored some of the structures that governed the world Heldris likely inhabited, in order to give a greater understanding of his artistic choices in *Le Roman de Silence*. Religious and political structures cemented the idea of masculine superiority, which laws and literature helped to uphold. Law codes sought to enshrine the rights of primogeniture, favouring the male line of succession, whilst attempting to ensure some provisions for daughters and widows. Aside from laws, there were many written and unwritten societal codes through which gender norms were reinforced and upheld. These manuals were written by men, for men, and reflect characteristically masculine ideals and attributes such as strength and virtue.<sup>92</sup> Literature was also a place where society's values could be explored, challenged, or reinforced. An examination of chivalric and romance literature reveals that, whilst the literature was interwoven with gendered ideas and stereotypes that reflected many of the tenets of elite society, there was also space for tales of diverse gender experiences. Heldris borrows themes, motifs, and ideas from other works, such as the adulterous queen, the knight's redemption, Merlin, and cross-dressing heroines, but re-writes them in his own way. Whilst Nature features in other medieval works, Heldris' depiction of Nurture is possibly unique, as is their argument over Silence's upbringing.<sup>93</sup> Exploring both the historical and literary contexts helps to situate Heldris' literary reality, and facilitates a deeper reading of *Le Roman de Silence*. Viewed within its historic, cultural, and literary context, *Silence* is still an unusual story, but understanding its elements through the historic and literary lens can offer a clearer picture of its unusual characters and its unique depictions of gender and power.

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<sup>91</sup> Bloch, "Silence and Holes," 204.

<sup>92</sup> Amalie Föbel, "The Political Traditions of Female Rulership," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M. Bennet and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 70-71.

<sup>93</sup> Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," 205.

## Chapter Two – Heldris’ Literary Bedrooms

The second element of Boddice and Smith’s anthropological framework is designated as ‘brain’, which, based on an understanding of the ‘world’, seeks to comprehend how an individual may have perceived their situated context. Having explored the key structures that dominated Heldris’ world in the previous chapter, these next two chapters examine depictions of gender and power within Heldris’ literary imagination. Chapter 2 will focus on the arena of the bedroom, whilst Chapter 3 will address the arena of the battlefield.

In the opening and closing lines of the poem, the author identifies themselves as Heldris de Cornuâlle, an otherwise unknown poet. This anonymity poses both as a barrier and a benefit when placing the author and the text into their historical context. In the first instance precise dates and locations are impossible to establish and there are no other works from which to glean an insight into his literary imagination. Yet, as Heldris frequently interrupts the poem to offer his own thoughts or explanation on both characters and plot, it is possible to understand something of what the author may have thought, and how he may have perceived gender and power negotiations. He is both complimentary to and critical of women in power, praising Silence’s military endeavours whilst questioning her place in society.

Heldris presents his version of *Le Roman de Silence* as a translation from a Latin manuscript.<sup>1</sup> By doing so, he deliberately places a distance between himself and the text, allowing him to both deflect judgement from himself and self-consciously interject, criticising the narrative and his society. He refers to the manuscript on several occasions, usually when facing an awkward plot development, such as when trying to explain elements of Silence’s upbringing and at the outset, where he positions *Silence* as a literary tale with ‘a good deal of fiction mingled with truth’.<sup>2</sup> His deviations, however, are not truly separate from his narrative, for his musings and opinions often underscore major themes within the poem, such as the nature of women, the role of honour in contemporary society, and questions of truth.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Silence*, L1662.

<sup>2</sup> *Silence*, L1664.

<sup>3</sup> Burr, "Nurturing Debate in Le Roman De Silence," 43.

Although set in the pseudo-historical realm of King Arthur, *Le Roman de Silence* heavily reflects the tensions and concerns of his presumed context and, at times, the values and opinions of the author. Throughout the poem, Heldris establishes the gendered arenas of the bedroom and the battlefield as key arenas of action, where power and authority are established and challenged. Doreen Ransom has successfully demonstrated the need to see beyond Silence's gender-bending narrative and instead to interrogate power relations, and the action necessary to create and maintain power.<sup>4</sup> However, she applies this analysis only to King Ebain, and not to characters such as Eupheme, Euphemie or Silence, who are also seeking to exert and maintain power. As Roberta Krueger states, medieval vernacular narratives of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries can be read as a testing ground in which the gender roles of the aristocracy were articulated, examined, and critiqued.<sup>5</sup> Therefore examining Heldris' depictions of power and gender, and understanding the historical and literary context of the world in which it was written, enables a deeper understanding of how gender and power are perceived in *Silence* within the gendered spheres of the battlefield and bedroom.

Much of Heldris' poem focuses on the gendering and un-gendering of his characters, and the negotiations and transfer of power. Despite their near identical names, Heldris portrays Silence's mother Euphemie and Queen Eupheme in very different ways. Euphemie only features in the first third of the poem, but plays a pivotal role in healing Cador from the dragon's poisonous fumes, and then as Silence's mother. Heldris' depiction of Queen Eupheme acts as foil against Euphemie, the 'perfect' medieval woman. Her later actions are rather ironic, given that Eupheme married Ebain as part of a peace treaty. She attempts to seduce Silence three times and schemes to dishonour and kill her. She is eventually revealed to have been conducting an affair, with her lover disguised as a nun to remain secret within her household. Ebain is emasculated, is un-gendered, in both the bedroom and the battlefield, both through his own actions and through the actions of those around him. Twice, he fails on the battlefield - first when the dragon attacks, and secondly, when Silence rescues him from defeat during the rebellion. His wife's actions within the bedroom further undermine his authority and masculinity. All of Heldris' main characters act in unexpected ways and present a fascinating portrait of medieval aristocratic life, in contrast to the norms explored in the previous chapter, perhaps reflecting elements of Heldris' lived or imagined realities.

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<sup>4</sup> Ransom, "Negotiating Kingly Power," 2.

<sup>5</sup> Krueger, "Gender in Play," 79.

Three key scenes take place within the confines of the bedroom: Euphemie healing Cador and their declarations of love and plans for marriage; Cador and Euphemie's plans for their child during Euphemie's confinement, Silence's birth and the beginnings of their ruse; and Queen Euphemie's three attempts to seduce Silence, and her plans to punish Silence for refusing her. These three scenes portray power dynamics between men and women very differently, and offer varying expressions of gendered behaviours.

Historically, during the High Middle Ages, the bedroom, or the domestic sphere more broadly, was seen as a woman's domain. Guests were often received in the bedroom, and it was also where women could conduct personal correspondence or business. Women often had a central role in maintaining dynastic stability and upholding the status of the king through the court customs, gift giving, and counsel.<sup>6</sup> Recently, Kimberly Lo Prete has discussed the way that, whilst rooted in the domestic sphere, an aristocratic woman's power could reach far beyond her bedroom.<sup>7</sup> As Erin Sebo and Cassandra Schilling highlight, describing a woman's power as 'domestic' in no way diminishes the importance of that power.

In the poem Ebain, as king, has authority over his subjects, negotiates with foreign states, and can change and impose new laws on his subjects. Cador's authority as Count allows him to dictate the means of his daughter's upbringing. However, whilst King Ebain and Cador have power and wield it overtly, the actions of Silence, her mother Euphemie, and Queen Euphemie demonstrate that Heldris does not view power as merely a top-down, exclusively male domain. Heldris portrays a world in which power is exercised only through action and must be continually negotiated. Ebain's authority is frequently challenged, by rebellion, by his wife's adultery, and by Cador's attempt to circumvent his laws. Silence's upbringing affords some agency on the part of the hierarchically inferior count and countess, who successfully subvert the king's laws to enable a positive future for their child. That Silence continues their plan, pushing back against the king's authority, affords her a degree of freedom, power, and authority that would be otherwise impossible.

Euphemie exercises power within the limited domain of her bedchamber, using her beauty and position as queen to extend her influence. Euphemie's power, on the other hand, is more subtle. She is skilled at healing and Cador acknowledges her authority when discussing plans for

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<sup>6</sup> Erin Sebo and Cassandra Schilling, "Modthryth and the Problem of Peace-Weavers: Women and Political Power in Early Medieval England," *English studies* 102, no. 6 (2021): 639. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2021.1966966>.

<sup>7</sup> Lo Prete, "Lordly Women's Domestic Activities." Kimberly A. Lo Prete, "The Domain of Lordly Women in France, ca. 1050-1250," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 44, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.1707>.

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their unborn child. Whilst King Ebain and Cador's power appears as conventionally dominant, it must be exercised and negotiated, and is often tested by those around them.

Born a girl but raised as a boy, Silence is placed in a unique position. Whilst her way of life was originally a decision her parents made for her, Silence agrees to continue with it. At first, Heldris states that this is because it would shame her father if the truth were revealed, but later he shows that Silence comes to feel an affinity for masculine life. Although not situated within a bedroom, the conversation between Nature and Nurture offers a glimpse into the gendered expectations of medieval aristocracy, the life to which Silence was born, and the life she instead chooses to lead.

When Silence is around 12 years old, the personifications of Nature and Nurture appear to her and argue over the way she is being raised. Nature bemoans that her most beautiful creation is being ruined by wind and sun, 'You have no business going off into the forest/ jousting, hunting, shooting off arrows... Go to a chamber and learn to sew! That's what Nature's usage wants of you!'<sup>8</sup> Silence is surprised by Nature's arguments and begins to doubt her upbringing. Nurture then interrupts and insists that Silence continue life as a man, highlighting the achievements and adventures Silence could have, and what she stands to lose, 'You will never train for knighthood afterwards/ you will lose your horse and chariot...'<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Silence agrees with Nurture, preferring her life as a boy, and feeling ill-equipped to life as a girl, stating:

...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 young man, and not a girl at all.  
I don't want to lose my great honour,  
nor exchange it for a lesser one...<sup>10</sup>

Through Nature, Heldris clearly outlines the gendered expectations of a noble woman - that she sews in her chamber, away from the sun and harsh winds, and that in lovemaking she presents a soft, appealing body for male pleasure. Heldris' use of the word 'learn' is interesting, for it suggests that feminine skills such as sewing must be taught, just as Silence has learned masculine traits such as jousting. Nature suggests that these qualities are innate, but Silence feels her upbringing, her nurturing, has left her unfit to live the life of a noblewoman.

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<sup>8</sup> *Silence*, L2525-2529

<sup>9</sup> *Silence*, L2620-21

<sup>10</sup> *Silence*, L2646-2649

Through Silence's musings, Heldris explores the gendered norms of aristocratic medieval society. As a man, Silence has access to the types of power and authority that would be impossible as a woman. When considering listening to Nature and adopting feminine ways, Silence asks, '...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 / but I wouldn't be any longer...'<sup>11</sup> In this context, Heldris' comments about 'under' and 'on top' can be read as both figuratively and literally.<sup>12</sup> Silence's cross-dressing allows her to access masculine power and, as a knight and a man, she is 'on top' both socially and sexually.

Throughout the poem, Heldris generally depicts men and women within the normative structures of the medieval world. However, in each of the courtships and marriages, there are instances in which more fluid gender and power roles become clear.

### *Euphemie's Power*

Inspired by his secret love for Euphemie, and spurred on by Ebain's promised reward, Cador challenges the dragon and defeats it. However, Cador is injured fighting the dragon, poisoned by the 'venom and the fumes/ that the fierce beast had spewed on him', and collapses after the celebratory feast.<sup>13</sup> Ebain, unaware of Cador's feelings, sends for Euphemie 'the wisest doctor in the land,' promising her any husband she chooses as a reward.<sup>14</sup> Here, Heldris stokes the reader's excitement. As she heals him, Euphemie falls in love but, like Cador, she does not reveal her feelings for fear of being rejected. Both spend a week being tormented by their feelings before Euphemie comes to Cador's bedroom and confesses her love. Cador, too, expresses his love, and they pledge to marry, agreeing to ask the king to fulfil his promises to them. Heldris devotes a large section of the poem to Cador's recovery and Euphemie's care, signalling the importance of the relationship to the larger story.

Euphemie is established by Heldris as a highly skilled healer empowered by her learning. Although referred to as 'noble girl' or simply 'the girl', Heldris' lengthy descriptions of Euphemie's skills as a healer, and the way in which she treats her patients, places her amongst skilled empirics and healers of the High Middle Ages. Heldris details her treatment and care of Cador, stating that:

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<sup>11</sup> Water's translation, L2639-43.

<sup>12</sup> Waters, "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in "Le Roman de Silence,"" 44.

<sup>13</sup> *Silence*, L581-82.

<sup>14</sup> *Silence*, L594.

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The girl had a bed prepared  
In one of the very finest chambers.  
The pavement was made of beautiful marble.  
Next to the room was the garden,  
Where both physicians and clerics  
Had planted many precious herbs  
with many healing virtues  
The garden outside the room is beautiful.  
Through the window comes the scent of perfume,  
Cador will rest most pleasantly there!<sup>15</sup>

Euphemie is acknowledged not as the wisest woman, nor best female doctor, but simply as the ‘wisest doctor in all the land’.<sup>16</sup> Although falling into gendered stereotypes by praising Euphemie’s worthiness, lineage, and beauty, Heldris hints at how she has acquired her medical knowledge. He tells the reader that she is well versed in the seven arts, an intense liberal education based on the Classical Roman curriculum, comprising the subjects of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, dialectic, rhetoric, and grammar.<sup>17</sup> Heldris does not apologise nor make excuses for Euphemie’s education and skills, as he later will with Queen Eupheme.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Euphemie’s intelligence and learning are stated and accepted by those around her. Euphemie is given total authority over Cador’s care. Her first act is to check Cador’s pulse, which Nancy Siraisi states is one of ‘the main diagnostic tools of the medieval physician,’<sup>19</sup> before informing Ebain how long it will take her to cure Cador. Euphemie’s use of the pulse as a diagnostic indicator, and her checking Cador’s vital signs before determining a course of action places her solidly among empirical practitioners of her time.<sup>20</sup> In keeping with medieval healing practices, Euphemie then arranges a sick room for Cador, and is the only healer to attend him, caring for him day and night. Heldris’ mention of a medicinal herb garden is significant, as it further underlines Euphemie’s status and knowledge as a skilled empirical healer. Euphemie originally promised Ebain that Cador would be healed in a fortnight, but she ‘did her work so perfectly’ that Cador is cured within a week.<sup>21</sup> As a reward for healing Cador, Euphemie is offered her choice of husband, a remarkable opportunity for a medieval woman and an only child, whose father had undoubtedly been planning a match himself.

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<sup>15</sup> *Silence*, L612-622.

<sup>16</sup> *Silence*, L594.

<sup>17</sup> Linne R. Mooney, “A Middle English Text on the Seven Liberal Arts,” *Speculum* 68, no. 4 (1993): 1028. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2865495>: 1029. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2865495>.

<sup>18</sup> Laine E. Doggett, “Love and Medicine in the Roman de Silence,” in *Love Cures: Healing and Love Magic in Old French Romance* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2015): 185.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval & early Renaissance medicine an introduction to knowledge and practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 58.

<sup>20</sup> Doggett, “Love and Medicine,” 190.

<sup>21</sup> *Silence*, L626.

Euphemie fits into a *topos* of women empirics and healers within literature, such as Iseult's mother and Iseult herself, who both receive the title *mire*, healer, just as Euphemie does.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Heldris plays on homophones within this passage: *mecine*, which means 'remedy', 'healing power,' and sometimes even 'enchantment' and *medicine*, which means 'remedy'. Both are near homophones of *mecine* or *meschine*, meaning young woman, which is used to describe or denote Euphemie 11 times in 1000 lines.<sup>23</sup> The masculine equivalent, *mechin*, is not used to describe Cador. This play on words echoes the idea that, in addition to her skills, it is the presence of Euphemie herself that will cure Cador.

It has been noted that, following their marriage, Euphemie never heals again, which some have read as her loss of power and independence.<sup>24</sup> However, Doggett refutes this, pointing out the change in plot direction after their marriage with focus shifting instead to their child.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it is unlikely that the respect and recognition for Euphemie's skills instantly dissipated upon her marriage. Euphemie's skills no longer play a central role within the narrative because she herself no longer plays a central role. The same is true for Cador, who is not shown engaging in battle following his marriage, but is still regarded as a strong, capable knight. Therefore, it should not be assumed that Euphemie loses her skills and knowledge following their marriage.

Heldris further highlights Euphemie's power by the way in which she and Cador confess their love. Neither wishes to declare their love without first being assured that their love is reciprocated.<sup>26</sup> However, it is Euphemie who makes the first move, by entering Cador's bedroom and, through an amusing linguistic bumble, confesses her love. Here, Heldris is aware of societal expectations but grants Euphemie the power to subvert the norm. After their initial confession, Euphemie urges Cador to declare his intentions before she does, stating that 'You're the man, so you go first;/ you should choose before I do.' Heldris seems ultimately bound to reassert standard societal expectations.

That Heldris dedicates so much time and words to Euphemie's thoughts as well as to Cador's is interesting, and is indicative how he views their mutual passion. He makes great effort to place their marriage on a much more equal footing than that of Ebain and Eupheme. Just as Cador bemoans the way love has paralysed him, Euphemie laments,

Love has made me incapable of action.  
Neither my learning nor my native intelligence can help me.

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<sup>22</sup> Doggett, "Love and Medicine," 184.

<sup>23</sup> Doggett, "Love and Medicine," 194.

<sup>24</sup> Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire in the Old French "Roman de Silence,"" 50.

<sup>25</sup> Doggett, "Love and Medicine," 193.

<sup>26</sup> Kinoshita, "Heldris de Cornuâlle's Roman de Silence and the Feudal Politics of Lineage," 399.

I prescribe medicine to others  
but all my fancy accomplishments  
aren't helping me one bit.<sup>27</sup>

It is unusual for Heldris to praise a woman's intellect, for he spends much of the poem criticising Eupheme for plotting to seduce and then punish Silence, calling her 'cunning as a vixen/ by nature...' <sup>28</sup> But here, possibly because Euphemie uses her skills to help and not to hinder, her learning and natural intelligence are seen as positive. Whilst still viewing a woman's worth by the nature of her interactions with men, through Euphemie, Heldris nevertheless offers a more rounded and sympathetic woman, in contrast with his portrayal of Queen Eupheme.

As Cador heals, he laments that Euphemie is so close but yet unable to reciprocate his feelings, comparing his lovesick state to the dragon's poison, 'She has saved me from one malady but now, truly, a much worse one poisons me...' <sup>29</sup> Similarly, Euphemie believes Cador will never love her. Heldris indulges in this romcom-esque sequence, with some 200-odd lines of lovesick pining and heartache, as both Cador and Euphemie lament their unrequited love and torture themselves with the belief that the other will reject their advances, which is followed by 350 lines of confessions, kisses, promises, and the fear that Ebain will not uphold his word. In all, this scene stretches for some 570 lines. For Heldris, who dedicated a mere 15 or so lines to Cador's fight with the dragon, this is one of the longest, most drawn-out scenes of the entire poem. That he dedicates such a long section to their love story further underlines its critical importance within the poem.

Comparing Euphemie and Cador's interactions to the relationship of Tristan and Iseult in *Le Roman de Tristan*, Doggett draws parallels to the ways both couples behave when in love. Unlike Tristan and Iseult, there is no love potion to catalyse Euphemie and Cador's feelings, but Heldris' vocabulary when discussing their lovesick pining bears remarkable resemblance to that of the *Tristan* narrative.<sup>30</sup> Both men sweat and change colour, and their suffering is only alleviated by both the knowledge and the physical presence of their beloved.<sup>31</sup> She also suggests that it is not only the dragon's fumes that have made Cador ill, as his symptoms only become pronounced after seeing Euphemie at dinner and torturing himself with the idea that she could never love him.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Silence*, L787-91.

<sup>28</sup> *Silence*, L4274-4275.

<sup>29</sup> *Silence*, L659-660.

<sup>30</sup> Doggett, "Love and Medicine," 183.

<sup>31</sup> Doggett, "Love and Medicine," 206.

<sup>32</sup> Doggett, "Love and Medicine," 194.

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Long, passionate love scenes are a common feature in medieval literature, and links Heldris' characters to other famous lovers, like Tristan and Iseult, and Guinevere and Lancelot.<sup>33</sup>

Heldris shows Cador, the active and successful knight, to be at Euphemie's mercy, both physically and emotionally. He is both ill from the dragon's fumes, and lovesick that she will reject him. Indeed, his illness only manifests itself after the banquet, where, seated beside her, he cannot tell if she loves him, and begins to doubt if she ever could. This is an interesting reversal for Cador, usually so in control of himself and his circumstances, to be at the mercy of his emotions. He is ashamed to be so cowardly, bemoaning that, as a knight, he should have the courage to perform some 'mighty deed' for her, but that Love 'has made a mighty coward' of him instead.<sup>34</sup> Heldris attempts to rationalise Cador's feelings by imagining that Euphemie may already have a lover, and that he should keep silent for fear of embarrassing himself. Scared of rejection, Cador reflects that,

Yes, that's the way a woman is:  
she doesn't do the best she can...  
she seeks occasion to dishonour herself  
her will works contrary to nature,  
contrary to reason and convention.  
She doesn't care where she deploys her love,  
and can easily stray out of bounds  
if allowed to marry where she pleases.  
But it is better to be silent  
Love has caused me great distress;  
I have no hope of being cured.<sup>35</sup>

This passage bears similarities to Heldris' gendered comments following Euphemie's accusations of rape, where Ebain reflects that 'a woman, when she is out to avenge herself / has a very sharp tongue, / and will never stop arguing. When she is told to be quiet, / she tries all the harder to make noise.'<sup>36</sup> Where Ebain's passage is in the context of Euphemie accusing Silence of rape, and perhaps reflects Ebain's previous dealings with his queen, Cador's passage has the air of trying to talk himself out of something, an excuse to justify his inaction. However, almost immediately after this passage, Euphemie comes to Cador and confesses her love for him. Upon hearing this, Cador forgets his earlier pronouncements on false and fickle women, and pledges to love Euphemie. Within this passage, Heldris frequently upends traditional assumptions of gender and emotion, showing Cador as weak, inactive, and indecisive, traits generally associated with

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<sup>33</sup> Boquet and Nagy, "Ethics and Aesthetics of Aristocratic Emotions," 109.

<sup>34</sup> *Silence*, L649.

<sup>35</sup> *Silence*, L667-678.

<sup>36</sup> *Silence*, L4265-4270.

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femininity, whilst Euphemie is wise, and active and brave in making the first move, generally masculine traits.

Although the conversation between Cador and Euphemie regarding their unborn child is short, their mutual involvement in the continuance of their family dynasty continuity plays a large role within the narrative. Indeed, it is the very reason for Silence's unusual upbringing, for if Cador and Euphemie had failed to produce a son, then the lands and title of Cornwall would be forfeited to the crown. During the High Middle Ages, the purpose of any marriage, particularly those of noble or royal lineage, was to produce children; a boy to inherit property and titles, or a girl to create alliances through marriage.<sup>37</sup> Legitimate offspring secured the dynastic rights of monarchies, the ownership of land and helped to establish familial authority. As Peter Jones puts it, along with death, childbirth was ever-present in medieval life and thought.<sup>38</sup> Criticism and blame for failing to produce an heir often fell on the woman, and a couple's infertility often read as the manifestation of a deeper issue – an indication of adultery or sin.

Euphemie becomes pregnant within a year of their marriage, in contrast to Ebain and Queen Eupheme, who fail to produce a child in over 18 years of marriage. Heldris details the way in which Euphemie's pregnancy develops and the pain of her labour, 'The countess was in agony./ The spasms coursed through her heart/ and bones and nerves and veins./ Her contractions were prolonged and very painful.'<sup>39</sup> Whilst a detailed childbirth scene may seem unusual from a male author, Emma Bérat has observed how medieval authors and chroniclers use vivid description of childbirth as a means to assert rights to land and lineage.<sup>40</sup> In both historical and narrative writings, many authors frame the act of childbirth as a nexus of genealogy, geography, and political authority. In relation to Heldris' detailed description of Euphemie's labour and birth, and the threat of Ebain's new law, Silence's birth can be read as the continuation of the ancestral rights of the Earl of Cornwall. Cador's claim to Cornwall is through his wife, and so Euphemie's act of childbirth is crucial to establishing and reinforcing both her husband's land rights and the relationship between the child and its ancestral lands.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Heldris portrays Silence's birth as both the romantic and political culmination of Cador and Euphemie's union.

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Murray Jones, "Performative Rituals for Conception and Childbirth in England, 900–1500," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89, no. 3 (2015): 406. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2015.0076>.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, "Conception and Childbirth," 407.

<sup>39</sup> *Silence*, L1785-1789.

<sup>40</sup> Emma O. Bérat, "Women's Acts of Childbirth and Conquest in English Historical Writing," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 57, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.32773/AZFT2110>, 146.

<sup>41</sup> Bérat, "Women's Acts of Childbirth and Conquest in English Historical Writing," 167.

The birthing chamber is clearly Euphemie's domain of power, one in which Cador is not allowed to enter whilst she is in labour. For the ruse to succeed, Euphemie is only able to have one attendant, a cousin of Cador's who will care for the child once it is born. Following Silence's birth, however, Heldris has the male protagonist intrude into the female sphere. Cador rushes into the birthing chamber sooner than might be expected of a medieval lord, for 'his desire to know the truth/ took away any feeling of shame/ which would have kept him from approaching a woman in childbed.'<sup>42</sup> This infringement of propriety would be shocking to a contemporary reader. The birth scenes also further demonstrate how Heldris views Cador and Euphemie as equals within their marriage, both equally responsible for – or indeed equally blameless – for the sex of their unborn baby. When Cador begins to speculate on the possibility of it being a girl, Euphemie states that 'I am not to blame ... whether the child is male or female',<sup>43</sup> a sentiment echoed by Cador. In not assigning blame to either party, Heldris is running against the grain of medieval cultural and medical thinking which held that strong male sperm resulted in a healthy boy.<sup>44</sup> Heldris does not depict Cador as disappointed that the baby is a girl, rather he is delighted and 'swore up and down' that he would not 'exchange his girl for a boy'.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, through the frequent use of 'we' and 'they' when discussing the couple, Heldris reinforces the strength of their relationship and the equality at the heart of it.<sup>46</sup>

Although initially Cador's idea, the plan to raise Silence as a boy cannot succeed without the agreement and cooperation of Euphemie. The plan is also Cador's way of regaining control from King Ebain, whose banning of female inheritance robbed Cador's right to decide the inheritance of his land and titles. Cador and Euphemie's decision proves that Heldris does not see Ebain's kingly power as absolute, if the king's own nephew is able to undermine his authority in such a spectacular manner.

From her introduction, Euphemie is presented as the perfect match for Cador, both in terms of their lineage and their respective skills. Just as Cador demonstrates his worth as a young, eligible knight when he rescues his king from the dragon's threat, Euphemie proves hers in healing Cador and the birth of their child. Heldris devotes equal praise to their skills, and equal time to explore their feelings, demonstrating the possibility of equality within their marriage. Through Cador and Euphemie, Heldris portrays fascinating power reversals – in both male and female

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<sup>42</sup> *Silence*, L2000-2005.

<sup>43</sup> *Silence*, L1696-97.

<sup>44</sup> Bullough, "On Being a Man in the Middle Ages," 31.

<sup>45</sup> *Silence*, L2028-2030.

<sup>46</sup> Burr, "Nurturing Debate in Le Roman De Silence," 36.

characters. These fluctuating expressions of strength and weakness may provide a more realistic reflection of contemporary human sentiments and emotions.

## *Eupheme's Power*

I'll give you two kisses for one.  
Don't you think that's an amazing rate of exchange?<sup>47</sup>  
'Yes,' said the youth who was a girl.  
'So kiss me!' said the queen...  
Silence gave her one chaste kiss -  
for you can believe he had no intention  
of kissing her the way she wanted. <sup>47</sup>

In contrast to Euphemie, who is given the opportunity to find love, Queen Eupheme is engaged to Ebain as part of a peace treaty between Ebain and her father, King Begon of Norway. Eupheme is first mentioned as part of the loot Ebain receives from Begon, 'They took the Norwegian king's daughter / and many black horses as well, and bears and fowlers and lions, too.'<sup>48</sup> As Brahney notes, Heldris depicts these two marriages as continuing in the patterns established in their courtships: Cador and Euphemie are equally skilled in their fields and equally respected. They share a mutual passion, and their marriage is presented as one of equals; Eupheme, on the other hand, is married to Ebain as part of a peace treaty, figuring as one of several items contracted in the agreement. She is given no role at his court, does not seem to win any great respect from her husband, and therefore their marriage remains fundamentally unequal.<sup>49</sup>

Eupheme does not have Euphemie's leaning, nor her positive reputation. Potentially much younger than Ebain, she has been used as a diplomatic pawn all her life, and fits into a pattern of medieval women marrying, usually older men, as part of a peace treaty.<sup>50</sup> Medieval marriage was a way of cementing an alliance, acquiring more land, and furthering dynastic ambitions. Dudo of Saint-Quentin records how Rollo the Viking invaded France and was pacified through a gift of the duchy of Normandy and the hand of King Charles III's daughter Griselda.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Sebo

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<sup>47</sup> *Silence*, L3760-3769.

<sup>48</sup> *Silence*, L230-233.

<sup>49</sup> Brahney, "When Silence was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*," 55.

<sup>50</sup> Burr, "Nurturing Debate in Le Roman De Silence," 36-37.

<sup>51</sup> John Watkins, "From Chronicle to Romance: Interdynastic Marriage in the High Middle Ages" in *After Lavinia: A Literary History of Premodern Marriage Diplomacy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017): 71.

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and Schilling note the role of the peace-weaver as either a diplomatically active or passive role for a foreign queen.<sup>52</sup> The marriage is emblematic of the desire for peace, but a queen may also undertake an active fostering of peace through further diplomatic endeavours. Heldris depicts Eupheme in the passive role: once in England, Eupheme makes no reference to her homeland, nor are the Norwegians or the peace treaty ever mentioned again.

Heldris portrays Eupheme as grasping, manipulative, and secretive, a woman who only acts out of self-interest, in stark contrast to his portrayal of Euphemie. Three times Eupheme attempts to seduce Silence, three attempts which all begin differently but all end in rejection, and with Eupheme plotting Silence's downfall. Each time, Silence is lured into the queen's bedchamber, her domain of power, and is almost powerless to stop the queen's advances.

Eupheme is 'consumed with lust' from the moment she sees Silence,<sup>53</sup> and orders Silence into her 'carved and gilded chamber' on the pretext of playing her harp for the queen. Once she has Silence trapped, she gives her 'five long kisses,/ exceedingly passionate and very skilful.'<sup>54</sup> Startled, Silence tries to escape, but Eupheme pulls off her dress and orders Silence to 'be a man' and make love to her.<sup>55</sup> When Silence refuses, Eupheme accuses her of being a monk or hermit, or else homosexual, for refusing her advances. Silence manages to escape and Eupheme begins to plot her revenge.

Silence does her best to avoid Eupheme for several weeks, a tactic which serves only to increase the Queen's lust. She tries to win Silence back by pretending she was merely testing Silence's loyalty to King Ebain. Silence accepts this explanation and, although she resumes playing the harp for the Queen, she remains suspicious. Whilst the king is out hunting, Eupheme again invites Silence into her chamber. Again, she offers herself to Silence, and again Silence turns her down. This time, furious that Silence has refused her again, Eupheme attempts a new power tactic: she tears at her hair and bloodies her own nose. She tramples her wimple and moans and weeps, all whilst keeping a firm grip on Silence's arm. Heldris offers that she was prompted to do this by the devil.<sup>56</sup> Ebain returns from his hunt to find Eupheme bloody and dishevelled, and Eupheme begs him to execute Silence. However, Ebain does not wish to bring dishonour upon Silence or himself, so he convinces Eupheme that exile to France will be a fitting punishment. Secretly, Eupheme forges a letter instructing the King of France to execute Silence. Following

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<sup>52</sup> Sebo and Schilling, "Problem of Peace-Weavers," 638.

<sup>53</sup> *Silence*, L3716.

<sup>54</sup> *Silence*, L3771-3772.

<sup>55</sup> *Silence*, L3819.

<sup>56</sup> *Silence*, L4075-4100.

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Silence's return from exile and the successful defeat of the Count of Chester's rebellion, Silence returns to court as a hero, Eupheme once more propositions her. Ebain cannot ignore the accusations and, prompted by Eupheme, exiles Silence until such time as she is able to capture the wizard Merlin. Eupheme believes this to be the perfect punishment, for legend states that Merlin can only be captured by a 'woman's trick.' Thus, as she believes Silence to be a man, she believes Silence will fail in the quest and be humiliated.

Overconfident in her own allure, Eupheme is confused and frustrated when Silence repeatedly refuses a physical relationship. By Eupheme's reasoning, she herself is beautiful and desirable, therefore Silence must be homosexual for refusing her. Trying to escape Eupheme's advances, Silence complains that Eupheme is making fun of her, to which Eupheme exasperatedly respond 'Non ai, se vos este estables.'<sup>57</sup> Psaki translates this line to 'Not at all, if you are firm',<sup>58</sup> whilst Roche-Mahdi renders it 'Not at all, if you are normal'. Both translations hint towards sexual uncertainty, and even sexual impotence. Elizabeth Waters highlights the homosexual undertones present within the seduction scenes, noting the way Eupheme frequently makes reference to Silence's refusal to be an indication of homosexuality,

Truly, I think he must be homosexual,  
since he takes no joy in women.[...]  
He is very pleasant indeed to boys,  
and enjoys their company.  
He is a homosexual, I know it for certain,  
and I withdraw my love from him.  
I will devote myself to shaming him.<sup>59</sup>

As Boquet and Nagy note, any suggestion of homosexuality was seen as the vicious and vulgar opposite of noble, manly, and spiritual love.<sup>60</sup> Ironically, within a strictly binary gender discourse, an accusation of homosexuality utilises feminine characteristics as a means of discrediting a man, whereas this accusation from Eupheme has the paradoxical function of actually reinforcing Silence's own masculinity.<sup>61</sup>

Enforcing the idea of a bad queen, and in direct contrast to Euphemie's purity and nobility, Heldris states several of Eupheme's unscrupulous skills. She is an 'expert locksmith',<sup>62</sup> highly skilled at pretending to be sick, and can forge the King's handwriting and manner to such a degree as to fool both his trusted Chancellor and the king of France. He also specifies that the kisses she

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<sup>57</sup> *Silence*, L3817.

<sup>58</sup> As quoted, Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable,'" 8.

<sup>59</sup> Water's translation, L3932-33; 3935-36.

<sup>60</sup> Boquet and Nagy, "Ethics and Aesthetics of Aristocratic Emotions," 106-107.

<sup>61</sup> Waters, "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in "Le Roman de Silence,'" 42.

<sup>62</sup> *Silence*, L4113.

gives Silence are ‘exceedingly passionate and very skilful,’<sup>63</sup> suggesting that the queen is experienced in the art of seduction. In these encounters, which all take place within the Eupheme’s bedchamber, the queen is the one in charge. Luring Silence into her chamber, insisting on being kissed, undressing herself, these are all clear acts of power. She is the active participant, orchestrating their encounters and even instructing Silence to make love. Once snubbed, she beats and dishevels herself to implore the king’s justice; again, she knows how to work the system to her benefit. Later, Eupheme forges a letter, ‘in the privacy of her bedchamber / the queen had written the kind of letter / that would do Silence a lot of harm...’<sup>64</sup> By instructing the king of France to execute Silence, Eupheme demonstrates that her power, whilst situated within her bedchamber, has far-reaching impacts. Here, Heldris presents the queen as acting in her own interests and deliberately undermining the authority of the king. By repeatedly demonstrating Eupheme’s skill in these underhand tactics, Heldris is reinforcing the picture of the spiteful queen seeking her own gains. However, her behaviours may also reflect something of her treatment by King Ebain, that she has needed to develop such skills to survive at his court.

Heldris hints at Eupheme’s youth whilst she is attempting to seduce Silence, ‘Her skin was as white as fresh-fallen snow / she had no problem with wrinkles; she was not old enough yet / to have to worry about creases, / not at all; she was round and smooth and soft.’<sup>65</sup> This statement comes after they have been married for some sixteen years, suggesting a significant age difference between Ebain and his queen. By taking a lover, and by attempting to seduce Silence, Heldris gives Eupheme the power to gain some control over her own life.

Whilst Eupheme’s introduction is generally positive, Heldris’ language towards her grows steadily more negative as the poem progresses. She is introduced as the world’s most ‘beautiful gem’,<sup>66</sup> symbolic of the historic peace between England and Norway. When Silence first comes to court, Heldris presents Eupheme as being ‘so sadly misled by external appearances’ that she falls in love with Silence.<sup>67</sup> It is at this point that Heldris begins to hint at another side to the queen, saying that ‘her love is not steadfast / it is irrational and unstable... As soon as she has a grudge against a man / she doesn’t give up hating easily.’<sup>68</sup> The more Silence refuses, the more desperate Eupheme gets, and the more hostile Heldris’ commentary becomes. After their first encounter, Eupheme is desperate to prevent word of what happened from reaching the king, she decides to

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<sup>63</sup> *Silence*, L3772.

<sup>64</sup> *Silence*, L4315-4317.

<sup>65</sup> *Silence*, L3793-97.

<sup>66</sup> *Silence*, L166.

<sup>67</sup> *Silence*, L3721.

<sup>68</sup> *Silence*, L3919-10; 3923-24.

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‘...turn the situation to her own evil advantage. Prompted by the Devil...’<sup>69</sup> Here, Heldris transitions his descriptions of her emotions from hate to ‘dreadful rage’ to wanting Silence dead. Later, upon hearing of Silence’s success in France and Ebain’s wish for Silence to return home, Eupheme’s hatred and love are simultaneously rekindled. Now, this ‘...treacherous whore of a woman’ is determined to humiliate and bring about Silence’s downfall.<sup>70</sup>

By the time of the third seduction, Eupheme is determined to either have Silence or to have her killed. Like the medieval trope of the beautiful woman who is revealed to be scheming and deceitful, Eupheme’s outward demeanour has cracked, and Heldris delights in showing the truth behind her façade. She is now ‘this whorish lady/ ... the wicked slut/ aroused, inflamed with lust’ as she begs Ebain to punish Silence. Heldris’ last words on the queen’s behaviour demonstrate his opinion on her actions,

the lady’s wickedness knew no bounds;  
she was malicious,  
arrogant and perfidious.  
She had always been cruel  
and dishonest.  
She had promised little and given less;  
she was vile and depraved.<sup>71</sup>

Eupheme is the archetypal bad queen, the example of what happens when women try to exercise individual power. In the vein of Modthryth, the queen from the Old English epic *Beowulf*, Eupheme is initially portrayed as a ‘peace-weaver’, emblematic of the peace between England and Norway, but this positive image begins to unravel almost as soon as she married Ebain, and Heldris appears to revel in her downfall. Heldris punctuates his tirade against Eupheme with steadily more misogynistic comments. In discussing Eupheme, he moves to criticising women in general,

And the queen was kneeling  
at the king’s feet and weeping and crying  
because he was delaying her vengeance  
She wanted to trick him with her tears  
into thinking she was innocent,  
for a woman always cries as a strategy  
when she wants to accomplish something deceitful.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Silence*, L4075.

<sup>70</sup> *Silence*, L5233.

<sup>71</sup> *Silence*, L6560-66.

<sup>72</sup> *Silence*, L4152-5158.

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By generalising Eupheme's actions to stand for the actions of all women, Heldris reveals a misogynistic reflex.<sup>73</sup>

Although not explicitly stated, Eupheme's actions also reflect badly on King Ebain, serving to undermine his power. Whilst medieval kings were able to take a mistress, often more than one, medieval queens were not afforded the same freedoms. A king's ability to maintain his dominance over his wife was often seen as indicative of his ability to rule his kingdom, and thus a wife's infidelity was often read as proof of the king could not control the kingdom.

Because of her bruised and bloodied face, Ebain believes Eupheme's story. Despite this, he hesitates in deciding Silence's fate, ultimately choosing to exile Silence and to keep the scandal private, rather than to publicly shame Silence and, by extension, himself.<sup>74</sup> Whilst acknowledging Eupheme's distress, Ebain believes the slight to his own honour to be greater, 'You have received and injury, and I an even greater one.'<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, his decision to exile Silence instead of exposing the allegations against her demonstrates his weakness and the instability of his position. Heldris sums up Ebain's character, and offers an explanation for his decision:

The king was neither a fool nor a madman.  
He did not wish to take any action  
that could possibly be used against him.<sup>76</sup>

In this way, Heldris shows Ebain to be working in the same way many medieval kings did: weighing up the pros and cons of a situation before taking any action, and ultimately taking what he believes to be the best course of action. However, some have also criticised Ebain's lack of decisive action as evidence of his lack of power.<sup>77</sup> Frequently, Heldris juxtaposes a statement about Ebain's good rulership with a scene demonstrating the exact opposite. He is said to mete out justice to all those accused of a crime, whether guilty or not. He is also stated to have started the war with Norway over something trivial, an unspecified 'petite oquoision'.<sup>78</sup> If maintaining peace and political stability is a measure of Ebain's masculine power, Heldris provides ample textual evidence to demonstrate Ebain's failings: his instigation of a trivial war with Norway; his rash ban on female inheritance; his lack of an heir; and his near-catastrophic defeat, from which he must be rescued by Silence, who is arguably the more successful knight.<sup>79</sup> Ebain's failures

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<sup>73</sup> Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," 210.

<sup>74</sup> Burr, "A Question of Honor: Eufeme's Transgressions in *Le Roman De Silence*," 30.

<sup>75</sup> *Silence*, L4251.

<sup>76</sup> *Silence*, L5086-88.

<sup>77</sup> Ransom, 76-77.

<sup>78</sup> *Silence*, L149.

<sup>79</sup> Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable,'" 12.

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within the domestic sphere manifest through his wife's repeated affairs and attempts to undermine his authority, highlighting the extent of his failures within the bedroom.

Within Heldris' literary imagination, women are able to exert power in many different ways. In setting these three key scenes within the realm of the bedroom, Heldris shows the importance of the domestic sphere for medieval women. Within this sphere, decisions are made and power is contested and negotiated by both men and women. He depicts Euphemie and Queen Eupheme in very different ways, suggesting that his views of women are not entirely negative. Euphemie is honoured and valued for her medical talents and knowledge, and Cador includes her in discussions about the Earldom of Cornwall and in deciding their daughter's fate. Euphemie is given full authority to care for Cador, and even the king bows to her medical knowledge. She is even allowed to choose her own husband, an unusual privilege for a medieval woman. Heldris' view on the Queen, however, begin with a suspicion that grows into open hostility by the end of the poem. She is characterised as a 'wicked slut' and 'treacherous whore' who is only out for her own gains. Even though set within the female domain, she seems to overstep the bounds of female propriety by acting out her power in manly ways. This seems to be the transgression for which Heldris criticises her; a criticism fully entrenched in the gender politics of his time. In conducting these affairs, Heldris views Eupheme as having undermined both her husband's authority and the security of his kingdom.

Whilst Silence's marriage to Ebain at the end of the poem does uphold the gender and power norms of the High Middle Ages, Heldris' inclusion of scenes like Euphemie's healing of Cador, the conversation between Nature and Nurture, and Silence's success as a knight and her fear of failing as a woman opens the possibility to a wider understanding of gender binaries within his literary imagination. Although Nature ultimately wins, and reclaims her most beautiful child, Nurture also enjoys a victory of sorts. Silence makes a remarkably successful man, and her secret is not revealed by any action of her own, but rather by the *deus ex machina* appearance of Merlin.

Heldris portrays his three women differently: Euphemie has the lineage and the learning to become the perfect medieval woman; Silence has been 'mis-raised', allowing her Nurture to override the Nature of her birth; Eupheme has the lineage, the Nature to be noble, but has not received the learning, the Nurturing, to be so. Euphemie succeeds where Eupheme fails. Euphemie produces a child, secures her husband's lands, and shares in the decision-making regarding their lands and child. The Queen is never seen as more than a token, and never afforded the same authority and autonomy as Euphemie. Although never entirely positive in his language about Eupheme, Heldris allows her to develop, for his audience to see the actions behind the beautiful façade. The other two women within the poem, Silence and her mother Euphemie, are spoken of

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in positive terms due to their noble lineage, their inherent qualities, and their positive actions. As the daughter of the King of Norway, Eupheme's actions should also be a reflection of her lineage. Rather, Heldris condemns her actions, which he views as a reflection of her character, a product of both her nature and her nurture. These three bedroom scenes clearly illustrate that, despite his sometimes bluntly sexist and misogynistic comments, Heldris is capable of viewing women as powerful and influential in their own right, as able to exert power in different circumstances.

## Chapter Three – Heldris’ Literary Battlefields

As explored at the beginning of Chapter 2, Heldris’ literary imagination is populated with characters who challenge traditional understanding of gender and power. In addition to the scenes within the domestic sphere of the bedroom, Heldris dedicates large sections of his poems to scenes which take place in the public sphere of the battlefield. The ways in which Heldris constructs, affirms, or destabilises the masculinity of his characters is suggestive of the fact that he perceives multiple masculinities at play within the world of his poem, and is indicative of his views on the subject in the real world. Examining Heldris’ depictions of gender and power will aid in uncovering his perceptions in a different context – the typically male domain of the battlefield.

War and conflict form the backdrop to *Le Roman de Silence*. The poem opens with a war between England and Norway, a long war that King Ebain is said to have instigated over ‘something trivial.’<sup>1</sup> Aside from Silence participating in tournaments, there are two major battle scenes within the poem: Cador’s defeat of the dragon near the beginning of the poem, that establishes Cador as a successful knight, and which paves the way for his marriage to Euphemie and Silence’s birth; and Chester’s rebellion near the end, that threatens Ebain’s authority and throne, and which allows Silence to demonstrate her military skills. Both scenes offer differing pictures of chivalry, knightly virtues, and masculine ideals. Additionally, Silence’s exploits at jousting tournaments demonstrate her military skills but also highlight Heldris’ views on women participating in armed combat.

Gender and gender roles permeate medieval secular and narrative writings. Even if not explicitly mentioned, specific constructions of gender were one of the primary ideas around which medieval society, and therefore thinking, revolved. As Betty Bandel notes, those writing about historical or fictional events use contemporary views to reinforce or destabilise the gender of their subject, whether by comparing a character to a historical figure or by describing actions as ‘manly’

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<sup>1</sup> *Silence*, L149.

or ‘womanly’.<sup>2</sup> To imply a man was ‘womanly’ was to undermine his masculinity, whilst describing a woman’s actions as ‘manly’ implied she was overstepping her role within society.

Medieval chivalric and romance literature often reflected or described idealised behaviours that its audience should aspire to emulate. Medieval romances often featured scenes in which the skills, courage, and masculine *virtus* of the hero is tested and proved, involving rescuing vulnerable or innocent people, often women, from a dragon or monster.<sup>3</sup> However, in *Le Roman de Silence*, it is not a damsels in need of rescuing, but a king. King Ebain twice needs rescuing, first from a marauding dragon, and then from a rebellion that threatens his throne. Through the characters of Cador, Ebain, and Silence, Heldris offers complex views on medieval masculinity.

Within Heldris’ literary imagination, gender and power seem more fluid than within the structures prescribed by medieval society. As established within the previous section on bedrooms, Cador may be a successful and heroic knight capable of defeating dragons, but he is at a loss when it comes to matters of the heart, unable to summon the courage to tell Euphemie of his feelings. When first introducing Ebain to the audience, Heldris juxtaposes grand statements about ideal kingly behaviour with examples of Ebain’s own behaviour, creating a curiously contradictory portrait of Ebain. For example, before extolling Ebain’s generosity, Heldris states that he metes out life imprisonment to all lawbreakers, regardless of their guilt.<sup>4</sup> He is said to be a wise ruler, but instigates a long and costly war with Norway over something trivial.<sup>5</sup> In anger, he bans all female inheritance, yet later rescinds this law. Through the character of Ebain, Heldris seems to be painting a portrait of conflicting masculinities and inconsistent kingship, highlighting the importance of upholding one’s reputation with both deed and word.

Within Heldris’ poem, Silence’s birth sex does not inhibit her participation in military affairs, just as Ebain’s masculinity is not assumed merely because he is king. Ebain’s frequent need for rescuing presents a different perception of kingship, one that is not stable, but needs bolstering and reinforcing. In Stock’s words, Heldris constantly destabilises the social and gender ideals his audience would be familiar with.<sup>6</sup> Ebain’s masculinity is questioned and undermined by all those around him, and by his own actions on the battlefield. Heldris creates characters and scenarios around Ebain which serve to heighten the contrast of his own actions and behaviours. If

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<sup>2</sup> Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women," 113.

<sup>3</sup> Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable'," 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Silence*, L115– 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Silence*, L149.

<sup>6</sup> Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable'," 8.

maintaining political and regal stability is any measure of Ebain's masculine power, Heldris provides many scenes to suggest its destabilisation.<sup>7</sup> Through victories, heroic epithets, and sartorial markers of masculinity, Ebain's masculinity is juxtaposed against that of Cador and then Silence. Most frequently, this juxtaposition and gender inversion takes place on the battlefield, a traditionally male-dominated sphere of medieval life and literature. Through Silence's successful performance of masculinity and actions on the battlefield, Heldris seems to question medieval assumptions of female weakness and male power.

### *Arming scenes*

In literature, honour was often given to knights through the arming scene, where the knight ceremonially dons armour before a battle or is assisted in doing so by squires and attendants.<sup>8</sup> As armour was a distinguishing mark of a knight, arming scenes were an important part of chivalric and romance literature.<sup>9</sup> Dereck Brewer's seminal work on the presence of the arming scene identified it as a legitimate literary *topos*. However, it does have its limitations, not least in that Brewer focuses solely on the arming of men and limits his definition to scenes in which armour is donned piece by piece, thus excluding passages where armour is described. Arming typically began with the legs and feet, followed by a padded gambeson tunic, protection for shins, forearms, and shoulders. Last is the helmet and sword, after which the knight's horse is brought and they charge into battle. As Laura Hodges remarks, arming scenes undoubtedly carried more meaning for contemporary audiences who would have understood the symbolism and meaning encoded within the text.<sup>10</sup> Meaning can be found in the ritualisation of the arming, in the order in which armour was put on or taken off, pieces included or forgotten, the decorative and protective symbols painted on shields, or the importance placed upon certain protective gemstones. For example, Chrétien de Troyes makes striking use of the arming scene in *Erec et Enide*, one of his Arthurian *chansons de geste*. Enide assists the hero Eric to arm, lacing up his greaves, fastening his sword, and bringing his horse.<sup>11</sup> Here, Chrétien follows the traditional order of greaves, corslet, helmet, sword, and horse. That it is Erec's beloved who helps him arm, rather than a squire, adds

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<sup>7</sup> Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable,'" 12.

<sup>8</sup> Brewer, "The Arming of the Warrior," 222.

<sup>9</sup> Helmut Nickel, "Arthurian Armings For War And For Love," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 4 (1995): 3. <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/27869144>.

<sup>10</sup> Laura F. Hodges, "Remarks on Arthurian Arms And Arming Scenes," *Arthuriana (Dallas, Tex.)* 5, no. 4 (1995): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1353/art.1995.0019>.

<sup>11</sup> Brewer, "The Arming of the Warrior," 229.

an emotional element to the scene and stresses the importance of Eric's success. Chrétien makes strong use of the *topos* whilst fitting it to serve his purpose, as many medieval authors did for their male heroes.

Brewer notes that, whilst some narratives have several arming scenes, it is usual to have one extended scene; and that this arming scene marks out both the hero and the combat to be of particular importance to the narrative.<sup>12</sup> Brewer focuses on Sir Gawain and Sir Thopas, amongst a few dozen others, and examines how a formal arming scene is used to construct and reinforce a knight's masculinity and military prowess. He notes that, from the *Iliad*, through to the *Aeneid*, the Bible, and European folk tales to Chaucer, the arming scene is a regular feature before major battles. However, few women have been the object of arming scenes in medieval literature. Of the female knights of medieval romance who fight in battles, such as Blanchandine, Nicolette, and Camille, Silence is unique among them by having such an arming scene.<sup>13</sup> Building on the work of Brewer, whose work focused on the *topos* of men in battle, it is interesting to examine the arming scenes present in *Le Roman de Silence*. Heldris makes striking use of the *topos* to further enhance the power and authority of his warriors. Silence receives an extensive arming scene before the battle against the rebellious Chester, and her father Cador receives one before his fight with the dragon, but King Ebain receives only a cursory sentence.

Silence's arming scene is the longest and most detailed within the narrative, and bears many similarities to arming scenes of other medieval heroes. Assisted by two squires, Silence's arming scene lasts a full 37 lines, with detailed descriptions of her armour, and the process of arming a warrior. Silence's armour is a padded silken gambeson; a fine mesh hauberk; greaves, and hood; gold spurs and good sword; a helm adorned with precious stones and a gold circlet, a gift 'worth a fortune' from the King of France; then her war-horse is brought, and Silence delivers a rousing speech to her troops, speaking as 'an experienced leader',<sup>14</sup> before leading her men into battle.

Over a padded silken tunic,  
Silence put on the finely-meshed hauberk  
which the king of France had valued  
so highly that he wouldn't have exchanged it  
for anything anyone could have offered him.  
It was light and flawless...  
His spurs were very valuable,  
They were of fine gold and very beautiful;...

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<sup>12</sup> Brewer, "The Arming of the Warrior," 71.

<sup>13</sup> Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man in Medieval Romance," 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Silence*, L5336-5371.

Then he girt on his good sword,  
which one of the youths handed to him...  
and quickly laced his helmet upon him.  
There wasn't another like it anywhere.  
It was covered with precious stones and a golden circlet  
that were worth a fortune  
It was a gift from the king of France.<sup>15</sup>

Silence's armour is both functional and of exceptional quality. Matthew Bennet has analysed how armour was seen as an indication of military prowess, as both a marker of masculinity and of high status. He notes that heroes often receive costly and ornate suits of armour which added to the individual's physical and sartorial attributes of knighthood.<sup>16</sup> Silence's helmet was a present from the king of France, adorned with 'precious stones and a golden circlet.'<sup>17</sup> Heldris highlights the armour's monetary value by its ornate decoration and its sentimental value in that it once belonged to the king of France's uncle. As Stock notes, that the king should choose to part with such an expensive and sentimental helmet highlights Silence's own value.<sup>18</sup> Heldris' mention of the 'escarboncle', the ruby carbuncle upon Silence's nose-piece is also significant, not only for its rhyme with 'oncle' (uncle) but for its protective qualities.<sup>19</sup> According to medieval lapidary traditions, carbuncles were sometimes understood to carry magical properties, capable of providing their own illumination to an otherwise dark interior.

Silence's arming scene is long and detailed, an elaborate catalogue of medieval armour, which serves to honour the hero before the poem's climactic battle. With her costly armour, squires to assist her, and gems to protect and enhance her masculinity, Silence follows in the footsteps of other medieval literary heroes. Heldris' inclusion of Silence's arming scene serves the double purpose of arming and honouring the hero of the narrative and reinforcing her masculine identity. The order of arming is also important, taking into consideration both literary traditions and the practicality of arming a warrior.<sup>20</sup> That Heldris follows the traditional order - padded gambeson and cloth or chain-mail leggings followed by greaves and spurs, then hauberk, helmet, sword, and horse - reflects his awareness of the *topos* in contemporary literature, and highlights his decision to honour Silence within this literary tradition regardless of her birth sex.

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<sup>15</sup> *Silence*, L5336-5356.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Bennett, "Military Masculinity in England and Northern France c. 1050-1225," in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* ed. D. M. Hadley (Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1999): 80.

<sup>17</sup> *Silence*, L5354.

<sup>18</sup> Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man in Medieval Romance," 72.

<sup>19</sup> *Silence*, L5359-60.

<sup>20</sup> Brewer, "The Arming of the Warrior," 223.

Silence's scene bears similarities to Sir Gawain's in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an Arthurian legend written c.1370.<sup>21</sup> Gawain's meticulously described arming begins with a rich doublet, then sabatons, greaves, and cuirasses to protect his feet and legs. His mail hauberk is next, followed by arm guards, then his sword and horse are brought to him. Like Silence, Gawain's helmet is adorned with precious jewels: diamonds form his heraldic arms.<sup>22</sup> Both Silence and Gawain boast a pair of fine gold spurs. Spurs were traditionally a symbol and privilege of knighthood, often bestowed during the ceremony of knighthood.<sup>23</sup> Spurs are also links to the fact that knights were mounted warriors, wealthy enough to own and maintain a horse, not common infantrymen.<sup>24</sup> In Bennet's words, they act as another physical and sartorial symbol of knighthood and power. In the original French, Heldris frequently uses the masculine *chevalier* to describe Silence, a word which connects the rider to a horse, *un cheval*, and to horseback fighting closer than the English *knight*.<sup>25</sup> Both the spurs and horse serve to further emphasise Silence's military abilities and masculine identity.

Building on the work of Brewer, Lorraine Kochanske Stock uses his framework to examine the depictions of women warriors within literature, and the role of arming and armour within their narratives. Only one other woman warrior is described in armour: Camille, in *Le Roman d'Enéas* an anonymous medieval retelling of Virgil's *Aeneid*, circa 1160 CE.<sup>26</sup> *Le Roman d'Enéas* differs from Virgil's in many significant ways, notably in expanding the role of Camilla, Virgil's Amazonian warrior.<sup>27</sup> Called Camille in the retelling, she is the main female protagonist in the middle third of the narrative and features prominently in battle scenes where she supports King Turnus of the Rutuli in his war against Enéas.

Like Silence, Camille rejects the 'feminine' pastime of sewing in favour of 'masculine' warfare and fighting arts and is praised for her military skills. However, Camille does not receive an arming scene as defined by Brewer. Instead, she enters the battle already wearing armour, which the author proceeds to describe in elaborate, if slightly static, terms. Where the jewels adorning Silence's armour serve to demonstrate its, and by extension Silence's, worth and value, Camille's armour is devoid of jewels, but is intended to enhance her feminine features, such as a

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<sup>21</sup> Nickel, "Arthurian Armings For War And For Love," 10.

<sup>22</sup> Nickel, "Arthurian Armings For War And For Love," 13.

<sup>23</sup> Nickel, "Arthurian Armings For War And For Love," 11.

<sup>24</sup> Max Lieberman, "A New Approach to the Knighting Ritual," *Speculum* 90, no. 2 (2015), <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/43577349>: 411.

<sup>25</sup> Le Goff and Fagan, *Heroes and Marvels of the Middle Ages*, 99.

<sup>26</sup> Gillian Adler, "Female Intercession and the Shaping of Male Heroism in the *Roman d'Enéas* and *Le chevalier au lion*," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 49, no. 2 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.1968>, 70-71.

<sup>27</sup> Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man in Medieval Romance," 57.

specially designed coif that protects her head whilst allowing her long blonde hair to flow freely.<sup>28</sup> Her armour is specified to be tight and figure-hugging, ‘daintily girt’ and specially made for her by ‘three fairy sisters.’<sup>29</sup> Whilst the presence of mythological or supernatural creatures is not unusual in medieval, or indeed Roman, literature, it is interesting to note that Enéas’ armour is made for him by Vulcan, the god of fire and metalwork, rather than ‘lesser’ beings such as fairies.<sup>30</sup> The *Enéas* author is clearly drawing attention to Camille’s femininity, and even shows her distracted in battle by the appearance of a Trojan warrior wearing an ornately decorated and bejewelled suit of armour, an ultimately fatal mistake that leads to her death and turns the tide of battle against the Latins.

Enéas himself does not receive a formal arming scene, instead his armour is described as his mother presents each piece to him. Contrasting to Camille’s armour, the author emphasises the costly splendour of Enéas’ armour, and the invincibility bestowed on it by Vulcan. Enéas’ invincibility is highlighted by the precious jewels that cover his armour: emeralds, jasper, rubies, and topaz all feature prominently, enhancing his armour further through their talismanic strength. Like Silence, Enéas bears a carbuncle: his adorns his shield and ‘threw out such light at night that it seemed like a summer day.’<sup>31</sup> Medieval audiences would have been aware of the lapidary traditions that accompanied such jewels, and of their association with specific virtues.

The *Enéas* author’s biases are clearly exemplified through these arming scenes. Whilst Enéas is praised, there is a negative bias towards Camille and her presence on the battlefield. She is portrayed in accordance with medieval gender assumptions. Whilst comfortable on the battlefield, she is dressed in revealing armour, and is distracted by another warrior’s beautifully decorated armour, which ultimately turns the tide of battle against her. Enéas’ decorated armour emphasises his strength and valour, Camille’s armour is elaborate but unsuitable for combat.<sup>32</sup> Enéas’ armour is ornately decorated to highlight his masculinity, Camille’s highlights her femininity.

Heldris’ attitude towards Silence’s presence on the battlefield is more ambiguous. He does not present Silence as the *Enéas* author does, as a woman easily distracted by pretty gemstones. Silence’s armour is decorated, yet functional, expensive, and offers appropriate protection whilst emphasising her masculinity. Unlike the *Enéas* author, Heldris focuses more on Silence’s skills,

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<sup>28</sup> Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man' in Medieval Romance," 68.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted, Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man' in Medieval Romance," 60.

<sup>30</sup> Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man' in Medieval Romance," 61.

<sup>31</sup> As quoted Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man' in Medieval Romance," 62.

<sup>32</sup> Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man' in Medieval Romance," 62.

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and makes no obvious statement on her sex whilst she is in battle. Silence's armour, although well-crafted and adorned with jewels, is functional and intended to protect her in battle rather than to enhance her femininity. Heldris presents her as a capable, noble, and brave warrior. Her birth sex does not hinder Silence as it does Camille. There is room within Heldris' literary imagination for Silence to be a successful warrior, with all the pageantry, honours, and power associated with her position.

Silence's formal arming scene provides a curious contrast to her father Cador's arming scene and to Ebain's arming scene. As Brewer states, it is not unusual for a narrative to feature only one extended arming scene, but the language Heldris uses when discussing Cador's, Silence's, and Ebain's arming scenes represent significant developments in establishing Silence's masculine identity and destabilising Ebain's. Cador's arming scene before he fights the dragon is all of 6 short lines, as he slips away from Ebain's knights to take on the dragon alone:

A squire more seasoned than most  
brought him his horse:  
he didn't want anyone but God to know.  
He went to a certain spot in the woods,  
and had his arms brought to him there  
for he could hardly fight without them.<sup>33</sup>

Like Silence, Cador's squire assists him to arm. As medieval armour could be quite heavy, one or more attendants were necessary to assist in donning or removing armour. A squire is also a symbol of knighthood, another example of the hero's importance. Cador's scene is short but functional, covering his basic needs without hindering the flow of the narrative. In Brewer's terms, it serves its purpose of adorning and acknowledging the hero before his battle without breaking narrative pace.<sup>34</sup> Cador then makes a lengthy prayer to God before charging towards the dragon.

Heldris is less than complimentary when discussing King Ebain's military abilities. Of all the main characters who engage in combat within the narrative, Ebain is the only one not to receive an arming scene. Even Silence's French companions receive four lines of verse from Heldris. However, King Ebain's arming scene, if it can be called that, is restricted to a single line: 'King Ebain and his men were arming themselves...' <sup>35</sup> Ebain is not the hero of the poem, but his kingly masculinity is further undermined by this lack of a proper arming scene, without even a squire to aid him. Cador had a squire, Silence has several to assist her with her many pieces of armour, but Ebain arms himself. A squire was as much a symbol of knighthood as a horse or spurs, a further

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<sup>33</sup> *Silence*, L418-422.

<sup>34</sup> Brewer, "The Arming of the Warrior," 224.

<sup>35</sup> *Silence*, L5329.

illustration of Ebain's diminished masculinity. Coming before the battle that will determine the future of his kingdom, Ebain's lack of arming scene presents the king as rushed and ill-prepared for battle, once again undermining his kingly masculinity.

If, as Brewer's catalogue seems to indicate, an elaborate, ceremonial arming scene is expected of a male warrior, why is King Ebain the only warrior not to receive one? Cador's scene may only be a few lines, but it is essential to his character, and to his defeat of the dragon. Silence's is long and highly detailed, and reflects confidence in her military abilities, whilst also reinforcing her masculine identity and signalling that she, a female, is the poem's hero.<sup>36</sup> The differences in their arming scenes reflects the position of each character within the narrative, and highlights the multiple masculinities at play within Heldris' literary imagination.

### *On the Battlefield*

Heldris uses descriptive language and heroic epithets to reinforce or, indeed, to undermine masculinity on the battlefield. Both Silence and her father Cador are referred to with heroic epithets, acknowledging both Cador and Silence's military skills, but he tends to be more complimentary towards Silence. Although Cador 'leapt onto his horse...', Heldris specifies that Silence mounted 'without holding onto the saddle-bow', an impressive feat which again underlines Silence's military abilities. Cador is described as 'Cador the brave, an accomplished youth./ He was the bravest knight of all,/ the best-loved and the most valiant.'<sup>37</sup> Silence is praised as 'so noble, honourable/ courteous, valiant, and kind... that his peers were nothing compared to him/ the praise he won put theirs to shame.'<sup>38</sup> Ebain receives little praise from Heldris, nor is his fighting described at any length. Although he charges at the rebellious Chester, the king is knocked from his horse and nearly killed. A medieval king was expected to lead his troops into battle, and to fight with courage and honour. Many medieval kings faced rebellions, and some even lost their thrones as a result. It does not bode well for Ebain's masculinity and kingly authority that he is unhorsed and nearly defeated in the battle that could cost him his throne.

The stark contrast of what a king is expected to do and what Ebain actually does is brought to the fore when a dragon attacks Ebain and his men. Instead of rallying his men and attacking the dragon, Ebain hangs back. He is 'greatly disconcerted' and 'really worried'.<sup>39</sup> Rather than

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<sup>36</sup> Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man" in Medieval Romance," 73.

<sup>37</sup> *Silence*, L392-94.

<sup>38</sup> *Silence*, L5121-5125.

<sup>39</sup> *Silence*, L356, 364.

authoritatively leading his men into action, Ebain attempts to cajole, wheedle, and then bribe his men into to confront the beast. When this fails, Ebain and his men retreat to consider their next move. In the end, it is not Ebain, the king and leader of his army, who challenges the dragon, but his nephew Cador. Inspired by his love for the Queen's handmaid, Euphemie, Cador sneaks away from the King's army and defeats the dragon in single combat. It is only once the dragon is dead that Ebain approaches it.

Heather Tanner notes Heldris' frequent reversal of the traditional gendering of emotions and reason, pointing to Ebain's overly emotional and intemperate responses to events such as his rash and hasty ban on female inheritance and weak response to the dragon's attack as examples.<sup>40</sup> For many medieval authors, a calm temper and rational thinking were traits often associated with men, whilst scheming and public displays of temper were associated with women. Indeed, within historical narratives, when a woman was seen to have conducted herself well by the standards of male chroniclers, she was often praised for her 'manly' behaviour.<sup>41</sup> Ebain allows his rage to overcome justice when punishing the chancellor, and when exiling Silence to search for Merlin. By comparison, Silence is depicted as calm and rational, bearing her exiles calmly, and returning to serve Ebain loyally. In highlighting Silence's masculine responses, Heldris draws attention to Ebain's un-masculine conduct. Furthermore, Boquet and Nagy have analysed the way in which fear is represented within literature. Fear can paralyse a hero, but it is also something for the hero to overcome.<sup>42</sup> Both Ebain and Cador experience fear when attacked by the dragon, but only Cador overcomes it. Heldris states that Cador's love for Euphemie 'took Cador's fear from him.'<sup>43</sup> Throughout the poem, Heldris' depiction of Cador and Silence as strong, capable knights serves to highlight Ebain's failings.

Whilst in France, Heldris further demonstrates Silence's military capabilities through her impressive performances at tournaments. Although not a typical battle setting, tournaments were often used during the Middle Ages as a training-ground for war, and as a stage to show off one's military prowess.<sup>44</sup> Young knights such as the Young Henry and William Marshall used tournaments to make a name for themselves and to win fame and money. Originally, *tornei* were war games, large-scale group melees with time limits and safe zones to simulate a battle.<sup>45</sup> Later,

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<sup>40</sup> Tanner, "Lords, Wives and Vassals in the Roman de Silence," 144.

<sup>41</sup> Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women," 116.

<sup>42</sup> Boquet and Nagy, "Ethics and Aesthetics of Aristocratic Emotions," 124.

<sup>43</sup> *Silence*, L413.

<sup>44</sup> Linda Paterson, "Tournaments and Knightly Sports in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Occitania," *Medium Ævum* 55, no. 1 (1986): 72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/43628951>.

<sup>45</sup> Paterson, "Tournaments and Knightly Sports," 72.

tournaments came to encompass other military feats, and could involve individual jousts or archery contests. Maurice Keen and Juliet Barker trace the beginnings of the tournament tradition in England and France to the mid-twelfth century, growing in popularity in the following centuries.<sup>46</sup> Whilst real tournaments were held to gain money and fame, literary tournaments often serve to honour the hero, demonstrate military prowess, and win approval and affection from both other characters and from the audience.<sup>47</sup> Heldris specifies that Silence participates in the joust.

In the tilting field, between two rows.  
Silence excelled at hitting the target.  
There was never a woman less reluctant  
to engage in armed combat.  
Whoever saw him jousting, stripped of his mantle,  
Carrying his shield on his left arm  
charging in the tournament  
with well-positioned lance,  
might well say that Nurture can do a great deal to overcome Nature  
if she can teach such behaviour to a soft and tender woman.  
Many a knight unhorsed by Silence, if he had known the truth  
at the time she knocked him down, would have been terribly ashamed  
that a tender, soft, faint-hearted woman,  
who had only the complexion,  
clothing and bearing of a man  
could have struck him down with her lance.<sup>48</sup>

Silence's tournaments scenes all take place during her exile to France, after being knighted by the king of France. Heldris states that Silence is knighted 'exactly at Pentecost', further establishing Silence's reputation as a noble knight. Pentecost was a significant date in the medieval Christian feast calendar, and in many Arthurian legends. The fiftieth day after Easter, it celebrates the day the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles – and was often the day on which knights were knighted or received an important quest. Chrétien de Troyes often states that King Arthur holds court on Pentecost, 'The messenger ... came to Orkney, where the king was holding, as appropriate for Pentecost, a court in state.'<sup>49</sup> That Heldris specifies Silence is knighted 'exactly on Pentecost' further underlines her knightly virtues and ties her to a long literary and Christian tradition. Additionally, in his translation of William Marshal's biography, David Crouch notes that the tournament season often began on Pentecost, meaning that Silence's tournament would likely

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<sup>46</sup>Maurice Keen and Juliet Barker, "The Medieval English Kings and the Tournament" in *Nobles, Knights and Men-At-Arms in the Middle Ages* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2003): 83.

<sup>47</sup> Solterer, "Figures of Female Militancy in Medieval France," 525.

<sup>48</sup> *Silence*, L5145-5164.

<sup>49</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval: or The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985): L1989-90. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=3038975>.

have been the first of the season.<sup>50</sup> The king also knights ten other men, ‘in (Silence’s) honour,’ further establishing her as the premier knight of her generation. Following her ceremony of knighthood, a tournament is held in her honour, and Silence wins jousts against many other knights to take out the prize.<sup>51</sup>

Silence’s tournament scenes are the culmination of Heldris’ ongoing discussion about Nature and Nurture, about Silence’s place in the world, and about his contrasting ideals of masculinity. Although Silence wins great acclaim at her tournaments in France, it is also one of the few moments when Heldris openly engages in a discussion of her gender and the idea of women in the masculine world of the battlefield. Following her knighting, the tournament is Silence’s first test in the masculine sphere of the battlefield, where her years of military training are put to the test. Just as when Eupheme tries to seduce Silence, Heldris feels the need to remind the audience that Silence is not a man. Within the bedroom, Heldris refers to Silence as the ‘youth who is a girl’, reminding the audience firstly why Silence could not accept Eupheme’s advances, and later why she could not disprove the allegations of rape without admitting her secret. During the tournament scenes, Heldris again raises the issue, switching between male and female pronouns to highlight Silence’s unique position on the battlefield and leaves Silence once again the outsider. Twice in this short passage, Heldris refers to Silence as a soft and tender woman, with only the ‘complexion,/ clothing and bearing of a man’.<sup>52</sup> Just as he did when Eupheme attempts to seduce Silence within the bedroom, Heldris is again reminding the audience of Silence’s secret. However, rather than undermining her success, Heldris’ statements instead serve to emphasise the extent and success of Silence’s masculinity.<sup>53</sup>

As Heldris makes clear during the tournament, it is one kind of shame for a male knight to be bested by another male knight, but it is a ‘grant honte’ (a great or terrible shame) to be bested by a fragile female.<sup>54</sup> Yet Silence, ‘a soft and tender woman’ *does* defeat these knights and takes out the prize at her very first tournament.<sup>55</sup> That Silence succeeds in this hyper-competitive, hyper-masculine environment is attributed to her upbringing, her Nurture overcoming her Nature. Adams believes that Heldris refers to Silence’s nature in an attempt to disguise the fact that even

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<sup>50</sup> David Crouch, *William Marshal* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016): 188.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/undu/detail.action?docID=4429777>.

<sup>51</sup> *Silence*, L5131.

<sup>52</sup> *Silence*, L5160.

<sup>53</sup> Terrell, “Competing Gender Ideologies,” 38.

<sup>54</sup> Stock, “Arms and the (Wo)Man in Medieval Romance,” 71.

<sup>55</sup> *Silence*, L5162-5163.

male children need to be thoroughly trained in the arts of jousting and fighting – it is not a given.<sup>56</sup> That Silence needed training to gain her skills takes the sting from her victories, reassuring a male audience that Silence’s skill was a product of her Nurture, not her Nature. Heldris seems to be reassuring the audience that Silence is not capable because she is a woman, she is capable because she has been trained. That said, it remains that Heldris establishes a perceived fact, vehemently argued two hundred years later by Christine de Pizan that, if given the same education as a man, women are capable of great (male) deeds.<sup>57</sup> Immediately following this assertion that other knights would be ashamed to know that Silence was a woman, Heldris declares that ‘Silence had not regrets / about his upbringing, in fact, he loved it.’<sup>58</sup> In this passage once again switching between male and female pronouns for Silence, Heldris seems to be agreeing with Nurture: that Silence’s good upbringing has allowed her innate noble qualities, courage, and skill to blossom, regardless of her birth sex. Silence has managed to overcome her ‘soft, faint-hearted’ nature to gain access to the knightly power, status, and authority that would otherwise be impossible for a medieval noblewoman. Clearly, Heldris does not view gender, and therefore gender roles, as fixed at birth, but rather as fluid identities that can be assumed and discarded as needed.

### *Rebellion*

Then it so happened that  
a fierce war broke out in England:  
hostile and dastardly men  
rebelled against the king...<sup>59</sup>

Heldris’ poem is bookended by war: opening on the war Ebain instigates with Norway and closing with the rebellion fomented by Chester. His narrative comes full circle, however, this final fight is not against an external enemy but rather a defensive stand against an internal insurrection. It marks another blow against Ebain’s regal authority, for he is now facing what any medieval king would fear: that is, the utter deterioration of the king’s political power or status.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Karen Adams, "Reimagining Gender, Reimagining Kinship: Cross-Dressing, Sex Change, and Family Structure in Four Medieval French Narratives" (PhD University of Pittsburgh, 2016): 64.

<sup>57</sup> Christine de Pizan, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1st ed. ed. (New York: Persea Books, 1982): 60-63.

<sup>58</sup> *Silence*, L5177-5178.

<sup>59</sup> *Silence*, L5185-5190.

<sup>60</sup> Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable,'" 12.

After hearing of Silence's military prowess in France, Ebain summons Silence home from exile to help him defeat a rebellion incited by the Count of Chester and three other lords. Silence, and thirty French warriors, arrive in England and join Ebain's army besieging Chester. Heldris bemoans the slaughter that will take place, lamenting the thousands of men who will be killed, 'whether they deserve it or not.'<sup>61</sup> During the fighting, Ebain and Chester charge at each other, Ebain is unhorsed but Chester remains seated. Just when all seems lost for Ebain, Silence and her warriors enter the battle and turn the tide for Ebain. Silence personally defeats Chester, knocking him from his horse and cutting off his right arm. Chester is captured and Ebain emerges victorious, with life and throne intact.

During the rebellion, Ebain's masculinity is once again questioned, just as Silence's military capabilities are once again demonstrated. That the Count of Chester, who Heldris had previously described as 'very prudent / you never heard of anyone less rash',<sup>62</sup> and three other Counts are rebelling signals Ebain's weak hold on his kingdom. Ebain does show some bravery in the face of Chester's rebellion, he is 'furiously eager' for combat, and charges at Chester, dealing him a 'manly blow' before being unhorsed. That Heldris has Ebain is unhorsed at the first charge, and that it is the rebellious Chester who is described as a 'second Alexander', further underlines Ebain's inferior military prowess and lack of control over his kingdom.

Heldris never explicitly states a reason for the rebellion, nor does he give the names of any of the four key rebels except the Count of Chester, although, by the battle, their numbers have swelled to many thousands. Some passages indicate the rebels' grievances as wanting greater control over the laws that govern the kingdom, wanting to 'usurp supreme power' from the king.<sup>63</sup> Count Conant of Chester is the king's closest friend and advisor at the beginning of the poem, and is even the man sent by Ebain to persuade Cador and Euphemie to marry. That the king's closes advisor has turned to open rebellion in an attempt to usurp his rule speaks to the weakness of Ebain's kingship. Ransom states that Chester's rebellion is a clear indication that Ebain has failed in his kingship.<sup>64</sup>

It is only Silence's intervention that saves Ebain's life and throne. Silence 'didn't skirt the edge of the battle/ but went straight through the middle.'<sup>65</sup> Silence's French companions marvel at her leadership and exclaim 'A man like this... inspires loyalty' as they follow her into battle.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Silence*, L5470-5474.

<sup>62</sup> *Silence*, L399-1400.

<sup>63</sup> *Silence*, L5408.

<sup>64</sup> Ransom, "Negotiating Kingly Power," 75-77.

<sup>65</sup> *Silence*, L5545-5546.

<sup>66</sup> *Silence*, L5553.

Heldris is far more complimentary when describing Silence's actions on the battlefield, charging headlong into the fray, and making the enemy feel the 'weight of his sword', and killing Chester's nephew.<sup>67</sup> Silence and Chester rush together in a dramatic charge, unhorsing each other and continuing their fight in the mud. Both their shields are splintered, and the jewels adorning Silence's helmet, which earlier had helped to reinforce her masculine identity and authority, now save her life, deflecting a blow from Chester. Silence strikes at Chester, severing his right arm. Silence hands Chester over to the king, and the rebel forces, seeing their leader captured, turn tail and flee 'ignominiously', from a victory 'for which the full credit belonged to Silence'.<sup>68</sup> Heldris dedicated over 100 lines to the dramatic single combat between Chester and Silence, having summed up Ebain's defeat in a mere eleven. Nor does Silence stop after defeating Chester. After she captures the Count, Silence is still caught up in a battle frenzy, enjoying the fighting and showing off her skills. Despite Heldris' repeated statements about women being soft and gentle, this passage disproves the essentialized construction of women as the 'weaker' sex, squeamish about violence and bloodshed.<sup>69</sup> In stark contrast to his portrayal of Ebain on the battlefield, Heldris is clearly setting Silence up as the ideal noble warrior, one who not only possesses good lineage, but one who has been raised with honour.

Interestingly, Silence's sex is not overtly referenced during the battle, as Heldris had done during her tournament scenes. Instead, he compliments her fighting skills and leadership. His one fleeting allusion to Silence's nature comes as she struggles against Chester, when Silence makes a prayer,

Dear God... Let me prevail against this foe!  
Only your intervention can strengthen  
That in me which nature made weak<sup>70</sup>

This prayer does not directly mention Silence's sex, only the part of her nature that makes her weak, implying her femininity. However, it also bears similarities to the ending of the prayer her father Cador makes before his fight with the dragon - '... be my aid in like manner / Against this ferocious beast/ May I be strengthened by God's power!'<sup>71</sup> Although much shorter than Cador's prayer, Silence's addresses the same points, that God grant her strength and aid her in defeating her enemy. Through her prayer, Silence overcomes her fear in the same manner as her father. In

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<sup>67</sup> *Silence*, L5543.

<sup>68</sup> *Silence*, L5635-36.

<sup>69</sup> Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man in Medieval Romance," 74.

<sup>70</sup> *Silence*, L5604-5608.

<sup>71</sup> *Silence*, L471.

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this light, Silence's prayer reads more as a knight seeking guidance and courage on the battlefield than as a woman feeling out of place.

Ransom posits Ebain's lack of piety as a possible reason for his failings. She notes that before charging into battle, both Cador and Silence stop and offer sincere prayers.<sup>72</sup> Ebain, however, does not seek spiritual guidance, but instead offers material gains as a reward for an action he cannot accomplish himself,

...(I)f there is any man among you  
who dares to take on the dragon,  
and if he overcomes and kills it,  
if he is valiant enough to do this,  
I will give him a county  
and I will let him have his choice  
of any woman in the kingdom.<sup>73</sup>

Again, this speaks to Ebain's capabilities as a knight, and to the way in which he runs his kingdom. Much as Heldris praises these warriors on the battlefield, he also criticizes the need for war and the slaughter of thousands of soldiers. This criticism seems to fall heavily on the shoulders of Ebain, again reflecting badly on his lack of kingly control, and his lack of masculinity. Ebain's repeated failure to outshine, or even equal, the physical prowess of his vassals further undermines his own masculinity.<sup>74</sup>

Heldris introduces Ebain by comparing his rule to that of King Arthur, in his justice, maintenance of the peace, and his laws. However, many scholars have criticised Ebain's rule, his harsh judgements, and his lack of action in stopping the rebellion or his wife's affairs. His failures as a monarch are strongly linked to his failure to maintain peace, in his kingdom and in his court.<sup>75</sup>

Once upon a time Ebain was king of England  
He maintained peace in his land;  
with the sole exception of King Arthur,  
there was never his equal  
in the land of the English.  
His rules were not just idle talk—  
There wasn't a man in his kingdom,  
From Winchester to Durham,  
Whom he wouldn't have thrown in jail  
If he dared to break his law,  
On such terms that, right or wrong,

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<sup>72</sup> Ransom, "Negotiating Kingly Power," 33.

<sup>73</sup> *Silence*, L378-384.

<sup>74</sup> Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable,'" 13.

<sup>75</sup> Ransom, "Negotiating Kingly Power."; Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable'"; Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the "Roman de Silence"".

He wouldn't get out till he was dead.<sup>76</sup>

Heldris often presents Ebain as needing to demonstrate the inherited power of his kingship. He imprisons his chancellor on suspicion of tampering with the letter for the king of France; imprisons any lawbreakers, regardless of guilt; threatens to execute Merlin for refusing to explain his sardonic laughter; and introduces his rash ban on female inheritance after the deaths of two young men, blaming their wives for their husbands' folly, and punishing future generations of women for the deaths of the two men. Each of these incidents offers the king the opportunity to demonstrate the 'naturalness' of his power, both in the way he issues the order and in the way his decisions to be obeyed. However, Ransom highlights an undertone of tension present when Ebain issues these orders. Heldris notes that, although many lords who had only daughters were concerned by the new law, they do not protest, although 'their hearts were filled with rancour'.<sup>77</sup> Ebain then has all his lords swear an oath to uphold his new edict, suggesting that his power is not absolute.<sup>78</sup> In needing to publicly demonstrate his inherited power, Ebain reveals how tenuous his power actually is.

Overall, Heldris represents Silence as being at home on the battlefield, as a capable and talented knight who inspires loyalty and love. He praises her heroic feats and her courage and is more complimentary towards her than any other character. Silence's masculine power and authority are reinforced by her battle scenes, just as Ebain's are undermined. Stock highlights the way in which Heldris emasculates Ebain on the battlefield. As the king, his masculine status and authority would suffer even from a male warrior's aid; since the audience is aware that Silence is female, Ebain's masculinity is compromised even further.<sup>79</sup>

Just as with the bedroom scenes, Heldris uses his battlefield scenes to great effect within *Le Roman de Silence*. Battlefields represent a public, external sphere of medieval life, one where masculinity and authority were reinforced or challenged through successful military endeavours. Heldris uses the battlefield scenes both to reinforce and to destabilise his character's masculinity and authority, continuing patterns established within the bedroom to explore the multiple masculinities at play within his literary imagination.

Within the tradition of the literary arming scene, Heldris draws attention to the relative masculinity and authority of each of his protagonists. Silence's extended arming passage links her to wider literary traditions and reinforces her masculine identity and her knightly authority, and

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<sup>76</sup> *Silence*, L107-118.

<sup>77</sup> *Silence*, L326.

<sup>78</sup> Ransom, "Negotiating Kingly Power," 37.

<sup>79</sup> Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable,'" 14.

indeed her heroic status. Cador's arming scene allows the audience and Cador himself to prepare for the fight against the dragon, the first combat of the poem. His victory reinforces the knightly authority established by the ritual of the arming scene. On the other hand, Ebain does not receive a formal arming passage, nor does he have a successful combat sequence. He does not dare to take on the dragon himself and is nearly defeated by the rebellious Chester.

The character's actions on the battlefield are clearly important to Heldris, for he dedicates large sections of the poem to combat scenes. In addition to the arming passages, Heldris uses these fight sequences to reinforce or undermine masculinity and authority. Cador's battle with the dragon establishes his reputation as a young knight and makes him worthy of marriage, an important step towards medieval manhood. Silence's tournament scene show her success on an international stage, and the honour she receives from her defeat of Chester's rebellion enhances her knightly authority and masculinity. Through defeats, Ebain is shown to be a less than successful knight and king. Twice, he must rely on others to rescue him, achieving feats of arms he himself could not. Chester's rebellion and the threat to his rule damages Ebain's kingship and masculine authority. Unlike Silence, he does not call on love, loyalty, or God when urging his men to fight, instead he relies on material rewards. Through these combat sequences, Heldris continues and reinforces the gendering and un-gendering of Silence, Cador, and Ebain established in previous scenes.

In a traditional hierarchy, Ebain as king should be on top, followed by Cador as earl, and then Silence as a young knight. By giving his three main characters arming and combat scenes of such varying length and detail, Heldris subverts this natural order, suggesting a model of masculinity not based on rank but talent, or nurturing. Heldris does not view masculinity and authority as a given based on birth, rank, or sex, but rather something that must be earned, proven, and maintained, even by a female.

## *Conclusion - Bedrooms and Battlefields*

Within Heldris' literary imagination, a person's birth sex or position within society does not seem to determine their abilities or their performance on the battlefield or within the bedroom. He is far more interested in the way a person's upbringing shapes their actions. Ebain was born to be king, but demonstrates his lack of masculinity and kingly authority through his actions in both the bedroom and the battlefield. Despite Silence giving herself the name Malduit, meaning

badly raised, Heldris later states that Silence ‘had no regrets / about his upbringing, in fact, he loved it.’ Even Ebain, once Silence’s secret has been revealed, does not punish her or Cador for outsmarting his laws, instead he praises her knightly virtue, ‘The king said so that everyone could hear, / ‘Silence, you have been a very valiant, courageous and worthy knight; neither count nor king ever fathered better.’<sup>80</sup> Heldris does not view a person’s nature as fixed at birth, nor in determining their character.

Despite their near-identical names, Heldris presents Queen Eupheme and Euphemie in vastly different ways. Euphemie is the ideal woman, not only rich and beautiful, but a highly trained physician, something both Cador and Heldris admire. She is educated, but uses her talents to help the men around her, rather than chasing her own gains. Her close marriage with Cador counteracts the negative view on marriage offered by Ebain and Eupheme’s union and demonstrates Heldris’ view on the importance of both partners working together within a marriage. Emblematic of the peace between Norway and England, Eupheme is outwardly beautiful, but Heldris depicts her as scheming and deceitful, his depictions steadily more negative as the poem progresses. Heldris never offers any explanation for her behaviour, other than wanting to ruin Silence out of spite and anger at being rejected. These two women, one praised for her actions to help and heal the men around her, the other criticised for her self-interest demonstrate Heldris’ nuanced view on medieval women.

Heldris’ depictions of Ebain and Cador also offer differing pictures of medieval masculinity and authority. Ebain fails in the two arenas in which medieval masculinity was usually put to the test: the bedroom and the battlefield. In a society which placed an enormous importance on the birth of legitimate, preferably male, children, and the necessity of a line of succession, Ebain and Eupheme’s lack of children reflects badly upon his virility, and therefore upon his masculinity. Eupheme’s affair with the disguised nun, and her repeated attempts to seduce Silence, further undermine his position as head of his household and kingdom. As with many medieval narratives, trouble within the king’s marriage and household was seen to reflect trouble within his kingdom. He does not have any personal military victories, but twice must be rescued by others. Heldris’ depictions of Ebain’s actions in both the bedroom and the battlefield further emphasise his lack of masculinity and kingly authority.

Cador is more the typical romance knight, defeating a dragon and winning a fair maiden. However, in contrast to the courage he displays on the battlefield, Heldris also shows Cador to be

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<sup>80</sup> *Silence*, L6576-6581.

shy and uncertain in confessing his feelings to Euphemie. Cador and Euphemie's marriage is a political, dynastic, and personal success, with mutual passion, love, and respect. In stark contrast is Ebain and Euphemie's marriage, which is a political, dynastic, and personal failure, with far-reaching consequences that nearly cost Ebain his throne. Heldris does not assume Ebain's masculinity or military capabilities merely because he is king,

Unsurprisingly, Silence is the most complex of Heldris' characters. Despite being born a girl, Heldris calls Silence the ideal knight, 'the mirror of the world', with the double meaning of being the best knight in the world and being the perfection to which the world should strive.<sup>81</sup> He praises Silence for her achievements, and unapologetically celebrates her successes. However, whilst Heldris uses male pronouns for Silence throughout the majority of the poem, at two critical points in the narrative, when being seduced by Euphemie and when defeating other knights during the tournament, Heldris feels the need to remind the audience of Silence's birth sex. These reminders serve both as dramatic irony, adding to the humour of the narrative by reminding the audience of a secret the characters are unaware of, but they also serve to undermine Silence's masculine identity and authority. Although Heldris praises Silence for her masculine traits, ultimately, he does not see women acting as men as an ideal. Silence is stripped of her masculine identity and made to conform to the expectations of a woman in the High Middle Ages - that is, to marriage and childbearing within the confines of the bedchamber. In some ways, the conclusion is contrived, a necessary happy ending where the social order has been re-established. That said, Heldris has already made his point: with education (or nurturing), women could be as capable as men. Indeed, reading through the poem's nuanced presentation of masculinity and femininity, it is safe to say that Heldris perceived men and women, and male and female roles, as much more fluid than the historical record may, strictly speaking, indicate.

This interpretation, based on the literary imagination of one author, Heldris de Cornuaille, and his only known text, has revealed fascinating new insights that seem to challenge accepted understandings of medieval gender and power. However, when viewed through the lens of the History of Experience, Heldris' narrative begins to reveal parallels to contemporary life and literature. Dialogic literature, as Laurie A. Finke states, is never simply reflecting or recording contemporary life and views exactly as they were lived.<sup>82</sup> Instead, it has the potential to reveal something about the author's perception of their world, and of the people who inhabit it.

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<sup>81</sup> Suzanne Kocher, "Narrative Structure of the 'Roman de Silence': Lessons in Interpretation," *Romance Notes* 42, no. 3 (2002): 351. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43803538>.

<sup>82</sup> Laurie A. Finke, "Sexuality in Medieval French Literature: "Separés, On Est Ensemble"," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*., ed. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (Routledge, 1996): 348.

### Chapter Three

Therefore, drawing together the three aspects of the methodology, world, brain, and body, will enable a deeper understanding of Heldris' literary imagination, and the role of fiction in reconstructing the lived experience of medieval people, which will be explored further in Chapter 4.

## Chapter Four - Embodied Realities

In conceiving the World-Brain-Body framework, Boddice and Smith discuss the need to simultaneously view all three aspects.<sup>1</sup> Splitting the framework into individual components may help to gain a deeper understanding of individual elements, but each should be viewed in connection to the others and the entangled context of each considered. It is impossible to fully understand the world without understanding those who lived within it, just as it is impossible to grasp the embodied reality without understanding the structures of the world they inhabited, or the thought processes that led to an action. For this reason, as the thesis has maintained, it is essential to view and understand both Heldris and the poem within their historical context. Indeed, it is hard to imagine, in writing *Le Roman de Silence*, that Heldris was not influenced by the world around him. Chapter One established the most influential structures that characterised Heldris' world. Then, Chapters Two and Three analysed the impact of those structures on Heldris' literary decisions. Ultimately, I have noted that he perceived gender and power much more fluidly than the structures would demand. However, the extent to which Heldris' representations of gender and power fluidity reflect the actual lived experience of at least some people at his time remains to be established and is the focus of this chapter.

This chapter explores the embodied realities of the world in which Heldris lived, wrote, and drew inspiration. It considers the ideas and characters Heldris developed within his text in relation to key historical events and peoples' experiences within the assumed time frame of its writing. In doing so, this chapter will address the third stated aim of the thesis, that is, to situate the literary text within the historical experience of its time, and to evaluate the role of fiction in reconstructing the lived experience of medieval people.

Literature played a vital role for medieval societies. In addition to providing entertainment, literature offered a means of communicating ideas, attitudes, and values. As Helen Cooper notes,

Medieval literature [...] records the ideology of an entire community, the values by which it represents itself to itself. Romance, as the dominant secular literary genre

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<sup>1</sup> Boddice and Smith, *Emotion Sense Experience*, 19-21

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of the period, was at the heart of such self-representation, a means by which cultural values and ideals were recorded and maintained and promulgated.<sup>2</sup>

Literature has the potential to reveal depths and complexities other areas of the historical record do not. In some ways, the fictive mode gives authors more licence to explore complicated and conflicted elements at work in the world, such as the dynamics of gender and power. It must be noted, however, that literature and poetic narrative such as *Le Roman de Silence* communicate and depict idealised versions of the world, or the world as the author would like it to be, rather than reflecting how society actually was.

Laurie A. Finke distinguishes the development of thinking through four theoretical perspectives on representation - reflective, hermeneutic, specular, and dialogic. Early academic work on medieval literature focused on the reflective view, where literature merely reflects a priori reality.<sup>3</sup> This developed into hermeneutic, where literature was seen to reveal hidden truths which are inaccessible to a literal reading. In the specular, literature reflexively refers only to itself, its author, or the processes of poetic creation.<sup>4</sup> Finally, recent scholarship has identified the dialogic view of literature, where literature is not merely a passive reflection, but becomes an ‘active participant’ in the construction of medieval life, where it reflects but, in turn, also helps shapes, social conditions.<sup>5</sup> Viewing literature as dialogic thus enables conversations about both the text and the society in which it was written. Literature should not be considered an exact reproduction of contemporary reality, nor a distorting reflection, but rather a mirror through which a version of reality may be glimpsed.

Literature and storytelling were central to medieval society, assisting in creating a shared culture, language, and set of ideals. As Silence demonstrates during her years as a minstrel, storytelling was an active, communal pastime during the High Middle Ages. Poems, romances, and chansons were not silently read by individuals, as is so often the case today, but instead they were shared experiences. They were performed or sung, often accompanied by music, before live and interactive audiences.<sup>6</sup> Exploring the embodied realities of the world in which *Silence* was written will help in assessing whether or not Heldris’ work reflects a more complex lived experience of gender and power in the High Middle Ages.

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<sup>2</sup> Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Finke, "Sexuality in Medieval French Literature: "Separés, On Est Ensemble,"" 347.

<sup>4</sup> Finke, "Sexuality in Medieval French Literature: "Separés, On Est Ensemble,"" 347.

<sup>5</sup> Finke, "Sexuality in Medieval French Literature: "Separés, On Est Ensemble,"" 353-354.

<sup>6</sup> Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, *Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages* (Newark: Polity Press, 2018): 104-105. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=5477777>.

In medieval Europe, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a critical time for redefining gender roles and identities.<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin makes clear the need to critically examine, not merely document, culturally defined gender roles, in particular where they intersect with evidence of actual behaviour. She highlights the importance of examining anomalies as a means to understand the lived realities of behaviours. Those who undertake a role outside of prescribed societal norms usually elicit strong reactions from their society; these reactions offer insight into acceptable or unacceptable behaviours, or instances in which certain behaviours may be tolerated.<sup>8</sup>

The known structures and cultural perceptions that inform Heldris' world permeate his literary imagination, and manifest through his writing. Within his literary imagination, Silence is hailed as a hero, a successful, brave, and chaste knight, despite her birth sex; whilst acknowledged as king, Ebain is viewed as ineffectual and weak, his power, authority, and masculinity undermined by those around him; Euphemie has knowledge and power in healing and is praised for her skills, whereas Eupheme is criticised for her deception, for trying to exert power beyond her feminine disposition to further her own ends. Whilst Euphemie supports and uplifts the men around her, the Queen undermines them. Whilst we have no direct historical parallels to Heldris' crafted narrative, it is possible to find evidence to suggest that Heldris' literary imagination reflects the embodied experience of some people who inhabited his world; that his perceptions of gender and power, and especially the nuances and flexibilities he draws into those perceptions, were part of the lived experiences of the Anglo-Norman sphere.

### *Women in Power*

Traditionally, within scholarship and popular imagination, the role of women within medieval life has been relegated to that of the homemaker, her power and influence restricted to the bedroom and home. However, in recent decades, many scholars have begun to question this assumption and to re-examine the evidence of women having a wider sphere of influence than merely their households. In examining the letters of medieval woman, Joan Ferrante concludes that, whilst religious and secular patriarchy, not to mention misogyny, did inhibit the actions of women, they were by no means excluded from historical events.<sup>9</sup> In the historical record, whilst

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<sup>7</sup> Natasha R. Hodgson, "Normans and Competing Masculinities on Crusade," in *Crusading and Pilgrimage in the Norman World*, ed. Kathryn Hurlock and Paul Oldfield (New York: Boydell & Brewer Inc, 2018); 197.

<sup>8</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior," 193.

<sup>9</sup> Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997): 5.

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stories about women's actions do not figure prominently, they are often featured in a negative vein, or alternately, in an ideal one. These views of women are almost entirely from the male perspective, and it is difficult to accurately extrapolate a woman's experience from a man's depiction. Often, these colourful accounts are designed to discredit a woman's actions, but they do show women participating in medieval life at the highest levels and having both positive and negative impacts on the world around them. Women who acted beyond their ascribed gender roles often faced harsh criticism and accusations of adultery and improper behaviour. These criticisms were often gendered, such as a woman acting beyond her sex, in a manly fashion, or being a bad mother.

There are limited contemporary sources for examining the lives of transgressive women, women who challenged or acted beyond their ascribed gender roles. This may be due to a historical bias, as male chroniclers were generally more interested in the deeds of other men, and where such women do appear in the historical record, it is often as examples of how not to behave. This dearth of source material from the point of view of women, or transgressive people more generally, is precisely why literary texts like *Silence* are important. It is in them that one might be able to discover the broader complexities of a society normally left silent in the historical record.

Allegations of adulterous affairs is a charge often laid at the feet of powerful women, either as a way to tarnish the woman's reputation, or to discredit the actions of her husband, as a noblewoman's reputation not only rested upon her own actions, but also the actions of her husband. This is particularly true for queens consort who, because of their station, are more visible in the historical record. King John is often hailed as one of England's least successful kings, and his wife Isabella of Angoulême remains one of the most controversial queens consort. Isabella was probably between 9 and 12 years old at the time of their marriage and was originally betrothed to Hugh IX of Lusignan. As king, John dissolved their betrothal and married Isabella himself to avoid creating a powerful Lusignan-Angoulême alliance that would have threatened his power.<sup>10</sup>

Isabella's largely negative reputation stems from her association with John, the scandal surrounding their marriage and the wars that followed. Further discrediting resulted from her own actions during and after John's reign, deeds which include acting against the interests of her son and his regency council, marrying her young daughter's betrothed, and the accusation of attempting to poison the king of France.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary chroniclers blame her for the war John

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<sup>10</sup> Lisa Hilton, "Isabelle of Angoulême" in *Queens Consort: England's Medieval Queens* (London: Phoenix Paperback, 2008): 168.

<sup>11</sup> Hilton, "Isabelle of Angoulême," 185.

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instigated following their marriage, and for the huge loss of territory that ensued. This is perhaps an unfair criticism, given her young age and the limits of her direct involvement at the time. Isabella is mentioned in only one of John's charters, and issued none herself, in stark contrast to her predecessors, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and Matilda of Boulogne, who both played active roles during their husbands' rule. In addition, Isabella received far fewer queenly privileges than earlier queens consort. She was not, for example, allowed to receive the incomes and revenue from her estates or dower lands, or from queen's gold, a tax levied on all incomes to the crown.<sup>12</sup> Given her young age at the time of the marriage, it is understandable she was given no role in government, but her role never increased, either under John or when their son Henry ascended the throne as a minor, when she might have expected to have a prominent role in his regency council. Following John's death, Isabella returned to France, leaving all but one of her children behind, and married Hugh X of Lusignan, her daughter's betrothed and the son of the man to whom she herself was originally betrothed, thus creating the problematic Lusignan-Angoulême alliance John had married her to avoid. It is largely from these events that her reputation as a 'bad mother' stems.<sup>13</sup> Isabella was also involved in the failed rebellion against King Louis VIII of France and later implicated in a plot to poison him, further adding to her negative reputation.<sup>14</sup>

It is impossible to establish how many tales of Isabella's actions have been inflated by biased chroniclers seeking to criticise her husband, John. Isabella receives almost universal hostility from chroniclers, who blame her for the long and costly war, emphasising her alleged adultery, and her failure as a mother. Matthew Paris even calls her more deserving of the name Jezebel than Isabel, a sentiment echoed by many other chroniclers. Therefore, the depiction of Isabella as a bad influence is more a criticism of John's reign than a true reflection of her character. There is no firm evidence of Isabella's adultery, but the rumours reflect badly upon John's ability to maintain his authority over her, and therefore over his kingdom. However, if one is permitted to read between the lines, one can see in Isabella's story a woman who, from a very young age, had been controlled by an overbearing (and in many cases ineffectual) patriarchy. She seems to live a dutiful life in some respects, successfully achieving a key gender ideal - the production of children and thus the continuation of the dynasty. However, it is possible to detect in the chroniclers' reports that, despite her youth, Isabella was strong and intelligent, and had some

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<sup>12</sup> Louise J. Wilkinson, "Maternal Abandonment and Surrogate Caregivers: Isabella of Angoulême and Her Children by King John" in *Virtuous or Villainess? the Image of the Royal Mother from the Early Medieval to the Early Modern Era*, ed. Carey Fleiner and Elena Woodacre (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 102.

<sup>13</sup> Wilkinson, "Maternal Abandonment," 102-104.

<sup>14</sup> Hilton, "Isabelle of Angoulême," 184-185.

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discursive influence over John's decisions, for good or for bad. Perhaps, we could surmise that her 'contributions' were unofficial, opinions shared within the domestic context. Although not politically active, Isabella made certain decisions for herself, and acted on her own advice. Moving to France and taking the decision to marry Hugh shows an incredible desire for political power and influence. As she grew older, it seems that she developed some political nous, and certainly some sense of empowerment as she negotiated her second marriage to Hugh without consulting her son's regency council.

Isabella and Eupheme share several parallels. Although Eupheme's age is never explicitly stated, it is conceivable that, like Isabella, she is much younger than her husband. Heldris alludes to her youth when she tries to seduce Silence, 'she had no problem with wrinkles; / she was not old enough yet / to have to worry about creases...'<sup>15</sup> Even after some 16 years of marriage, she is still youthful and wrinkle-free, suggesting she was very young at the time of their marriage. This may be why Eupheme plays merely a ceremonial role within the kingdom, and why Heldris depicts her on the fringes of power. Both women are also viewed as political pawns, as symbols of a peace through a marriage alliance. Yet, both women, one literary, one real, actively engage in changing their lot and their power is evident in the decisions they make: Eupheme exacts punishments through her husband to punish the object of her unrequited love and maintains a lover within her household; Isabella transforms her fortunes by establishing a marriage alliance that suited her needs. Both women are criticised for decisions that undermine the position of their husband, and, in Isabella's case, her son. Isabella reveals how much a noblewoman's position and freedoms relied on the goodwill of her husband, and how overstepping society's gender boundaries often resulted in criticism and negative stories designed to discredit her actions and reputation.<sup>16</sup>

Within medieval romances, accusations of adultery serve much the same function as they do within chroniclers' accounts – to undermine the authority of both the woman and her husband. Romances do not simply rewrite tales of adultery, instead they represent, explore, and unpack, sometimes opaquely, many issues debated in the evolution of medieval queenship at the time the romance was composed: the importance of chastity and a clear succession; the extent of a queen's influence over her husband and wider political influence; the symbolic importance of a queen as a reflection of the king's sovereignty.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Silence*, L3794-96.

<sup>16</sup> Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the 'Roman de Silence,'" 65.

<sup>17</sup> McCracken and Karras, *The Romance of Adultery*, 2.

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Whilst not the case for every medieval woman, Heldris' portrayal of Euphemie reveals a woman who is respected and admired for her skills and learning. His positive portrayal suggests the possibility that women could be admired for skills and learning. Heldris' treatment of Queen Eupheme, on the other hand, reflects a contemporary fear of women with too much power, and his negative descriptions of her reflects sentiments expressed by contemporary chronicles.

There is no one experience of women in the High Middle Ages. Experience varies greatly from woman to woman, based on social, economic, and personal circumstance. Those lower down the social order could not access the avenues of power and authority open to noblewomen. Heldris' differing portrayals of his three leading women, Eupheme, Euphemie, and Silence, contributes to the possibility that, whilst facing gendered obstacles, woman could, and did, exert influence and power according to their means. When acting in the extended domestic sphere of managing land, incomes, tenants, and disputes, noblewomen such as Matilda of Boulogne were not seen as transgressing traditionally female domestic roles. As Lo Prete puts it, whether commanding household cooks, household clerics, or household knights, the lady of the house was seen to have as much authority as the lord, her husband.<sup>18</sup> When a woman transgressed these gendered social boundaries, she was viewed as acting beyond her gender role, impinging on traditionally masculine rights and authority. In acting for her own interests, Eupheme seems to have transgressed these social boundaries, and is criticised for it; whilst Euphemie, in acting in concert with her lord's interests, is celebrated.

For women acting outside the domain of the domestic sphere of house and home, especially within the traditionally masculine domain of the battlefield, there was yet more gendered criticism. When Pope Urban II preached in favour of the First Crusade in Clermont, 1095, he included women amongst those to be excluded as 'unfit to bear arms', reiterating the medieval gender norm that Heldris expresses through the personification of Nature: that arms and warfare were a male domain, and therefore that women were unsuited to bear them.<sup>19</sup> Warfare was far from an unusual state of affairs during the Middle Ages, with conflicts ranging from local border disputes and small-scale rebellions to large international campaigns and crusades. Observing the roles and limitations afforded to medieval women, Joan Ferrante notes that 'they cannot, with rare exception, go to war or battle,'<sup>20</sup> However, both Maier and McLaughlin state

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<sup>18</sup> Lo Prete, "The Domain of Lordly Women," 17.

<sup>19</sup> Evans, "'Unfit to bear arms,'" 45.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted, Stock, "Arms and the (Wo)Man' in Medieval Romance," 57.

that boundaries between men's and women's roles tended to overlap during times of war, with women being called upon to oversee household and state affairs, assist in raising armies, taxes, and ransoms, and to defend castles and property.<sup>21</sup> Eleanor of Aquitaine, for example, was instrumental in raising the ransom for her son, Richard the Lionheart. McLaughlin notes that many examples of women warriors do stem from emergency situations: noble women defending a castle when the lord is absent, or women seizing arms in defence of their homes, such as Dame Nicola de la Haye, the sheriff of Lincoln, who played a crucial role in the Siege of Lincoln in 1217.<sup>22</sup> She also notes the presence of women functioning as generals, organising and planning a battle or campaign.<sup>23</sup> Whilst these anecdotal instances often lasted a short time, they are nevertheless important, as they demonstrate a degree of military readiness amongst the women of Europe, a population that, historically, has been overlooked when examining warfare.

There is a tendency for male chroniclers to view the actions of women on the battlefield through a gendered lens: as war was perceived to be fully in the realm of male action, for a woman to be seen as taking on a man's role, she must give up some part of her femininity. Countess Blanche of Champagne campaigned for years on behalf of her infant son, as one chronicler noted approvingly, 'she triumphed over her enemies in a manly and energetic fashion'.<sup>24</sup> Just as when discussing the actions of Empress Matilda and Matilda of Boulogne, chroniclers often characterise certain actions as masculine or feminine, ascribing judgements to actions based on contemporary gender stereotypes, and the role a woman was expected to play within society. The *Gesta Stephani* praises Matilda of Boulogne for having the virile, courageous breast of a man, yet tempered by the constancy or fortitude of a woman.<sup>25</sup>

In the early Middle Ages, chroniclers tended to briefly mention the actions of warrior women as unusual. By the High Middle Ages, chroniclers regularly expressed astonishment at women's military activities, as exemplified by the verbose *Saxo Grammaticus*:

...Loathing a dainty style of living, they would harden body and mind... rejecting the fickle pliancy of girls... forgetful of their true selves... tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm's embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill, and those they could have appeased with looks they attacked with lances.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior."; Maier, "Women in the Crusade Movement," 64.

<sup>22</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior," 199.

<sup>23</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior," 196.

<sup>24</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior," 199.

<sup>25</sup> Hilton, "Matilda of Boulogne," 107.

<sup>26</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. Peter Fisher (Cambridge, Eng.: Brewer; Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1979).

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Here, Saxo Grammaticus is juxtaposing traditionally feminine desires and actions with masculine actions, implying that, by acting beyond her traditional gender role, these woman warriors were not truly women. He echoes Silence's fears that she cannot successfully live as a woman, having lived as a man all her life, '...I have a mouth too hard for kisses / and arms too rough for embraces.'<sup>27</sup>

For a woman to overcome this gendered imbalance, she needed to give up all aspects of her womanhood. As St. Jerome puts it, as 'long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from men as body is from the soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man.'<sup>28</sup> There is a tendency for male chroniclers to view the actions of women on the battlefield through a gendered lens. As war was perceived to be fully in the realm of male action, for a woman to be seen as taking on a man's role, she must give up some part of her femininity.<sup>29</sup> Vern L. Bullough cites the cases of over 30 priests, monks, and saints who were discovered to be female upon their death as proof that women did indeed dress as men to access the power and respect which was otherwise denied them.<sup>30</sup> This is reflective of Heldris' treatment of Silence, whom he refers to with male pronouns and typically male epithets until the end of the poem where Silence is stripped of her masculine clothing and identity and marries King Ebain.

Despite the negative connotations surrounding women on the battlefield, many medieval women did engage in military endeavours. The Crusade movement dominated much of the High Middle Ages, with regular crusades to the Holy Land from 1095 to 1291. Kings and nobles might lead armies, but many ordinary people undertook the long journey to fight in the Holy Lands. The image of male-dominated crusades is large in the popular imagination, but many women and even children also took part. Recent scholarship has begun to uncover the many roles women undertook during the crusades, ranging from financing the crusade, motivating family and soldiers, and fighting themselves.<sup>31</sup> Maier characterises the female crusade experience as difficult to fully assess, as most chroniclers and writers tended to focus on the actions and experiences of men, and viewed women on the crusades through gender stereotypes.<sup>32</sup> Unlike their male counterparts, there

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<sup>27</sup> *Silence*, L2646-47.

<sup>28</sup> St Jerome, as quoted Bullough, "On Being a Man in the Middle Ages," 32.

<sup>29</sup> Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man : Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (Florence, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 1996): 4. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/und/a/detail.action?docID=1075141>.

<sup>30</sup> Bullough, "On Being a Man in the Middle Ages," 34.

<sup>31</sup> Gabrielle Storey, "Berengaria of Navarre and Joanna of Sicily as Crusading Queens: Manipulation, Reputation, and Agency" in *Forgotten Queens in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Political Agency, Myth-Making, and Patronage*, ed. Valerie Schutte and Estelle Paranque (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018): 41.

<sup>32</sup> Maier, "Women in the Crusade Movement," 62.

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was no ideal of the female crusader against which the actions of individual women could be referenced.<sup>33</sup> There were also religious undertones to depictions of women, with writers focusing on the holy suffering undertaken by women, or using their presence on the battlefield to denounce their enemy. Both Christian and Muslim writers note the presence of women on the battlefield, usually in their enemy's army and usually as a way of emphasising their enemy's barbarity, that they would allow women in their armies.<sup>34</sup> One such account from Baha' al-Din regarding the Frankish siege of Acre from August 1188 to July 1191, records the words of a Muslim veteran, who described one of the Frankish attackers: 'Within their rampart was a woman dressed in a green cloak, who kept shooting at us with a wooden bow until she had wounded several of us. Having overpowered and killed her, we took her bow and carried it to the sultan, who was greatly surprised...' <sup>35</sup> Christie notes that Saladin's surprise may not be entirely due to the archer's sex or may represent the author's desire to emphasise the perceived otherness and barbarity of their enemies.

Both Christian and Muslim writers disapproved of the presence of women on or near the battlefield. Many writers characterise these women as camp followers or prostitutes, and often used their presence to explain why a battle or crusade had not been successful. As sexual beings on a holy mission, women were regarded as inherently sinful.<sup>36</sup> However, whilst many women did go as cooks or washerwomen, or following her husband, there are accounts of women being compelled to take the cross for religious reasons. Margaret of Beverly is perhaps the most well-documented woman to have participated in the Crusades, thanks to the efforts of her brother Thomas of Froidmont, a Cistercian monk, who included her story in his *Hodoeporicon et pericula Margarite Iherosolimitane*. Margaret took the Cross and journeyed to the Holy Land in the late 1180s, arriving in Jerusalem in 1187, just before Saladin's forces besieged the city. She was involved in the city's defence, where she wore a cooking pot as a helmet and brought water to the city's defenders.<sup>37</sup> After paying a ransom to leave Jerusalem, she decided to go on pilgrimage to the tomb of her patron saint, Margaret at Antioch, where she again took part in fighting between Christians and Muslims.<sup>38</sup> During her time on crusade, Margaret was twice captured and forced to work as a slave. She finally made her way back to Europe around 1191.

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<sup>33</sup> Maier, "Women in the Crusade Movement," 69.

<sup>34</sup> Evans, "Unfit to bear arms," 45.

<sup>35</sup> Niall Christie, "Fighting Women in the Crusading Period Through Muslim Eyes: Transgressing Expectations and Facing Realities?", in *Crusading and Masculinities*, ed. Natasha R. Hodgson, Katherine J. Lewis, and Matthew M. Mesley (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019): 185.

<sup>36</sup> Maier, "Women in the Crusade Movement," 68.

<sup>37</sup> Evans, "Unfit to bear arms," 55.

<sup>38</sup> Maier, "Women in the Crusade Movement," 65.

Whilst exemplary, Margaret's story also fits into the pattern of female stories being recorded by men, with the crusades portrayed as a typically male activity.<sup>39</sup> Thomas is particularly concerned with demonstrating his sister's piety, and represents her endurance of captivity and slavery, and acceptance of the mortal dangers of warfare, as pious sacrificial suffering. Her experience on Crusade inspired Margaret to become a nun at the Cistercian abbey Montreuil-sous-Laon, which Thomas portrays as the continuation of her crusading spirit and devotion to God. As with other instances of women on the battlefield, Margaret's story also demonstrates the way in which crusading women were often drafted in as auxiliary troops in emergencies, to fill gaps in defences, or bring water and food to troops. Nor is it unusual for stories of women's involvement in the crusades to be overshadowed and less well documented than the typical male crusader's adventures, for chroniclers typically focused on the actions of militant, crusader kings.<sup>40</sup> Eleanor of Aquitaine, and later her daughter Joanna and daughter-in-law Berengaria, all journeyed to the Holy Lands on Crusade, but barely feature in historical accounts. Berengaria and Joanna are mentioned as accompanying Richard the Lionheart but, as Gabriella Storey notes, they are mentioned not for their own actions, but for the alliances they represent.<sup>41</sup>

Through his literary imagination, Heldris offers the picture of a woman highly skilled and respected for her medical knowledge and healing abilities, who is later involved in the running of estates; a woman who has no power except through her husband, yet who nearly causes the death of the kingdom's most celebrated knight; and a woman who has gained respect through her military capabilities, but who must dress and live as a man. Together, these women offer an unorthodox picture of medieval life, yet one which may share parallels with the lived experience of other medieval women. Heldris' portrayal of Cador and Euphemie's marriage is one of domestic bliss, founded in mutual passion, love, and respect. The only blight on their happiness is the possibility of not producing a son; however, in contrast to contemporary medieval views on childbearing, Heldris considers them to be equally blameless in whether their child will be a boy or a girl. Cador consults Euphemie, stating that, as they are one flesh and blood in the eyes of the Church, they should be on one mind and one will, ‘...our flesh is one,/ Let our will be one as well.’<sup>42</sup> This example of marriage, as a partnership, is very different to the example offered by Ebain and Eupheme. If Euphemie demonstrates the influence and power that noblewomen could

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<sup>39</sup> Maier, "Women in the Crusade Movement," 68.

<sup>40</sup> Storey, "Berengaria and Joanna," 41.

<sup>41</sup> Storey, "Berengaria and Joanna," 43.

<sup>42</sup> *Silence*, L1721-1722.

exert, then Queen Eupheme may be a reflection of the contemporary fear of a woman with too much power.

## *Transgressive Women*

Although medieval sources generally present societies with a strict gender binary, with prescribed roles, ideals, and limitations, new research is uncovering evidence of those who lived between the binary, those whose lives did not conform to their birth sex.<sup>43</sup> Hotchkiss notes that the cases of women dressing as men occur frequently within literature, and is also a significant, although rarely recorded, historical phenomenon.<sup>44</sup> Cases range in time and geographic location throughout the Middle Ages, demonstrating the wide range of cases and circumstances in which cross-dressing was seen as either acceptable or unacceptable. Generally, a man was seen as abnormal to dress and live as a woman, where a woman was not heavily criticised for wearing men's clothes, or even living as a man, so long as she did not threaten the authority and masculinity of other men.<sup>45</sup>

Medieval European societies, in particular religious communities, were often hostile to those existing outside of the binary, a hostility that can be traced to Deuteronomy (22:5): 'The women shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God.' This passage clearly condemns a cross-dressing woman just as much as men, yet Bullough notes that medieval society was more hostile towards men wearing woman's clothing.<sup>46</sup> One instance where cross-dressing was socially acceptable, although still frowned upon, was theatre, although a man was seen as lowering himself to dress as a woman.

Arguably the most famous case of a cross-dressing woman leading an army is Joan of Arc, the young French woman who led successful campaigns against the invading English army during the Hundred Years War. One of the few sources written within Joan's lifetime is Christine de Pizan's *Ditié de Jeanne d'Arc*, which offers a unique picture of contemporary views on women in battle. The poem is Christine's last, written before Joan was captured and taken prisoner by the

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<sup>43</sup> Hotchkiss, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>44</sup> Hotchkiss, "Introduction," 3-4.

<sup>45</sup> Vern L. Bullough, "Transvestites in the Middle Ages," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 6 (1974): 1393 <http://www.jstor.org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/stable/2777140>.

<sup>46</sup> Bullough, "Transvestites in the Middle Ages," 1382.

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English, and months before Christine's own death. Christine devotes several stanzas to powerful women from the Bible and from legend, such as Esther and Judith, and concludes that Joan outshines them all:

For all the champions who lived,  
As one goes back through history,  
Could not compare in prowess to Joan,  
Who strives our enemies to ban;  
For God who counsels her gave her  
A greater heart than any man.<sup>47</sup>

Christine celebrates Joan both as a woman and a warrior, and a supporter of Charles sent by Divine Providence. Written before Joan's capture and trial for heresy, Christine's poem vividly captures not only the huge wave of joy and optimism that swept through the whole of France at the time, but also the sense of wonder and gratitude that all loyal Frenchmen must have felt at her miraculous intervention.

Joan was loved and celebrated whilst winning, but as the tide of war turned against France, people who had celebrated her victories began to fear that a woman leading armies on the battlefield was unnatural and against God. Joan was criticised by the Church for wearing men's clothes and armour, leading to her trial for heresy and eventual execution. For her English inquisitors, Joan's dressing in men's clothes was just as ungodly as her taking up arms: her cross-dressing was both the cause and the symbol of her transgression.<sup>48</sup> Joan's humble origins were also a concern, for she showed it was not necessary for one to *be* a nobleman to be respected as a nobleman.<sup>49</sup> This was not considered a minor transgression, but a threat to the social hierarchy. Unlike Silence, Joan was recognised a woman, and never tried to be anything other than a woman in men's armour and clothing.<sup>50</sup>

Whilst on trial, Joan defended herself masterfully. The records of her trial are some of the most complete records of the time, offering an unparalleled insight into the trial of a medieval heretic. She was interrogated by the best theologians the English could find, churchmen and clerics who attempted to twist Joan's words against her.<sup>51</sup> They bombarded her with complex theological arguments and questions, frequently shifted topics, and interrupted her answers, in the

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<sup>47</sup> Christine de Pisan, *Ditié de Jeanne d'Arc*, trans. L. Shopkow, ed. Angus J. Kennedy and Kenneth Varty (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1977): XXVI. <https://dmdhist.sitehost.iu.edu/joan.htm?>

<sup>48</sup> Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2013): 126. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=1492573>.

<sup>49</sup> Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, 144.

<sup>50</sup> Bullough, "Transvestites in the Middle Ages," 1390.

<sup>51</sup> Karen Sullivan, "The Inquiry at Rouen," in *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 83.

hopes that her answers would be theologically incorrect, and that she would condemn herself with her own words. Joan, however, answered each question calmly and avoided their theological traps.<sup>52</sup> Her famous response to being asked if she was in God's grace exemplifies both the devious nature of her interrogators, and Joan's calm answers, 'If I am not, may God put me there; and if I am, may God so keep me.'<sup>53</sup> Through the surviving records of her trial, Joan's calm and careful answers offer a fascinating window into the experience of a young woman defending her actions against the power of the patriarchy. Her story, an anomaly for certain, demonstrates, like *Silence*, the possibility of unconventional experience in a seemingly ordered world; experience spurred on by circumstance and the contingencies of time and place.

The phenomenon of transvestite saints is an interesting example of women rejecting medieval gender roles. The term refers to the small but significant number of women recorded as spending their life in service to God, whether as a monk or hermit, and whose secret is generally revealed only after their deaths.<sup>54</sup> Often, many of these women were later sainted, becoming known as transvestite saints. A common theme in legends is the disguised woman being accused of seducing or impregnating a local woman. Instead of revealing their identities, these women are then ostracised from their community and the truth of their identity is only revealed after their death.<sup>55</sup> Vern Bullough theorises that these women assume male clothing at a point of crisis within their lives, and that their transvestitism seems to denote a break with their former lives.<sup>56</sup> As women were generally seen as less rational than men, theologians and chroniclers saw women who chose to live and seek God as men as having transcended the limitations of their sex. It was not seen as abnormal; indeed, some Church writers even saw it as admirable. The women discovered were not stigmatised, as Joan was, but accepted, like Silence, and many were later sainted.

In the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, one of these saints, Christina of Markyate, decided at a young age to dedicate herself to God and take a vow of chastity. She spurned the advances of Ranulf Flambard, the Bishop of Durham and an important councillor to William Rufus, by locking him in her chamber when he attempted to force himself onto her. Flambard exacted revenge by arranging her marriage to a young nobleman, Beorthred, of whom her parents approved but, in view of her vow of chastity, Christina did not. Her angry parents then arranged for Beorhtred to

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<sup>52</sup> Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, 99.

<sup>53</sup> Sullivan, "The Fairy Tree," in *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*: 11.

<sup>54</sup> Hannah Hunt et al., "'Virgins of God': Manly Women and Transvestite Saints," in *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012): 70.

<sup>55</sup> Bullough, "Transvestites in the Middle Ages," 1384-85.

<sup>56</sup> Bullough, "Transvestites in the Middle Ages," 1386.

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have access to her room, only to discover the next morning that the two had instead spent the night discussing religious matters.<sup>57</sup> Furious, her parents banned all people of religion from entering their house, and instead ‘invited people given to jesting, boasting, worldly amusement, and those whose evil communications corrupt good manners’ in the hopes of convincing Christina to matrimony.<sup>58</sup> Dressed in male clothing, Christina eventually fled her parents’ house with the aid of some companions, who urged her act like a man when mounting a horse, ‘Why do you honour your feminine sex? Put on a manly spirit and mount the horse like a man.’<sup>59</sup> Christina sought refuge at St Alban’s Abbey and later became Prioress of St Albans, a position of considerable power and authority. Stories from Christina’s life survive in her *Vita*, likely written in the 1130s by a Benedictine monk in the monastery of St Albans in Hertfordshire.<sup>60</sup> Emilie Amt considers Christina’s *Vita* to be one of the most realistic surviving hagiographies.<sup>61</sup>

Valerie Hotchkiss has compiled a fascinating list of transvestite saints, ranging from the early 4<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-16<sup>th</sup>. Whilst this information generally comes from male chroniclers, details such as the women attempting to evade a forced marriage, wanting to serve God as a monk, or taking a vow of chastity, are all common themes, offering a glimpse at the lived experience of these women who chose to so radically reject society’s gender roles.<sup>62</sup> Bullough differentiates the instances of transvestite saints being pardoned their wearing of male clothing, whilst Joan of Arc was executed for it. He posits that women were permitted to wear male clothing in order to seek God, but to compete with men on masculine grounds such as the battlefield was simply unacceptable to medieval society.<sup>63</sup>

The experiences of these transgressive women mirror the experiences of fictional women, many of whom take up male dress and weapons out of desperation: Nicolette is searching for her lover, Grisandole has been separated from her parents, Yde is fleeing an abusive father.<sup>64</sup> Silence and Camille are far from the only literary women to take up arms or fight in battles. The titular Nicolette in the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century chantefable *Auccasin and Nicolette* disguises herself as a minstrel in order to follow and rescue her lover Auccasin. Whilst women are often mentioned in tournament scenes, it is almost exclusively as a spectator, to observe the

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<sup>57</sup> Amt, *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe*, 74.

<sup>58</sup> C. H. Talbot (1959), as quoted Amt, *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe*, 76.

<sup>59</sup> Hotchkiss, "Hagiographic Appendix - The Lives of the Transvestite Saints," 134.

<sup>60</sup> Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, "The Author of the Life of Christina of Markyate: The Case for Robert de Gorron (d. 1166)," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 68, no. 4 (2017): 720. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046916002815>.

<sup>61</sup> Amt, *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe*, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Hotchkiss, "Hagiographic Appendix - The Lives of the Transvestite Saints," 131.

<sup>63</sup> Bullough, "Transvestites in the Middle Ages," 1390.

<sup>64</sup> Perret, "Travesties et Transexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine," 330.

male spectacle as knights joust in their honour.<sup>65</sup> This idea is challenged in the thirteenth-century manuscript *Li Tournoiemant as dames* or The Ladies' Tournament, which portrays a unique picture of women armed and jousting against each other.<sup>66</sup> Although they receive no arming scene, the women are 'booted and spurred' and wield their weapons expertly. The hero of the tournament is awarded extravagantly high praise, 'No man has seen her like. Ah! Roland ... if you had had women of such strength in your company...'<sup>67</sup> Whilst these women are acting in extraordinary ways, their instances of cross-dressing and military action generally occur in response to an absence of masculinity: Silence's parents lack a son, Nicolette is searching for her kidnapped beloved, and the woman of *Li Tournoiemant* are jousting in order to resolve an argument whilst the men of their village are away fighting a foreign war. In these examples, fiction is mirroring life, reflecting McLaughlin's observation of medieval women taking up arms in emergency situations, and Bullough's observation that cross-dressing marks a break with a woman's past.<sup>68</sup>

### *Men in Power*

Medieval kings faced enormous expectations, from both the wider public and their nobility, and their responsibilities stretched from the judicial to the military, from the international to the domestic. Medieval kings were heavily involved in the justice systems within their kingdom, often presiding over cases, ruling on punishments, and creating laws. Ordering either punishment or clemency was yet another way to demonstrate and reinforce a king's authority and regal power. A rebellion was seen as more than treason, it was a challenge to the king's majesty, authority, and masculinity. Even kings who survived a rebellion faced the prospect of a diminished authority and power. Therefore, it was extremely important for medieval kings to maintain their reputation.

Warfare was seen as a quintessentially masculine affair, one through which one's 'manhood' was proved or undermined.<sup>69</sup> Contemporary descriptions of warfare were peppered with gendered references, equating fighting ability to virility and masculinity. During the High Middle Ages, the advent of the Crusades led to changing ideals of masculine behaviour, both on

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<sup>65</sup> Solterer, "Figures of Female Militancy in Medieval France," 527-528.

<sup>66</sup> Solterer, "Figures of Female Militancy in Medieval France," 521.

<sup>67</sup> As quoted Solterer, "Figures of Female Militancy in Medieval France," 524.

<sup>68</sup> Bullough, "Transvestites in the Middle Ages," 1386.

<sup>69</sup> McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior," 194.

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and off the battlefield.<sup>70</sup> For secular elite men, being a crusader was synonymous with being the ideal man; failure to take the cross was sometimes viewed as unmanly and cowardly.<sup>71</sup> This was especially true for kings, many of whom capitalised on the prestige that being a crusader king provided. Military prowess and martial ability were qualities praised in kings, but their commitment to crusading increasingly became an additional obligation, a way of affirming military skills.<sup>72</sup> Even those kings who never ventured to the Holy Lands saw the importance and status a crusader reputation could bring. Hodgson includes a chapter on contrasting masculinities on the crusade, identifying elements such as crusader ethic, Muslim versus Christian values, and the importance placed on feats of arms.<sup>73</sup> However, she also proposes that there is no one ideal form of masculinity to be found in the context of the crusades and that, instead, a more ‘subtle and nuanced approach’ must take into account the varying and often contrasting models of masculinity exhibited within contemporary sources.<sup>74</sup>

There is no doubt that a king’s military reputation was key to his successful rule. In examining the works of Matthew Paris, Mesley comments upon the way Paris harnesses gender to comment on the ways in which certain kings personified chivalric and religious tenets. Paris relies on gendered stereotypes to conceptualise ideal kingship. For example, he characterises the decision of Henry III and Louis IX not to start a war against Holy Roman Emperor Frederik II as ‘it would appear womanlike (*muliebre*) and dishonourable (*inhonestum*) at once to attack one whom they had formerly protected’.<sup>75</sup> Throughout his accounts, Paris ties masculinity and kingship together through gender stereotypes familiar to his audience, reinforcing long-held gender ideals.

There is also a link between the body of the king and the safety and prosperity of his realm and endeavours. Jean of Joinville chronicles the events of King Louis IX of France on the ill-fated Eighth Crusade in his *Vie de saint Louis*. Louis and his forces landed in Carthage in 1270, where disease struck the camp and Louis himself suffered from dysentery. During a retreat, he refused to abandon the bulk of his forces who could not fit on the boat. Having no such scruples, his noble

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<sup>70</sup> Hodgson, "Normans and Competing Masculinities on Crusade," 197.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew M. Mesley, "Performing Plantagenet Kingship: Crusading and Masculinity in Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora*," in *Crusading and Masculinities*, ed. Natasha R. Hodgson, Katherine J. Lewis, and Matthew M. Mesley (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019): 275.

<sup>72</sup> Mesley, "Performing Plantagenet Kingship: Crusading and Masculinity in Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora*," 275.

<sup>73</sup> Natasha R. Hodgson, Katherine J. Lewis, and Matthew M. Mesley, *Crusading and Masculinities* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unda/detail.action?docID=5724687>.

<sup>74</sup> Joanna Phillips, "Crusader masculinities in bodily crises: Incapacity and the crusader leader, 1095–1274" in *Crusading and Masculinities*, ed. Natasha R. Hodgson, Katherine J. Lewis, and Matthew M. Mesley (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019): 151.

<sup>75</sup> Mesley, "Performing Plantagenet Kingship: Crusading and Masculinity in Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora*," 276

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warriors and advisors took flight, leaving the king with ‘not one of all his knights and all his sergeants,’ except for one companion, Geoffrey of Sergines.<sup>76</sup> The king attempts to establish a truce with the Saracens, but is instead taken prisoner and dies from dysentery a few days later. Joinville explicitly links Louis’ physical condition to his ability to rule, to his manliness, leadership, and nobility.<sup>77</sup> He presents Louis as losing control of his own bodily integrity at the same time he is losing control over the military situation of the Eighth Crusade, an image reinforced by the fact that he is deserted by all but his closest companion. Louis was later sanctified, but records of his illness and death continued to contaminate his pure and saintly reputation. Although Ebain suffers no illness, Heldris frequently depicts him as losing control of his actions as well as his kingdom. He loses his temper and rashly bans female inheritance without consulting his nobles, leading to an increase in resentment and hostility. Later, in the desperate fight for the throne, Ebain is knocked from his horse and comes perilously close to losing his kingdom. Ebain’s bodily autonomy and his masculinity are tied to the success or failure of his kingship.

For both medieval churchmen and knights, a ruler’s authority became so closely associated with masculine matters such as commanding knights in the field, or meting out harsh justice, that the idea of a woman as a ruler became unimaginable. Masculinity was tied to physical attributes: a king must be both sound in mind and body, and his royal authority must be enacted and continually reinforced. Under William the Conqueror, the death penalty was abolished and instead forms of corporal punishment, such as blinding and castration were introduced. For example, the punishment for men convicted of political crimes and treason under Norman law was castration, literally ‘unmanning’ the guilty man, and ensuring he could never again aspire to rule.<sup>78</sup>

As noted by Joanna Laynesmith, within Britain, the link between an adulterous queen and failing kingship dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE and is amongst the earliest medieval references to British royalty.<sup>79</sup> However, to have one’s queen, even one found guilty of adultery, drawn and quartered, is almost unheard of in medieval Europe. A few decades after Silence was written, the Tour de Nelse affair in 1314 stunned France, as the daughters-in-law of King Philip IV, Margaret and Blanche, were accused of adultery with two brothers, Gautier and Philip of Aunay. A third daughter-in-law, Joan, was accused of being present and harbouring knowledge of the affairs.

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<sup>76</sup> Jean of Joinville, as quoted Phillips, “Incapacity and the Crusader Leader,” 149.

<sup>77</sup> Phillips “Incapacity and the Crusader Leader,” 149-150.

<sup>78</sup> Van Eickels, “Gendered Violence,” 591-4.

<sup>79</sup> Joanna Laynesmith, “Telling Tales of Adulterous Queens in Medieval England: From Olympias of Macedonia to Elizabeth Woodville,” in *Every Inch a King: Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, ed. Lynette Mitchell and Charles Melville (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 199.

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Following a lengthy investigation, the two knights were tortured, castrated, and executed, but the three princesses were imprisoned for life in Chateau Gaillard.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, Ebain's punishment for both Eupheme and her lover is execution, with Eupheme receiving the harsher punishment: 'In accordance with royal decree/ the nun was executed, and the queen was drawn and quartered./ Thus was the king's justice accomplished.'<sup>81</sup> This harsh punishment is in keeping with Ebain's previous actions, and Heldris' comments on the severity of his justice. Emphasising the wider political impact of the Tour de Nelse affair, Richards posits that, whilst the affairs may indeed have occurred, Philip's barons may have been alarmed at his rise in personal power and authority, and may have used the affair to weaken Philip's, and his son's, authority.<sup>82</sup> The Tour de Nelse affair also had wide-reaching impacts on European literary culture. As Peggy McCracken notes, narratives featuring adulterous queens began to die out in the years following the scandal, suggesting that such tales became less acceptable or entertaining after the triple executions and imprisonments of the French royal family.<sup>83</sup> This drop in the popularity of adulterous queens so soon after the manuscript of *Le Roman de Silence* is believed to have been written may help explain why only one manuscript survives.

Most rebellions during the Middle Ages were incited by a kingdom's nobles, the earls and barons who were, more often than not, the king's cousin, brother, or son. Although rebellions instigated by those lower down the social order were relatively rare during the Early and High Middle Ages, Chris Wickham and others have noted a sharp increase in popular revolts during the thirteenth century and increase substantially following the first outbreak of the Black Death.<sup>84</sup> The rebellion against Ebain follows a similar pattern, instigated by the Count of Chester following ongoing tension between king and nobles. As first noted by K. B. McFarlane, the crown and the nobles were not natural enemies in a state of constant quarrel, but rather that tensions arose as results of specific failures of kingship by monarchs such as John, Edward II, Richard II, or Henry VI.<sup>85</sup> A king's successful rule rested partly on his ability to manage the tensions and ambitions of his nobility. Indeed, Andrew Spencer states that understanding the actions of the upper nobility is

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<sup>80</sup> Earl Jeffrey Richards, "Political Thought as Improvisation: Female Regency and Mariology in Late Medieval French Thought," in *Virtue, Liberty, and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women, 1400–1800*. , ed. Jacqueline and Karen Green. Broad (Dordrecht: Springer: 2007): 8.

<sup>81</sup> *Silence*, L6655-6657.

<sup>82</sup> Richards, "Female Regency and Mariology," 8.

<sup>83</sup> McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery*, 171-2.

<sup>84</sup> Chris Wickham, "Looking Forward: Peasant revolts in Europe, 600– 1200 " in *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*, ed. Justine Firnhaber-Baker and Dirk Schoenaers (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 155.

<sup>85</sup> K.B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 120-121.

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essential to understanding the reign of any medieval king.<sup>86</sup> Rebellions also provide insight into the developing concepts of royal power and authority.<sup>87</sup> The rebellion against Ebain is similar, incited by the Earl of Chester and four other barons, who appear to be pushing for a greater say in shaping the kingdom's laws. Heldris does not specify any familial ties between Ebain and Chester, but as Chester is one of Ebain's closest advisors prior to the rebellion, no doubt his betrayal was a personal as well as a strategic loss. Many medieval kings faced rebellion and challenges to their authority, and a kingdom's nobility played an important role in shaping the king's rule. Thus Heldris' portrayal of Ebain's kingship as unsuccessful and rash speaks to turbulent contemporary events; the early thirteenth century fiasco around the rulership of John and the forced ratification of the Magna Carta is a significant case in point.

The medieval king of the High Middle Ages was not the position of ultimate power and sole rule it was to become in later centuries; kings relied much more heavily on their nobility to support and secure their status. Rebellions from nobles were common, often instigated by those closest to the king, which destabilised the king's power base and often resulted in greater power for the kingdom's leading nobles. Both Chrétien's Arthur and Heldris' Ebain are decentralised figures who suffer the embarrassment of rebellions and unfaithful wives, and who are outshone by young, successful knights. Although both Arthur and Ebain are fictional kings, their actions are grounded in a historical reality – again, one could easily cite the lives and experiences of King John and Queen Isabella of Angoulême. Arthur and Ebain's characterisations, actions, and failings may also reflect something of contemporary fears and expectations of kings. In this light, Heldris' depiction of Ebain is less an exceptionally bad king and more a reflection of the power dynamics of the High Middle Ages.

As exemplified by Euphemie and Queen Eupheme, there is no single experience of women during the Middle Ages, nor were all women seen in a negative light. Euphemie is acknowledged as a skilled healer and Cador consults her on matters regarding their earldom and child. Heldris portrays Euphemie as educated, capable, and respected, an equal partner within her marriage. However, whilst Euphemie demonstrates the possibility for women to operate at the highest levels of medieval court power, she also demonstrates the limited role available to women without being

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<sup>86</sup> Andrew M. Spencer, *Nobility and Kingship in Medieval England: The Earls and Edward I, 1272–1307* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 1-2. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/undu/detail.action?docID=1543672>.

<sup>87</sup> Björn Weiler, "Kings and sons: princely rebellions and the structures of revolt in western Europe, c.1170-c.1280," *Historical research: the bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 82, no. 215 (2009): 18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2281.2007.00450.x>.

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seen as overstepping their gender roles. She is limited to healing and childbearing, supporting the men around her rather than taking charge herself. Whilst her husband consults her on their child's upbringing, it is ultimately Cador's decision. Heldris' depiction of Euphemie's life and influence is reflecting of the lives of other medieval noblewomen, such as Matilda of Boulogne, who acted with authority in aiding their husband.

The Queen, on the other hand, is deliberately kept from power, and merely occupies a ceremonial role within Ebain's court. Euphemie's position is reflective of Queen Isabella's, as each has no authority within the kingdom simply because their husband does not allow them any. Whilst accusations of adultery frequently attached themselves to both real and fictional queens, it is unusual for the queen herself to actively chase an extramarital affair. Heldris frames her attempts to seduce Silence and then her efforts to ruin Silence as her attempts to grasp power.

Despite their similar names, Euphemie and Euphemie reveal the differing roles and positions for women at the centre of medieval power. However, as demonstrated by Heldris, not all women in power faced the same hostility from medieval writers.<sup>88</sup> Whilst Heldris ultimately conforms to contemporary gender ideals by reverting Silence to her birth sex and erasing all traces of masculinity from her body before she is fully integrated back into society through her marriage to Ebain, there is room, both in Heldris' literary imagination and in the writings of contemporaries, for women to act beyond their traditional gender roles.

There is little in the historical record on how men and women transgressed norms of gender and power. However, by reading between the lines of various sources, it is possible to find hints and anecdotes that suggest the possibility that such instances occurred. The little evidence we do have suggests the possibility that Heldris' perceptions are not entirely based on fictions or imagination, but that there is some reflection of more fluid gender and power experiences in the medieval world.

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<sup>88</sup> Janna Bianchini, "A mirror for a queen? Constructions of queenship in twelfth- and thirteenth-century León-Castile," *Journal of Medieval History* 45, no. 4 (2019): 443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2019.1630848>.

# Conclusion

At first glance, the world of *Le Roman de Silence*, with its weak king, sexually transgressive and adulterous queen, and a woman dressing as a man, may seem far removed from the world in which it was written. However, by examining this poem through the framework offered by the History of Experience methodology, a more diverse picture of the High Middle Ages emerges. The aim of this thesis was to investigate whether or not *Le Roman de Silence* disrupts or conforms to our understandings of gender and power in medieval society; to explore whether the claims that Heldris makes about discursive power have a basis in reality, and if his work can give us some insight into the experiences of both men and women of his time, even if only the exceptional.

Having established the world in which Heldris lived and wrote and understanding the way in which he constructs power and gender within his literary imagination, this concluding chapter will explore the role of fiction in reconstructing the lived experience of medieval people, to understand if literature can offer a deeper understanding of the past. It will also evaluate the extent to which the research aims have been addressed, and the significance of the present research within broader scholarship.

## *Battlefields and Bedrooms*

The focus of this thesis has been Heldris' depiction of gender and power through the spheres of the bedroom and the battlefield. These two spheres are where much of the poem's action takes place, and where Heldris establishes and challenges the gender and power norms of his society through his characters.

Through Heldris' depictions of gender and power within the traditionally female sphere of the bedroom, it is possible to see a more diverse picture of medieval gender roles. Despite their near-identical names, Heldris' portrayal of Euphemie and Eupheme could not be more different. Euphemie is praised for her actions and agency, whilst Eupheme is criticised. Silence's mother also acts as a foil against Eupheme, highlighting the extent of the queen's failures, both personal

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and political. Euphemie also reflects something of the reality facing many medieval noblewomen who, whilst able to exert a certain amount of power and agency, were curtailed by the gendered society in which they lived. Similarly, Euphemie's lack of direct power and agency is reflective of the lived experience of Queen Isabella and possibly the generations of women whose lived experience is not reflected in conventional historical records. Through these women, and their historical parallels, it is possible to see elements of Heldris' literary imagination at play in the real world.

Heldris also depicts multiple masculinities in action on the battlefield. As king, Ebain should exhibit exemplary chivalry and bravery, leading his knights and maintaining the stability of his kingdom. However, Ebain is far from the ideal king: his swift ban on female inheritance stirs up resentment amongst his nobles; his harsh punishments without proof of guilt greatly impacts on his subjects. Twice he must be rescued, first from a marauding dragon and then from a disastrous rebellion that threatens his life and throne. Ebain's authority, masculinity, and his ability to competently govern a kingdom are called into question by all those around him. Although at first Ebain's position as king appears entirely fabricated, tenuous as it is, and challenged by rebellions, a dragon, and his wife's frequent infidelity, Heldris' depiction of kingship finds real parallels in the historical experience of several actual medieval kings, such as John or Henry III, whose reigns are both remembered for rebellions and unpopular foreign wives. Cador is first presented as the ideal knight, young, brave, and willing to fight dragons for his beloved. When he is ill, Heldris reveals another side to his character – his deep love for Euphemie and his fear of rejection. However, Cador is also willing to deceive the king, his uncle, through the ruse to raise Silence as a boy. Through his actions, both on and off the battlefield, Heldris demonstrates through Cador that Ebain's power is not absolute and that discursive power no doubt had real impact in the everyday lives of medieval people, high and low.

Silence is Heldris' most complex character, and the one who most challenges accepted understandings gender and power in the High Middle Ages. She is presented as a strong, capable knight, worthy of all the honours typically given to male heroes. However, Silence cannot be both woman and warrior within Heldris' literary imagination: her adventures and knightly authority end when she marries Ebain. No matter how complimentary Heldris is of Silence's military achievements, she must be integrated back into society, conforming to the societal and literary expectations of her birth sex. The hasty conclusion aside, Heldris' characterisation of an honourable, active, masculine female protagonist is unapologetic demonstrating that such unorthodox behaviour was possible, sometimes necessary, and could (perhaps should) be celebrated, and indeed researched.

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Ebain's status as king does not prevent his authority and masculinity from being undermined, just as Silence's birth sex does not prevent her military success. Her story bears many similarities to other women, both historical and literary, who dressed in men's clothing to access the respect and authority that would otherwise have been impossible. Silence's decision is made by her father, who states that, should a boy be born later, Silence can simply shed her masculine life and become his daughter again. Clearly, Heldris does not see gender as fixed at birth, but rather a flexible construct that can be adopted and discarded as needed. Through Ebain, Cador, and Silence, Heldris reveals that his view of power and gender are far from assured – instead, they must be continually reinforced. Ebain's position as king does not guarantee his power and masculinity, just as Silence's birth sex does not prohibit her participation on the battlefield. Through his characters, Heldris clearly challenges accepted understandings of gender and power within the Middle Ages. Here, perhaps Heldris captures something of the flexibility of real lived experience despite the conventions represented for the most part in the non-literary sources.

### *Literature through the History of Experience*

It is important to remember that Heldris is only one writer, and *Le Roman de Silence* only one depiction of life in the High Middle Ages. It is impossible to accurately reproduce a complete and accurate picture of medieval life through only one source, or through the literary imagination of only one author. This, however, is where the History of Experience methodology may prove highly fruitful in contributing to current knowledge of the Middle Ages.

Research through the History of Experience has generally relied on primary sources to establish an understanding of an individual's lived experience. However, when investigating periods in history when no written record survives, or when the individual has left little mark on the historical record, literature can provide what other textual sources cannot. The historical record, and much subsequent scholarship, has primarily been focused on events, from plagues to famines to the deeds of the great men of history. Tax and census records offer a picture of who lived where, but not *how* they lived, or what they thought and felt. In other words, it is very difficult to establish the lived experience of an individual from their tax records, for those records reveal nothing about the individual's emotions, senses, intentions, struggles. As Boddice and Smith also note, it is often those excluded by the dominant discourses who are denied the privilege

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of recording their own history, and this then occludes the possibility of reflecting their experience in the historical record, leaving little for the historian in search of experience to uncover.<sup>1</sup>

Literature can aid in filling this gap in understanding. As Boquet and Nagy clearly state, literature contains not only the deeds and behaviours that make us human, but the emotions that drive us all.<sup>2</sup> Literature can aid in exploring the lived experience of those often neglected within the historical record: the lives of ordinary people, marginalised people, and socially transgressive people. Literature also offers a more diverse and nuanced picture of the world, where women are more than footnotes to great events, they participate in events, demonstrate agency and power. As Richard Hoggart states, literary evidence does more than simply illustrate that a society believes, assumes, or feels something, it recreates what it was *like* to believe, assume, or feel that something.<sup>3</sup> In other words, while not reality itself, literature offers a window into the possible lived experiences of individuals and groups; if nothing more than at least by posing significant questions around the possibilities of diverse experience.

By grounding a work of literature within its historical context, the History of Experience methodology can enable deeper understandings of literature. By considering the text within the cultural and literary context of which it was written, it is possible to better understand how one might perceive those structures. For example, Heldris' use of the arming scene is engaging and interesting to a modern audience, but to its medieval audience, the arming scene was more than a formality. It was a ritual that underscored the authority and masculinity of the hero, to honour the hero and the combat, and to link the hero to other literary greats. The gemstones that adorn Silence's armour appear as nothing more than decorative to a modern audience, but a medieval audience would have understood the deeper significance each gemstone played in reinforcing Silence's authority and masculinity. Therefore, by understanding both the cultural and literary context, a modern reader is better able to understand the significance of Silence's arming scene. Heldris' poem demonstrates that performances of gender and power could be, at the very least, imagined in ways that sit outside of the conventional structures of society. The real-life examples further demonstrate that such varied performances were indeed part of life. His text also helps us to imagine, perhaps, the details not recorded in the historical record, that which is not visible. That is, not that power and gender were negotiable, but *how* power and gender might be negotiated. The nuances, the anecdotes, the conversations, the feelings that men and women might have had

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<sup>1</sup> Boddice and Smith, *Emotion Sense Experience*, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Boquet and Nagy, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hoggart, "The Literary Imagination and the Sociological Imagination," in *Speaking to Each Other*, vol. II: "About Literature" (London, Chatto & Windus, 1970: 1967).

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in these real-life situations can be extrapolated from Heldris' text. This nuance within Heldris' literary imagination is reflective of a wider societal truth – that power and gender were far from stable.

The History of Experience relies on having a body of evidence from which to draw conclusions regarding an individual's lived experience. When investigating literature for evidence of experience, it is important to remember that literature should not be viewed as an exact replica of reality. Even when an author is writing about their own society, their work is still an expression of their perception, not an accurate picture of history. Therefore, conclusions drawn from literary sources must be grounded in historical reality. Even allowing for creativity and literary conventions, literature – as a form of art – reflects on, considers, and responds to its own context.<sup>4</sup> Literature must have some basis in reality to be effective and appealing to audiences. It is therefore necessary to ground any work of literature in the historical context in which it was written.

It is impossible to accurately reconstruct Silence's lived experience from Heldris' poem, for it is not possible to capture a character's lived experience, only the author's perception. Heldris is not attempting to tell the story of a transgender man, he is exploring contemporary issues of power, gender, authority, and the lengths some people will go to in order to secure their own future.

## *Research Aims*

The research aims, established in the introduction, sought to interrogate Heldris' depictions of power and gender through the History of Experience methodology, and to determine the degree to which his perceptions may reflect lived reality. This thesis sought to understand the role of fiction in reconstructing the lived experience of medieval people, and to consider the ways in which *Le Roman de Silence* disrupts, or conforms to, our understandings of gender and power in medieval society.

The first chapter clearly examined Anglo-Norman experiences of power and gender in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In examining the religious and socio-political structures and discourses that governed Heldris' world and the literary structures that may have influenced his work, it established a foundation through which to better situate *Le Roman de Silence* within its historical and literary context, thus addressing the first research aim.

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<sup>4</sup> Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin*, 1

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Chapters Two and Three focused on Heldris' literary imagination and his depictions of gender and power within the spheres of the bedroom and the battlefield. Chapter 2 explored patterns of gender and power within the bedroom: Euphemie's healing and dynastic power, Eupheme's use of sex as a means to power, and Ebain's lack of masculinity within the bedroom. In exploring Heldris' depictions of warfare Chapter 3 demonstrated the ways in Heldris reinforced or undermined the masculinity and authority of his characters through their actions on the battlefield. Often, Heldris emphasises patterns of behaviour established in one sphere with actions exhibited in the other, demonstrating the interconnected relationship between the public and the private spheres of medieval life. Together, these chapters demonstrated that Heldris perceived gender and power as fluid rather than fixed, expressing that they are not necessarily determined by one's birth sex and status. Together, these two chapters have clearly addressed my second research aim.

The fourth chapter explored the embodied realities of power and gender in the High Middle Ages, testing Heldris' perceptions against the historical record. In drawing together Heldris' perception and examples of lived experience from the historical record, it demonstrated the historical basis for Heldris' characters and ultimately, it revealed that, whilst Heldris' depictions are unusual, varied performances and depictions of power and gender are by no means unprecedented within the historical record.

The History of Experience methodology has proven useful in facilitating a deeper understanding of both *Le Roman de Silence* and the historical context in which it was written. It is clear, from this analysis, that literature and experience were both situational and relational; the one is not easily divorced from the other. By viewing Heldris' text holistically (as a response to dominant societal structures, as a perception of those structures, and as a reflection of them – perhaps even an influence on them), one gets a much more complete understanding of the complexity of the poet's world. Indeed, through the HEX lens, the value of literature in reconstructing the many varieties and possibilities of actual lived experience can be demonstrated. The perception of gender and power fluidity, demonstrated throughout the text, finds clear parallels in the actual world of Heldris' near contemporaries.

### *Future Research*

Whilst the conclusions drawn in this thesis come from one source, they have proven fruitful to a certain degree. It seems clear that more work at the intersection of literature and the History of Experience should be done to firm up some of the conclusions come to here and to tease out some of the problems. The History of Experience may prove useful in analysing the

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wide range of narratives, both in time and in geographic location, that, like *Silence*, feature fluid gender roles. Supported by the historical record, these poems may reveal more nuance to traditional views of medieval gender and power.

Although scholarship into *Le Roman de Silence* has increased in recent years, it is still a relatively unknown and under-researched poem. Further research into Silence's mother and Queen Eupheme may reveal contrasting ideals of womanhood and queenship, and King Ebain has more to reveal about the role of the medieval king. As several scholars have identified Heldris' personification of Nurture in opposition to Nature to be unique within medieval literature, further investigation into their roles would certainly be of scholarly importance. In particular, I believe further research into the miniatures adorning the Nottingham manuscript will greatly add to current knowledge, as they have not been thoroughly investigated. As they contain scenes not present within the manuscript, they offer a greater insight into the text. Alison Stones and Michelle Bolduc have examined the miniatures, and both conclude that, in depicting scenes merely alluded to, the images complement and enhance the meaning of the poem.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, further testing on the inks and pigments used to create the manuscript may aid in more accurately dating the manuscript.

Given that Roche-Madhi's translation was published in 1992, the time may be ripe for a new translation, one that incorporates the rhyme and meter of the original poem and includes a discussion on its miniatures in relation to the text. This new translation would also have the advantage of several decades' scholarly attention and debate to draw on, and would, therefore, be better able to explain and convey the nuances of Heldris' original text.

With regards to wider scholarship, there are many more works of medieval literature that could potentially benefit from a History of Experience lens. The literary experience of Silence, Blanchandine, Camille, and so many others, and the historical experience of transvestite saints, of Joan of Arc, and Margaret of Beverley, to mention a few, all demonstrate the need for and importance of ongoing, gender-focused historical enquiry. Exploring these diverse narratives reinforces the importance, legitimacy, and the need for gendered studies of historical experience and the need to refocus on and therefore legitimise the unorthodox and transgressive element in history.

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<sup>5</sup> Alison Stones, "Two French Manuscripts: WLC/LM/6 and WLC/LM/7," in *The Wollaton Medieval Manuscripts: Texts, Owners and Readers*, ed. Ralph Hanna and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2010); Michelle Bolduc, "Images of Romance: The Miniatures of 'Le Roman de Silence,'" *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (2002), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870418>.

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Therefore, further research into *Le Roman de Silence*, as well as other subversive texts, has the potential to contribute significantly to current understandings of medieval life. Heldris' poem unequivocally demonstrates that the performance of gender and power could be, at the very least, imagined in ways that sit outside of the conventional structures of society.

### *Significance*

This research has sought to understand the ways in which *Le Roman de Silence* disrupts our understandings of power and gender in medieval society. Much current research has treated the poem as an outlier, an extraordinary poem with few links to the historical or literary record of the Middle Ages. However, through the History of Experience methodology, I have uncovered both literary and historical parallels to Heldris' poem, in the stories of women raising armies and going on crusade, in the records of transvestite saints, of unsuccessful kings and adulterous queens, and in the literary examples of women who cross-dressed, fought in battles, and gained power and authority through feats of arms. Heldris' differing depiction of Eupheme and Euphemie shows that women were not treated with universal hostility. Heldris is certainly not an advocate for women in power, but he does demonstrate the potential for women to exert power.

Heldris' poem is not purely aesthetic, it functions outside of the literary conventions and says something about how men and women experienced their world in multifarious, unconventional, and nonconforming ways. Through the History of Experience, this thesis has clearly demonstrated that, whilst *Le Roman de Silence* may be a fictitious narrative, the characters within Heldris' literary imagination reflect something of the lived reality of gender and power relations within the High Middle Ages.

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