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"What's the use? There's too much to say": A(na)tomizing Silence in Heldris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence*

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ABSTRACT

In medieval culture, silence (through its connection with the virtue of Patience) has an important place in ethical thought, as well as a central place in philosophical, epistemological, and theological discourse. Examining the repeated and sometimes contradictory depictions of silence in the 13th-century French romance *Roman de Silence*, this essay investigates the way in which medieval poets – whose poetry at times seems to resist states of silence, to fill the world with as much language and narrative as possible – negotiate the ethics and metaphysics of medieval silence. I argue that the narrator's careful, sometimes ironic, account of the variety of forms which silence can take and of the competing reasons the individual may choose to adopt silence, reflect his interest in silence as a solution to social and political problems; and that this curious romance exemplifies the paradoxical, even strained, relation between silence and the medieval writers who write about it.

Keywords: Heldris of Cornwall, *Roman de Silence*, silence in medieval culture

「所用為何？言之不盡」：剖析康沃爾郡黑爾德瑞思的作品《沈默的傳奇》中的沉默

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摘　要

在中世紀文化中，沉默（因爲其與耐心此一美德的關聯）在道德思想中擁有重要的地位，亦於哲學、知識論、與神學論述裡佔據核心位置。透過檢視十三世紀法國文學作品《沈默的傳奇》中對於沉默重複且時而矛盾的描述，本文檢視中世紀詩人在倫理與沉默形上學之間如何商榷——中世紀詩人的詩歌有時似乎抗拒沉默的狀態，試圖用語言與敘述填滿整個世界。《沈默的傳奇》敘述者對於沉默的可能形式進行了仔細且時而諷刺的描述，並且對個人選擇沉默所根據的諸多相斥理由有所陳述。筆者認爲，這些敘述反應了作者對於沉默作爲社會與政治問題的解決方法懷抱著興趣，而這部引人注意的傳奇文學作品則體現了書寫沉默的中世紀作家與沉默之間所存在之矛盾、甚或緊張的關係。

關鍵詞：康沃爾郡黑爾德瑞思、《沈默的傳奇》、中世紀文化中的沈默

"What's the use? There's too much to say": A(na)tomizing Silence in Heldris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence*

John Lance Griffith

Early on in his tale, the narrator of Heldris of Cornwall's thirteenth-century French romance finds himself getting distracted:

> The wedding festivities went on for a year:
> that was the custom in those days,
> they lived life to the fullest then.
> But avaricious men—God curse them—
> have spoiled the old ways.
> I'm really incensed ... (253-58)[1]

This is followed by seventeen angry lines railing against avaricious men (259-76), before he steps back and begins his story again:

> What's the use? There's too much to say.
> I want to get back to my story.
> The festivities in England were magnificent…. (275-77)[2]

This is not the first silence in this tale entitled the *Roman de Silence*, the *Romance of Silence*; there were others and will be more to follow (most notably when the heroine herself is named Silence); but this particular moment of silence is a significant one, I think. For it establishes that, while

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[1] Les noces durent .xii. mois,
Car tels estoit adonc lor lois.
Entiere avoit adonques joie;
Mais li aver, cui Dex renoie,
Ont enpirie la costume.
Gran maltalens m'art et alume …. (253-58)
Passages quoted in this essay are from the Roche-Mahdi edition of the *Roman de Silence*.

[2] Cui caut? Car trop i a a dire:
Repairier voel a ma matyre.
Grans fu la fieste en Engletiere. (275-76)

much of the tale is about Silence (the female character) and therefore (thematically speaking) about women and silence, the text as a whole is fascinated with all kinds of silence, including that silence which marks the boundaries of a narrative, with which every poet must engage. There is too much to say and therefore he cannot say everything; he must silence himself on one point or risk (Tristram Shandy-like) digressing endlessly and never completing his story. Yet as a poet, he must say something. Every narrative thread abandoned to silence must be replaced by some other speech; he ends one story to return to another. To ask the question "What is the use [of continuing to speak]?" and then to keep speaking, is to beg the more central question in a story about a character named Silence: "What is the use of silence?"

The text takes up various social and ethical problems posed by silence, particularly those silences which are active and deliberate on the part of the individual. But the text does so without becoming a didactic sermon on the value or non-value of silence. The poem's length and complexity obscure any obvious or explicit exegetical path for its audience to follow. Such obfuscation is, I suspect, deliberate, in that—like the works of other serious and complex medieval writers (Chaucer, Boccaccio)—the text functions as more than sermon or even social criticism. In addition to being an entertaining tale, it is a text that anatomizes a subject in order to invite readers or listeners[3] to make sense of the facts of that anatomy, to construct for themselves a point of view after meditating on the subject. By focusing on the characters other than Silence herself and on the episodes in which she does not take part, the following essay demonstrates that the extensive references to silence and speech form a thematic matrix, a patterned web of images and ideas as it were, generated by this text for its audience to reflect upon. I argue that the narrator's careful, sometimes ironic, account of the variety of forms which silence can take and of the competing reasons the individual may choose to adopt silence, reflect his interest in silence as a solution to social and political problems. At the same time, I suggest the

[3] Because the story was recorded in a manuscript it could have been read privately, though, of course, given the medieval practice of reading aloud and public recitation, much of the original audience may have heard rather than read this story. However, neither that nor the fact it was designed to be entertaining renders it any less complex (no more than is the case with a Chaucerian tale) or lessens the philosophical and educational value of it for the thoughtful audience member. If anything, for a listening audience, the ironic contrast between the story's thematic treatment of silence and the narrator's inability to refrain from speaking would have been that much more evident.

poem resists making didactic claims about the nature and the value of silence, instead presenting the choice between silence and speech as an ethical problem for the courtier (or any individual) and as a philosophical and aesthetic problem for the poet. I argue that this curious Arthurian romance exemplifies the paradoxical, even strained, relation between silence and the medieval writers who write about it.

The *Roman de Silence*: background and critical reception

Uncovered in 1911, the manuscript of the *Roman de Silence* is the only existing work of Heldris of Cornwall. The Old French text was first published in book form by Lewis Thorpe in 1972. Since then there have been several translations[4] and a growing critical interest in the work.

No doubt it is one of the best stories one will ever read about a character named Silence. The basic plot is as follows. A king plagued by a dragon is saved by one of his knights; the king then grants him the power to choose any maiden in the kingdom for a wife. Wounded in the battle with the dragon, the knight is cured by the skill of a lady at court, to whom the grateful king grants the power to choose any man for a husband. Unsure of whom the other will choose as a spouse, each of them hides their love from the other; eventually the silence is broken and they confess their love for one another. They happily marry and have a child. However, while the slow courtship was taking place, one of the king's favorite knights is slain in a duel meant to resolve a dispute with another knight over a woman. In a fit of rage the king decrees that girls will no longer be able to inherit land or money from their parents. Thus when the parents learn that their newborn is a girl, they decide to raise her as a boy. They name her Silentia, but resolve to call her Silentius from now on. Thus begins the saga of Silence herself—a girl raised as a boy who grows up to become the most skilled and highly regarded of knights, but who is constantly forced to conceal the truth about her birth and her sex.[5]

Much of the critical attention paid to the story by Roche-Mahdi and others focuses on issues of gender in the tale.[6] Roche-Mahdi suggests the

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[4] For translations, see Psaki or Roche-Mahdi, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Romance*.

[5] For a discussion of the possible sources and analogues of the tale, see Roche-Mahdi's introduction xii-xvii.

[6] For feminist/ gender criticism of the tale, see Burr; Blumreich; Clark; Khan; Kinoshita "Male-Order Brides"; Keene; Ringer; Stock "Arms"; and Tolmie. See Kinoshita "Feudal Politics"; Kocher; and

possibility that, because the name Heldris of Cornwall might be a pseudonym borrowed from Geoffrey of Monmouth's history, the author of text could be, like the heroine Silence, a woman disguised as a man (xi, footnote 2). What separates the text from other medieval, especially Arthurian, romances is that "Heldris raises … profound questions, predicated on the primary opposition of speech and silence, concerning women's voice and men's discourse, women's place in or absence from the social contract, whether verbal, economic or political—matters that the modern reader might reasonably expect to find expressed so explicitly and with such emphasis on linguistic play in French feminist criticism of the 1970's rather than in a medieval romance" (xx). Certainly the relationship between women and silence is central to the text: hiding Silentia's gender and raising her as Silentius gives her masculine voice and power, while the resolution of the story returns her name and gender to her, effectively silencing her from thereon. Yet there are many other forms of and references to silence in the text that are not related to gender. The silence of women is but one part of a larger matrix of images of silence. The *Roman* is not only the story of Silence (the girl), but a story about silence (the concept).

In one sense the text is an anatomy of silence, a taxonomy of the various types of silence and the various situations in which one might encounter silence. Yet it is far from a rigorous critical report. It is difficult to find a coherent pattern to the examples, but they repeatedly surface and exist as indirect challenges to one another: the silence of Christ, the silence of the dead, the silence of the courtier before the king, the silence of the king before the courtier when the king is embarrassed; the silence intended to protect a loved one, the silence intended to protect oneself. The text is voluminous and sprawling, more than half as long as *Paradise Lost*, but without Milton's clarity of thought and organization. For both the medieval listener and the modern reader, engaging its 6706 lines induces a meditative exercise on the nature of silence itself. The audience is left to take the elements of the taxonomy and reflect on them, constructing an order of one's own.

For the most part this text is interested in silence as a solution to moral and socio-political problems more so than in silence as a state of being which might induce some manner of metaphysical experience (for example, the silence of a cathedral vault or the silence self-imposed in a monastery).

Lloyd for essays which deal at greater length with issues other than gender in the text.

The choice to speak or not to speak—and the absence of such choices in a world where the power of speech is unevenly distributed—mark key moments in the narrative. Indeed, the choice between silence and speech facing the characters is one of concern to the poet as well. The poem would not exist if the poet chose not to speak, but equally the poet would have nothing to speak about if not for certain fateful speech acts (and, again, non-speech-acts) performed by the characters. Thus in this essay I focus largely on passages not directly concerning Silence herself partly in order to demonstrate that the text's interest in silence extends beyond Silence herself (as a woman) and problems of gender, and partly to suggest that the tumultuous state of Evan's kingdom reflects the epistemological troubles of the poet. To the extent that the king chooses to speak on the matter of avarice, he engenders a silence amongst his subjects which destabilizes the court and indeed (in Silence's case) threatens to unravel the very fabric of Nature. To the extent that the poet chooses to voice his feelings about the declining values of the court of his own day and about the questionable behavior of the characters in his own story, his narrative thread is disrupted and his tale disorganized. Yet to the extent that he refrains from speaking, he runs the risk of having no story to tell at all. In the analysis below of the episodes about the dragon and about the French and English courts, I argue that in these particular episodes we observe this text's ambivalent relationship to the concept of silence: the poet chooses not to preach to his audience and tell them precisely how to assess the value of silence, but rather presents these complex episodes so that the audience can think about silence as an ethical and political problem for the courtier (or any individual), and as a philosophical and aesthetic problem for the poet.

First, then, let us consider more closely the lengthy prologue and history which begins the text and delays the birth of Silence for over sixteen hundred lines.

A Noisy Prologue: Silence and the Poet

The first quarter of the poem covering the history of King Evan and of Silence's parents (Cador and Eufemie) could be material for a tale in its own right. Cador himself is a noble knight who defeats a dragon and the long, agonizing courtship of his love Eufemie is the stuff of medieval (and modern soap operatic) melodrama. Of course, this pre-empting of the true hero (ine)'s appearance—this noisy tale introducing Silence—may at first seem a

trial of the audience's patience, an ironic counterpoint to the notion of telling a story about silence. As far as the plot goes, the relevance of these events to the central story of Silence could have been handled in a sentence or two. Silence's parents decide to raise her as a boy because King Evan has decreed that girls are no longer able to inherit wealth; he has done so in anger because one of his knights was killed by another knight as they dueled for the hand (and so the wealth) of a noblewoman.

Yet while the plot is unnecessarily elaborated, the thematic core of the work is unfolded in a sophisticated, if not always clear, manner during the long opening which the reader must wade through while anticipating the arrival of the tale's hero (ine). The irony that the story of Silence can only be arrived at through a wordy introduction underscores the irony inherent in the very idea of narrating silence: the absence of words, voice and sound can only be talked about, narrated, commented upon by its very opposite. The form of such a tale can never reflect the nature of its theme. Silence—the character and the idea—must be born of and into a world of noise.

The prologue is a conventional opening, reflecting on the state of the court and the state of poets in such a world, in this case manifesting as a diatribe against "the kind of people / who don't know a good story / when they hear one" (6-8).[7] Other vices at court are condemned, namely stinginess and avarice, economic sins that have come to supplant chivalric virtues as "generosity, jousting and tourneying, / wearing ladies' sleeves and making love / have turned to heaping up mounds of dung" (43-45):[8]

> In this prologue to my poem
> I feel tremendously compelled, stung, goaded [into talking about this].
> It bothers me terribly
> that people are driven to disgrace themselves.
> Before I begin my story for you,
> I really have to let it all out a little
> in order to get into the proper frame of mind.
> I want to get it all out of my system beforehand,

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[7] Que, quant il oënt un bon conte,
Ne sevent preu a quoi il monte. (7-8)

[8] Doner, joster et tornoier,
Mances porter et dosnoier
Ont torné en fiens entasser. (43-45)

so that when it's time to tell the tale,
there'll be nothing left in me to spoil the telling.
So now I'm going to get it off my chest!
Cursed be the day the strongbox was ever forged,
for which so many kings and counts
have disgraced themselves I can't keep count.
O greedy people, alas! Alas! …. (73-87)[9]

Despite the conventional complaints by the poet, the prologue nonetheless works to establish the main concerns of the text. The joke is that while the complaints themselves are superfluous to the text, the poet's inability to refrain from voicing them is not. And despite his efforts to empty himself, he proves to be a narrator who cannot keep silent, but repeatedly inserts himself into the text. Immediately the paradoxical nature of silence is introduced: on the one hand, he cannot remain silent because the vice needs to be exposed; on the other hand, in the act of speaking, he creates an additional problem (the disruption of the story) in which case keeping silent himself would have been preferable. Throughout the text characters find themselves torn between the benefits of speech and the rewards of silence.

Yet this situation is particular to that of a poet, thus raising questions about the relation between silence and text, between poet and voice: the poet must speak to tell the story, but how much should he say? What causes him to break silence and tell a story? Interestingly, the speaker introduces the notion that speech can be compelled. It is almost as if he cannot keep silent, as if he has to say his piece about avarice and must speak (about one thing) in order to go on speaking (about another that he really wants to talk about).

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[9] Grans volentés me point et lime.
Il me prent moult grans maltalens
Qu'a force se honist la gens.
Ainz que jo m'uevre vus conmence,
M'estuet un petit que jo tence
Por moi deduire en bien penser,
Car jo me voel tost desivrer,
Que quant ventra al conte dire
N'ait en moi rien qui m'uevre enpire.
Or dirai donques ma gorgie.
Mar fust la morjoie ainc forgie
Dont sont honi tant roi, tant conte,
Tant chevalier, n'en sai le conte.
Avere gent! ahi! ahi! (73-87)

This suggests that text and story themselves are products of a silence which needs to be broken; that they are the sum of things we wish to say and of things we must say. Poetry is an emptying out of the poet, a voicing of what he cannot keep silent, cannot keep inside himself.

A Tangled Web of Silence in King Evan's Court: the Ethics and Aesthetics of Silence

As the history of King Evan develops, it is tied thematically to the poet's concerns about avarice. Interestingly, this history, immediately following the narrator's remarks on silence in the prologue, returns again to questions about silence even as it explores the dangers of avarice, fusing ethical and aesthetic concerns, and demonstrating the web-like interweaving of ideas which characterizes the structure of this complicated text.

Like Arthur, Evan is held up as a model king of the past, in this case a generous one who is free and lavish with his goods (in general [121-37] and in particular at his wedding [249-55]). The events which disrupt the peace he has forged stem from inordinate desire for inherited wealth, as two knights battle to the death in order to win the hand of a wealthy heiress. Later we see that it is the unwillingness of Silence's parents to see their wealth unbequeathed that leads them to raise Silence as a boy (1686-91, 1759).

The dragon defeated by Cador (the act which brings him to the attention of the king) represents both greed and death (and presumably the causal relation between the two). Dragons are traditionally associated with hoarding and avarice. In a nice variation on the conventional trope of hoarded gold in the dragon's lair, Cador' dragon is characterized with a specific image of gluttony and insatiable appetite as it consumes the men of King Evan's court (483-86). The dragon's overpowering hunger results in its own death as its continuing feast causes it to linger and exposes it to Cador's attack. Of course the dragon, greedy for the greedy men at court, brings death to the court as well. Curiously, this death is envisioned as the sudden end of speech visited upon the courtiers as they walk together one day in the forest:

> They were ambling along, joking and chatting,
> when it rushed into the midst of their company
> and stung them with its tail and grabbed them.
> It spewed forth venom from its mouth

that harmed and killed whomever it touched. (348-52)[10]

There is some irony in the juxtaposition of Cador's initial triumph over the dragon Avarice and his subsequent failure to accept the king's decree which deprives him of an heir. Yet the fact that the dragon is associated not only with avarice but also, in a less obvious manner, with silence invites further analysis.

The description of the dragon's attack contains only one word describing sound, *siflant*: "a great big dragon came / whistling through the forest towards them" (346-47).[11] The attack is thus not silent, but it is not easily perceived either, as the men are taken suddenly and by surprise; the sound is just the swift movement of the dragon through the air. We may imagine the sounds which accompany the ensuing attack, but the text focuses on the dragon's movement, the physical consequence of the attack, and the stench generated by the dragon's flames and the charring flesh. [12] Not until King Evan weeps at line 372 is there any explicit indication of sound.[13] The fire comes from its nostrils, but the text mentions its mouth as well: "It spewed forth venom from its mouth / that harmed and killed whomever it touched" (351-52). In Old French, the rhyme of *bouche* and *touche* reinforces the notion that what comes out of the mouth affects the world, in this case in a negative way. And yet this dragon has no speech; his venom is in that regard a silent killer.

Reading the dragon figuratively leads to two antithetical and equally unsatisfying possibilities. If what spews from the mouth is monstrous, silence is preferable. On the other hand, if the dragon is a silent killer and is

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[10] Et li alquant s'en vont ciflant,
Tant qu'il se fiert ens en la rote
Et point les o sa choe et tolte.
Geite venim parmi la bouche:
Honist et tue quanque touche. (348-52)

[11] Si vint uns serpens grans et gros
Par le foriest viers als siflant …. (345-46)

[12] For a modern reader, familiar with the wall of sound created by modern action films, the sound effects for this scene are supplied unthinkingly. But one wonders if, for the medieval audience, this scene unfolds more like a silent animation.

[13] After the lengthy unfolding of the scene without any prompt by the poet as to the sound, Cador's slaying of the dragon ends with an explicit bray and shriek by the dragon (499), though the king hears it from a distance and is uncertain of its meaning, fearful it might signal the death of Cador – a curious instance of a sound, as opposed to a puzzling silence, needing to be interpreted and then misinterpreted by a character.

a metaphor for silence, then silence itself is monstrous. But if the dragon embodies the negative elements of noise and of venomous speech, why is its attack largely silent and why are there so many other examples in the text of silence being a negative choice? It is perhaps more tempting to read the dragon as a negative embodiment of silence because so many instances of silence in the tale seem to be negative. This episode also features the silence of the knights when the king asks for help in defeating the dragon: "Nobody dared to utter a word, / no matter how much he promised to give, / no matter how much he cajoled and wheedled, / nobody dared boast that he would attack it" (387-90).[14] In this case, remaining silent indicates their lack of bravery and unwillingness to aid their lord. [15]

The silences which characterize Cador, the hero who defeats the dragon and later becomes father to Silence, are equally ambivalent. Cador, interestingly, is willing to fight the dragon, but only because of a silence within himself. He secretly loves Eufemie but has not dared to speak of it (405-07) to her or anyone else (and so is motivated to defeat the dragon largely by the hope that he will be rewarded with her hand by the king). His own method of assault is, like that of the dragon, largely silent. The result is that Cador's triumph over the dragon is somewhat anti-climactic and not the most heroic in literature. Cador moves "very quietly, so that it wouldn't hear him" (480) and refrains from attacking it "until he saw it drunk with blood"

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[14] N'i a nul ki ost mot soner,
Por quanque il promet a doner,
Por quanque il sot dire et canter,
Qui del envaïr s'ost vanter. (387-90)

[15] The connection between the dragon and silence seems all the more pronounced when one considers that later in the text the noise of battle between human armies is explicitly noted several times (5424-5425; 5444) – a case where war and its attendant noise are placed in a negative light by the narrator, where the silence of peace would be preferable to the sounds of war. These two episodes represent the moments in which Silence and her father become heroes. Thus one interpretation is that the silence which surrounds Cador's battle represents an ideal state of knighthood, in which the individual struggles against a monster, an evil. By contrast, Silence ironically becomes a man (indeed a hero among men) when she proves herself to be the greatest of knights not just at tournaments but also on the field of a very real and very bloody war in which she slaughters other human beings amid the din of battle. At that moment, she abandons all that is feminine: silence, beauty, gentleness. We are reminded that, for all the bad things about being a woman which she runs from and for all the good things about being a man which she desires, in order to be a man she must also accept the unpleasant realities of being a man (as she would have had to accept those of being a woman had she remained a girl). The text, at least in its account of the war, does not necessarily second Silence's conclusion that "a man's life / was much better than that of a woman [Et voit que miols valt li us d'ome / Que l'us de feme, c'est la some]" (2637-38).

(482).[16] Surprising the dragon, he strikes "before it caught sight of [him]" (487),[17] though this stealth-attack fails and Cador is forced to fight the dragon briefly head on. These silences of Cador, combined with the fact that he leaves the court surreptitiously without telling anyone that he is going to fight the dragon,[18] only complicate the episode's rich treatment of the issues involved in choosing between speech and silence.

The history of King Evan is as much about issues of proper speech and silence as about avarice, and locates the source of the future troubles of Silence herself in problematic language acts (and non-acts) as much as in the greed of the nobles or the arbitrariness of the king's law. But the exact relation between silence and the fate of Silence remains unclear. For all the poet's authorial intervention and commentary, his thoughts on silence itself remain unspoken and his assessment of Silence herself remains ambivalent at best. The text does not evaluate silence as either good or evil.

Two other events in the opening history of King Evan establish this ambivalence which itself becomes a thematic and indeed structural component of the text as a whole: the king's angry decree denying women inherited wealth (308-36); and the arrival of his queen at court for her marriage to King Evan (240-46). Similar to the scene with the dragon, both episodes are good examples of how the web-like matrix of images and references to silence functions in this text. Each deals with the problem of silence only indirectly, but each significantly shapes the course of the narrative.

Upon learning that two of his knights killed one another while fighting over the inheritance of two wealthy twin sisters, the king issues an angry decree (308-36) forbidding women from inheriting wealth. The court's public response is unanimous confirmation, but the poet's editorializing implies their unspoken views:

> He had everyone swear to uphold the decree,
> to confirm the validity of the oath.

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[16] Viers le serpent vint une voie
Tolt coiëment que il ne l'oie,
Car ne li violt pas faire cuivre
Ainz qu'il le voïs[t] del sanc ivre. (479-482)

[17] Anchois qu'il ait Cador veü …. (487)

[18] "[He] didn't want anyone but God to know [Ne violt qu'altres fors Deu le sace]" (419). With his reason unarticulated, we are left to guess whether it is because he does not believe in boasting or because he wants to conceal his true motivation.

> Some did it in anger,
> but most did it quite gladly —
> the ones who had nothing to lose.
> But for those who had only daughters
> and huge holdings to bequeath,
> don't you think their hearts were filled with rancor? (319-26)[19]

We and the poet must guess at what is in their hearts because no one speaks up in protest. A false public declaration masks their true, unspoken, feelings. But for the king, the voicing of an oath, however insincere, is enough. He then orders the burial of the two knights and designs a tomb with a cautionary epitaph:

> "Greed has robbed many a man of his freedom,
> and more than that if he gets hooked—
> she makes him trot till he is dead."
> The king didn't want to stay any longer;
> the living left the dead in peace,
> since they could give them no other comfort,
> and everyone left for home. (330-36)[20]

By inscribing the epitaph, the king effectively ends all discourse; he and the court leave the dead alone because there is no use talking about it. Yet the poem goes on and, instead of finding closure, expands in a narrative rupture born of the king's very effort to silence discourse. The sudden

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[19] L'asise fait a tols jurer
Por bien le sairement durer.
Alquant le font ireëment
Et li plusor moult liëment,
Qui n'en donroiënt une tille.
Mais cil qui n'a mais une fille
Et a ballier grant teneüre,
Cuidiés qu'il n'ait al cuer rancure? (319-326)

[20] Escrire i fait: "Par covoitise
Tolt a maint home sa francise, /
Et plus avoec – quant s'i amort
Troter le fait jusque a la mort."
Li rois n'i violt plus demorer.
Li vif lasscent les mors ester,
Qu'autre confort n'en puet on faire.
Cascuns s'en vait a son repaire. (330-36)

arrival of the dragon and the marriage of Cador and Eufemie are necessary but not sufficient factors to ensure the continuation of the story of Silence. Rather Silence becomes who she is and the poem becomes what it is because of the king's decree and the unwillingness of the nobles (including Cador on the day of his daughter's birth) to speak against it. The naming of Silence and the peculiar upbringing she experiences both originate in the initial silence of the court before the authority of King Evan.

This episode of the king's anger is preceded by an eruption of the poet's anger over the effects and the rapid spread of avarice (256-75), similar to the king's outburst. The poet, however, is outraged on principle, whereas presumably the king's rage is motivated by personal grief, for the king knew the two knights, who were not just "good men" as in the English translation, but *mes barons en ai perdus* (310). The poet, too, inspired initially by concerns about avarice, finds himself caught up in problems of speech and silence:

> But avaricious men—God curse them—
> have spoiled the old ways.
> I'm really incensed
> to think they've changed things so!
> I'd really like to kill the bastards
> who have so abased honor.
> And for those of highest rank who have abandoned it—
> they only live a short time anyhow,
> and with the devil always on their tail at that!
> They live less well than they used to,
> and yet the more they have, the more they want.
> This really makes me very angry.
> It's as if they were caught by a spider:
> thus she stretches her web, labors and works;
> and just as one doesn't see the design
> that she has worked into her web,
> the dazzled stinking fools are trapped,
> cleric and layman and count and duke,
> no less than any other dupe.
> What's the use? There's too much to say.

> I want to get back to my story. (256-76)[21]

That the metaphor of the web surfaces at this point is interesting, in that it captures the subtle and deceptive nature of not only the avarice denounced by the poet, but also of silence and of this poet's own poetic style. The web represents structures we cannot see, but which silently shape us nonetheless. In the poem, this turns out to be true of life and of Nature especially. The reason Silence must return at the end to what she is (a girl) is because she is caught in the web of avarice spun by her father and in the web of Nature. Even as her father's upbringing (Nurture) and her own pleasure in being a boy work to create a new reality for her, Nature ensures her existence as a girl (faced with the queen's advances, for example, she cannot help reacting as a girl).

Moreover, the poem itself functions as a web. A character born of (and limited by) the plot of the poem's narrative, Silence returns to being a girl because that is what the structure of such a tale requires: order must be—and so is—restored. The poet, too, experiences this web, even as he creates it. He abandons his story and is caught in a web of anger, trapped like the avaricious men he is angry with. And from the audience's perspective the structure of the story about silence continues to be spun, even if we cannot see the whole design even at the end.

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[21] Mais li aver, cui Dex renoie,
Ont enpirie la costume.
Grans maltalens m'art et alume
Qu'il l'ont cangie et remuee.
Car fust la pute gens tuee
Par cui honors est abascie,
Et li plus halt [qui] l'ont lascie—
Si ne vivent mais c'un poi d'eure,
Mais li diäbles lor cort seure!
Il vivent mais que faire seulent,
Et por quant com plus ont plus welent.
Certes, j'en ai moult grant engagne.
Ausi est d'auls com de l'aragne:
El ordist tel, painne et labore;
Et si se point ne voit on l'ore
Enmi sa toile qu'a ordi,
Si font li pusnais esdordi
Et clerc et lai et conte et duc
S'enprendre, mois ne altre buc.
Cui caut? Car trop i a a dire:
Repairier voel a ma matyre. (256-76)

In this sense, the thematic web of the poem in which we as readers are caught is more complex than that which Silence must transverse. She, as a character, is at the mercy of what happens, what E.M. Forster would label "story", but that (for all its twists and turns) has a clear beginning and end. Even why it happens (Forster's "plot") is fairly clear. By contrast, the poem returns us again and again to images and instances of silence that are independent of plot and story. Whether episodes or passing references to sound, speech, or quietness, these moments form a thematic matrix that has no obvious message—a web without a clear center or dominant pattern. What ultimately is the *Roman de Silence*'s valuation of silence (or Silence, for that matter)? It is this interpretive challenge—more so than the warnings against avarice, the concerns about honor and the lapse of chivalry, or even the play on gender roles – which marks the *Roman* as a meditative text. More than a didactic sermon, an exciting adventure story, or a social critique, it offers the kind of complex narrative which demands, like the Bible, like the best and most challenging of medieval texts (Dante, Chaucer, Boccaccio), responses not easily formulated. It demands an explanation of its very nature and purpose, inviting (indeed requiring) multiple interpretations through an exegetical investigation into the most essential of questions ("what is its purpose? what does it actually mean?").

Like the episode with the dragon, albeit on a much smaller scale, the arrival of King Evan's bride at court (240-46) illustrates how this thematic web functions and challenges any attempt to simplify our assessment of the poem's discourse on silence. The reference to silence is brief, seemingly insignificant. This is especially so on a first read when the opening section seems to drag on without any clear indication of when the character Silence will appear or why the story begins this way. But the princess (later queen)'s unspoken dissatisfaction gains thematic significance when read a second time in light of events to follow.

King Evan bargains with the King of Norway for his daughter's hand in marriage in exchange for peace between the kingdoms. The Norwegian king, Begon, willingly agrees and sends his daughter to England:

> King Evan omitted none of the niceties
> when he came to greet his beloved.
> When he saw her, he greeted her gallantly;
> she returned his greeting courteously,
> which was most pleasing to the king.

> The king lingered to kiss her
> and then saw to her comfort,
> for her heart was a little bitter
> from the tiring journey across the sea.
> Three days later he married her,
> for he had yearned for her a long time. (238-48)[22]

His desire, not hers, defines their relationship: she is his "beloved" and it is he who has "yearned for her a long time." If she feels anything positive toward the king, she says nothing beyond her courteous greeting and, while she does not say anything negative, the poet suggests that she feels bitter. The king seems to sense that, though he attributes it to the long trip from her homeland. That, of course, is speculation on his part. Because she does not speak, there is no way to know. She could equally be bitter about having to leave home without being asked if she wanted to marry the king. Whatever the reason, she cannot speak of it (or chooses not to); it is a resentment she bears silently. In light of her later conduct in the story—where she largely appears as a villain, attempting first to seduce Silence and then trying to have her executed—this quiet moment of her arrival may explain (or, for some readers, mitigate) her choice to pursue an affair with Silence.

That her silence cannot be penetrated by the king, the poet, or the audience, places the narrator's later diatribe against her, which is more severe than his angry rant about avaricious men, in a different light. The narrator attributes her conduct to her wicked nature, but he does so without seeming to be aware of her history and her feelings about the king and her marriage. These aspects of her character enter the text, indirectly, through this silence explicitly noted by the text upon her arrival in England in the early part of the story. I do not suggest that the narrator or we *can* know this

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[22] Li rois Ebains n'a nient de tort
De cho qu'il vint contre sa drue.
Quant il le vit, gent le salue;
Cele li rent moult biel salu,
Cho a le roi moult bien valu.
Li rois demeure a li baisier
Et puis sil fait bien aäsier,
Car son cuer ot un poi amer
De la lasté et de la mer.
Tier jor apriés l'a esposee,
Car forment l'avoit golosee. (238-48)

other aspect of her character or even that it would necessarily excuse the wicked things that she does. The point is that this is not a hypothetical extra-textual plot question (along the lines of "how many children has Lady Macbeth?"). By including her wordless arrival at court, the poem (if not the narrator) makes us aware of this gap between what is explicitly said and done in the text and what is left unsaid. And because the text is a text about silence, the narrator's failure to recall this moment and assign it significance points to his unreliability as narrator and to the sophistication of the text which exists outside the narrator's (if not the poet's) control. Whether the poet intended to ironize the narrator on this particular point is debatable; but I suggest his diatribe against the queen is part of the pattern of narratorial interruptions and editorials which disrupt the text and call our attention to the narrator's inability, in a story about silence, to remain silent himself. These failures to withhold comment at once form part of the matrix of references to silence and distract the narrator's attention from that theme—a web that he does not see, yet continues to follow.

Power to Speak: The Politics of Silence

This small episode with the queen's arrival also raises issues about consent—the difference between choosing silence and not having the power to speak—which resurface elsewhere in the text and form one of the central nodes in the large matrix of references to silence and speech. The queen is placed in a position where, regardless of whether she speaks or remains silent, the outcome will be the same. Unlike Silence's mother—to whom the king grants the special power to choose any husband she wishes—the queen is never asked about whether she wishes to leave Norway and marry King Evan. Silence herself seems to be placed in a similar position.

At the end of the story, the theme of avarice resurfaces when Silence admits that she was motivated to deceive the world about her sex by a desire to keep her inheritance (6614). Yet she takes pains to suggest this was largely to please her father (6592-601). Claiming her father "did with me as he saw fit" (6592),[23] she says that she agreed to do as he said to get her inheritance because "I didn't want to go against him" (6601).[24] Though the queen and Silence herself, as women, profoundly experience such pressure,

[23] Mes pere fist de moi son buen … (6592)
[24] Et jo nel vol pas contredire (6601)

silence as an expression of fear and of powerlessness is not strictly a gendered problem. All the knights of the court are in a parallel situation after the king's decree against female inheritance. They swear the oath, but it is not really consent in the sense that they have no choice or fear they have no choice and choose to keep their true feelings silent.

Yet it is important not to overstate the powerlessness of either the women or the courtiers in this text. The king presumably does not require anyone's consent, though he is not an absolute monarch either. Like the King of France, he has advisors; and we see the important function of such advisors in the scene in which the French court debates what to do about Silence (when she arrives with a sealed letter—seemingly from King Evan but in fact forged by the angry queen—asking the King of France to execute Silence as a favor to the English court). Before reading the letter, the French king welcomes Silence with a kiss. He then faces the dilemma of having to execute someone to whom he openly offered his hospitality or of offending his ally the English king by refusing his request. Both choices would lessen his honor, and he turns to the court for advice. The significance of this passage is less in the advice the courtiers give than in the point that the Count of Clermont makes when he refuses to remain silent even if (as the others suggest) what he says may offend the court or the king:

> "My lords, I have never said
> that the king cannot act as he sees fit,
> despite my considered opinion.
> Even after I have given him
> the best advice I could,
> he can still do just as he wants.
> Is this any reason to keep silent
> and deny him proper counsel, if he requests it?
> .....
> If I always tell him the best course of action to take,
> it is not my fault if he takes the worst.
> Even if I incur the king's displeasure,
> I will not stray from the right path at any price,
> as far as I can determine it." (4692-711)[25]

[25] "Biel segnor, cho ne di jo mie
Que li rois ne puist faire bien

Remaining silent may be polite, but is the dishonorable choice in this situation.[26] The count's choice recalls the opposite choice made by the English knights early on. That they did not speak up is not necessarily an indication they could not speak. King Evan is depicted as having a temper, but not necessarily as a tyrant: it is not clear King Evan would have punished anyone for disagreeing with him. And, as the French count points out, the king's potential reaction to dissent or contradiction is immaterial to the decision facing an honorable knight: if the situation is grave enough, the man of honor is obligated to break his silence. In the case of King Evan (linked early in the text to the noble Arthur [109-11]) one could argue that, since he is indeed reasonable enough to see the folly of his decree at the end, had someone spoken up earlier many of the problems could have been avoided.

Reading these scenes, a philosopher like John Locke might puzzle out the implications for government by consent; a modern feminist might investigate the political status and voice of medieval women. For the narrator of this medieval poem, however, these episodes seem to be focused more on the dangers of keeping silent, on the noble man's (or woman's) obligation to the truth. Certainly the queen on her wedding day is in a situation where it would be difficult to speak up against either her father or King Evan. Clermont's point, however, is that the difficulty of speaking out should not be an excuse for not doing so. For Clermont, silence is largely a matter of self-interest, while speaking up is a reflection of one's commitment to the truth. Re-reading the queen's choice in light of the episode with Clermont, one could argue that she remains silent not because she is powerless but because she desires power: it is in her self-interest to remain

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Trestolt son plaisir malgré mien.
Mais puis que dit li averai
Al miols que dire li sarai,
Puet il faire tolt son plaisir.
Doi li jo donc por cho taisir
Consel de droit, s'il le demande?
.....
Se jo li di le miols tols dis,
Quel blasme i ai s'il fait le pis?
Encor li soit il contrecuer,
Nen istrai del droit a nul fuer
Por cho que g'i puissce assener. (4692-711)

[26] Ironically, in yet another ambivalent moment of silence, after all the debate about the letter and whether to keep silent or not, the French choose not to tell Silence about the letter (4870-73).

silent and to marry the king. As her later behavior toward Silence demonstrates, she is a woman who enjoys such power.

Clermont thus represents the clearest (as perhaps his name is meant to suggest) position on silence: truth, however unpleasant, is preferable to silence.[27] Arguably, the entire narrative is resolved according to this principle, for order is restored finally at the end when Merlin speaks the truth, both about the queen's deception and about Silence's true sex.

Yet what is impressive, and perhaps a little frustrating, about the text is the way in which it complicates this basic reading and resists closure. Clermont's refusal to remain silent follows both his own struggle to quiet his anger (4582-600) and the Chancellor's decision to speak up out of self-interest (4397-416; 4430-33; 4453-55). Clermont's concealing his own anger is to some extent a matter of self-interest, since rhetorician's logic tells him that angry words will not help him gain his objective (4590-600). Yet arguably the choice still points to Clermont's positive status as a figure of moderation (no man *plus atemprés* as the narrator says, 4598). He chooses his words carefully and, though he conceals his own anger, he does not hide the essential if unpleasant truths relevant to the conversation. However, the case with the Chancellor is different. When the Chancellor is the first to read the letter which calls for Silence's execution, he decides that he must tell the French king what is in the letter, even though his impulse is to conceal it:

> "By Monmartre, I don't want
> to have this letter read aloud;
> if I tell what it says, it will be a pity,
> for the youth will be executed.
> Pity tells me to lie to the king
> but fear won't let me.
> I will feel great pity if he dies,
> but fear if he is spared because of me.
> Of two evils, I must now choose
> the lesser, that is, to tell.
> For if I didn't say what was in the letter,
> the king would soon have me beheaded.
> It will harm me less to tell the truth

[27] "To consent to a vile deed, Sire, / is shameful; to reject it is honorable [De felonie octroier, sire, / Est hontes, honors d'escondire]" (4779-80).

than to suffer such a fate for this youth." (4403-16)[28]

The Chancellor never reveals this reasoning to the king. In fact he uses this situation as an opportunity to ingratiate himself with the king. After waiting for the king to order him to read the letter[29] he says: "As you wish, Sire ... . / You ask me to read the letter: / I do so with the utmost reluctance, dear, kind lord, / but for the fact that I must not conceal anything from you" (4430-33);[30] "I have committed an act of terrible cruelty / by telling you this, but it is my duty / to tell you the truth" (4453-55).[31] He tells a clever half-truth here by admitting he cannot conceal anything, but remaining silent about the true reason (namely, because he is afraid). He thus leaves the king to infer the false but more self-serving reason (namely, because the king is too noble to be lied to and because the chancellor is a loyal servant to the

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[28] "Jo ne volroie por Monmartre
Qu'il m'esteüst lire la cartre:
Ja se jel di cho iert pechiés,
Qu'il iert deffais et depechiés.
Pitiés me rueve al roi mentir;
Paörs nel violt pas consentir.
Pitié ai grant se il i muert;
Paör s'il par moi en estuert.
De .ii. mals estuet ore eslire
Le mains malvais, cho est le dire:
Se ne disoie qu'a el brief
Li rois me tolroit tost le cief.
Mains me nuist donc la vertés dire
Que por lui sofrir tel martyre." (4403-16)

[29] That the Chamberlain remains silent until ordered to speak is significant in that it calls our attention to the fact that the situation of the French court is different than that of the English court. In England, King Evan will demand that his own Chancellor speak about how the letters were mixed up (5068) and, at the end of the story, will order Merlin to speak (6303-6304). However, at the beginning, when he issues the edict against women's inheritance which sets in motion the sequence of events which make this story possible, he never asks for advice. And for this reason, Clermont's choice to speak up even if his conclusion may displease the king does not present us a simple parallel between noble/ignoble, speaking truth/ remaining silent: unlike the English knights, Clermont speaks out, yet Clermont and the other courtiers were specifically asked by the king for advice. This subtle distinction adds a wrinkle to debates about the virtue and non-virtue of silence, once again illuminating the text's complexity.

[30] "Volentiers, sire," cil respont.
"Vos me rovés lé letres lire.
Jes lis envis, mais, bials dols sire,
Mais que ne vos doi rien taisir." (4430-33)

[31] "Del dire ai fait grant cruelté
Mais jo vos doi tel feëlté
Que ne vos doi mençoigne traire." (4453-55)

king). Remaining silent on that point enables a win-win interpretation for the chancellor and the king. Yet torn between pity and fear, the chancellor is not a caricature of avarice or selfishness, and judging him is not simple. Whatever one thinks of Clermont's idealism, the point is that one is forced to think about it, just as one is forced to observe that, in the Chancellor's case, silence is not the servant but the enemy of self-interest. In this way the Chancellor episode is neatly tied back into the thematic arc about avarice, and provides us an ironic counter to Clermont's statements about the value of revealing the truth, however unpleasant.

In this section about the French court we are also reminded numerous times that while the queen is ultimately the cause of the events (having written her letter alone in the privacy of her chamber and then silently switched it with the king's), from the French point of view King Evan has created a problem of honor for them because he has a personal problem for which he cannot (or will not) find words: "The letter says / that what he [Silence] did to the king / was too shameful to be told" (4442-44).[32] The court never speculates as to what this act might be. Indeed, they seem content to consign the details to silence because the act itself has no bearing on their deliberations (which are concerned with the honor of the French king, not with the injustice committed against King Evan in England).[33]

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[32] Cho me dist ceste letreüre
Que il a fait al roi tel honte
Que il ne violt pas metre en conte. (4442-44)

[33] This point about the act being too shameful to speak first surfaces when the queen writes the letter (4325-26), and then is specifically raised numerous other times (4507-08; 4565-67; 4635-36). The silence surrounding this act (which of course never took place) is emphasized in part to underscore the fact that for the French court, the act itself – unspeakable or not – has little bearing on their deliberations; the issue is one of noble etiquette, whether to honor the English king's request or the kiss of peace given to Silence upon her arrival. If we accept Clermont's argument that "the first duty of any subject / is to safeguard his lord's honor [N'a loialté el mont gregnor / Que salver l'onor son segnor]" (4623-24), then the French court has no cause or obligation to probe the silence surrounding the act "even if the youth had killed our brother [Et cis eüst ocis no frere]" (4620). Yet the text leaves us questioning its own conclusions; although the French court ultimately is persuaded by Clermont, his argument is challenged by the Count of Nevers: "Are we to let him off scot-free? / You'd better watch what you are saying! / Didn't it say in the letter / that he did such a terrible thing to the king / that he didn't even want to tell anyone about it? / Therefore, he brought dishonor to my lord as well, / if what the letter says is true. / I cannot see / how we can let this youth go free [Doit en dont cis aler si quites? / Car prendés garde a vostre dit! / Dont n'a il ens el brief escrit / Qu'i a fait al roi tel anui / Que ne le violt dire nului? / Dont a il fait mon segnor honte / Se cho est voirs que li briés conte. / Jo ne puis veïr de cestui / Coment puist aler sans anui]" (4632-40). Count Nevers, too, is concerned about the French king's honor, but implies that the act itself does have significance. Indeed, the very fact that it is not spoken of is a

The passage in which the French court debates a silence about an act that never happened ironizes our reading of the passages (occurring before and after the debate in France) in which back in England King Evan does impose a real silence on a real event:

> **(a)** He saw that if he didn't take vengeance,
> his reputation for justice would be undermined.
> But it seemed worse to dishonor this youth,
> because he himself would also be dishonored,
> if he should spread the news about the shameful deed
> that nobody knew about yet.
> Because of this, he would rather do too little
> justice than overdo it.
> .....
> "So let's pretend it didn't happen.
> Just think of it all as a dream, sweetheart.
> Nothing happened, nothing's wrong, nothing should come of it."
> (4191-98; 4245-47)[34]

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sign of its severity and an indication that it was a dishonorable act—which thus affects the honor of King Evan and of his friend the King of France, and presumably all men of honor precisely because it is honor that has been trespassed against. For Nevers, the question of honor seems linked to problems of justice—the concern is not for the individual honor of individual men, but the honor of honor itself; and thus the act cannot be ignored, cannot be covered in silence, simply to preserve the individual honor of the King of France. This point of view does not win out. Interestingly, though, after Clermont's response, in which he again argues that the French king's honor is what must be preserved at all cost, the court is still uncertain what the king himself will think of this argument: "My lord [Clermont], we are [with you], / but we hope the king doesn't go against you [Bials sire, o nos, / Mais que li rois ne vos desdie]" (4690-91). Yet, despite the authoritative position Clermont has in the text, there is room for us to wonder—especially if we are interested in problems of justice (of honor in the abstract) rather than problems of personal honor—if Clermont's decision to speak up bravely, with its consequence that ultimately he silences discussion about the truth of what really happened in England, is as noble as it may first appear.

[34] Voit se venjance nen est prise,
Foible est, malvaise sa justice.
Pis est de honir cel enfant,
Car il seroit honis par tant,
Se honte esparse et esmeüe
Ki pas nen est encor seüe.
Por cho se violt il miols retraire
De la justice que trop faire.
……
"Mais or tornons cho a mençoige,
Ma biele amie dolce, a songe:

> **(b)** He had no use for the sort of vengeance
> that might reflect badly on him.
> He told the chancellor to cover up the matter,
> as he valued life and limb.
> For he knew very well that the queen had written the false letter out of hatred,
> and if suspicion should fall upon the lady,
> he knew he would bear the blame.
> He concealed his shame from the chancellor,
> and said the letter came from a count
> who had a grudge against the boy [Silence] and his family. (5091-101)[35]

The first of these passages takes place when the queen accuses Silence of rape (and leads King Evan to exile Silence by sending her as an envoy to the French court). The second passage is the king's response when he discovers that the queen switched his friendly letter to the King of France with the one demanding Silence's execution. Both episodes begin with the king becoming so angry that he is speechless (4149-51; 4908-10), before he finally recovers his reason and finds a way to save his honor. Here speechlessness is associated with anger and self-destruction; discourse with reason and self-preservation.[36] Yet the poem complicates this model by

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Niens fu, niens est, a rien ne tagne." (4191-98; 4245-47)

[35] Ne proise gaires sa venjance
Qui li acroisce sa viltance.
Il rueve al cancelier qu'il cuevre,
Si com a chiers ses menbres, [l]'ouevre.
Car il set bien que la roïne
Escrist le faus brief par haïne;
Et se blastange en a la dame
Bien set que il i avra blasme.
Al cancelier coile son honte;
Dist qui li brief vint par un conte
Ki het l'enfant et son parage. (5091-101)

[36] We often associate anger with screaming or shouting, but the individual so consumed by anger that he cannot speak is not an uncommon image in the Middle Ages: see the Pardoner's wordless anger which threatens to derail the Canterbury pilgrimage. The connection between anger and self-destruction was also conventional, as Anger was often depicted as a woman committing suicide. See also the iconic image of Anger tearing out her hair and rending her clothes, of which the descriptions of the Queen Eufeme in the *Roman de Silence* are reminiscent (4075-76). Notable

juxtaposing the king's silence against the king's reasoned discourse, a self-serving analysis which leads him to conclude that silence is the best way to preserve his honor. Like the French court, King Evan is not overly concerned with justice. It is his personal honor that must be preserved, as the line between honor and avarice/self-interest become blurred. King Evan, as we noted, is not a tyrant, but he is not quite Arthur either. He makes questionable choices when having to choose between speaking and keeping silent.

I have focused mostly on the scenes that do not feature Silence in order to illustrate how this text creates a complex series of ideas and images around and against the main story and the titular character. I concentrated in particular on the scenes with King Evan, the dragon, and the French court because they seem at first to be at the furthest remove from the central story of Silence herself.[37] The *roman* of Silence, the "story of Silence [the character]", could have been much shorter (certainly more focused), yet these potentially digressive passages serve in a "story of silence [the concept]" as fascinating talking points—moments which invite, even demand, further meditation on and speculation about the text. There is obviously much to be said about Silence herself and the interplay of gender and silence; but the point is that all of that exists within (and so needs to be considered in light of) the larger scope of the text and its concern with the theme of silence in general.

Avarice and courtly behavior are important themes, but, as I suggest, they are tied to questions of speech and silence in complex ways. Self-interest involves both speaking and not speaking, hiding who you are and being honest with oneself and others. In a sense, self-interest and well-being find common ground in an ideal state in which one has no need

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in her case, though, is that she is staging her emotion and her appearance to some extent, becoming that stock image as she tries turning the situation to her own advantage: she does not shout at first, for example, because she doesn't want anyone to hear before the king himself arrives (4077-83).

[37] The love story of Cador and Eufemie also takes up a sizable portion of the poem, and it too contributes, though perhaps in a more direct and obvious way than the passages about Evan and the court, to the anatomy of silence (covering specifically the silence of lovers and unspoken feelings). At the end of the story Merlin seems to take over from Silence herself and becomes a prominent character; his initial silence and then his revelation of hidden truths introduce other categories of silence, including that silence which is frustrating (his laughter angers the king because it is seemingly significant yet impervious to interpretation) and the silences of astonishment (6557-58) and of guilty fear (6500-04). For more on Merlin's role in the poem see, Gilmore; Stock "Civilization"; and Roche-Mahdi "A Reappraisal."

to talk because there are no questions about who one is or about what one should and should not do—a silent state in which one can simply be. All of which goes against the self-interest of the poet. For if these characters would tell the truth, or simply be what they are—as, indeed, Silence is at the end – saying nothing, then there would be no story for the poet to tell. Life would be lived in that state at the end of stories—and thus without stories—where the rest is silence. [38]

Coda: A Reflection on Medieval Writers and Silence

Heldris' text expects, even demands, that one be interested in these problems of silence and not content to accept a simple answer. Notably absent among the examples of silence in the French poet's anatomy is the silence of indifference, of the passionless, and the lukewarm (for whom, as Dante observed in his travels, there is a special place in hell). Not so in Chaucer, who pointedly underscores the pilgrims' lack of enthusiasm and self-introspection when the Chaucer pilgrim wryly notes the silence with which the Host's proposal for the tale-telling game is met: "'Hoold up youre hondes, withouten moore speche,' [said the Host] .... / Us thoughte it

[38] Like her mother, Silence acquiesces to her father's desire. One could argue that, as women, neither has power to speak against him; that their right of consent has been silenced, as the choice to consent or not to consent is unavailable to them, since agreeing or not agreeing makes little difference. Yet this seems an overstatement, given that Silence's mother proves herself a powerful woman in her courtship with her father. Perhaps she does not object more strongly—other than saying a mother should be pleased with any child given by God (1699-1700)—to her husband's suggestion that they raise Silence as a boy, because Eufemie after her marriage is at one with herself and her husband. That is certainly Cador's view. His argument, which she acknowledges, about Adam and Eve being of one mind and one body (1701-27) is especially interesting in this text about silence because it is a theory that leaves no place for discussion because it sees no need, positing that an ideal space is a silent one since the ideal individual has no need for words. If body, mind, and will are in harmony, there is only silence, not just an absence of speech, but a lack of a need to speak—an ironic reminder that as Silence grows up, she is not happy in part because she is divided against herself; she has multiple voices (Nature and Nurture) within her and so we are witness to her internal monologues (anthropomorphized as debates between Nature and Nurture). The positing of an Edenic space and relationship within this text reminds us, too, that Eden and Heaven are spaces that usually don't make for very interesting narratives because they are without division. Silentius is the perfect character for a narrative when she is unstable and not quiet inside; yet once she comes to be who she truly is—Silentia—the poet's narrative and purpose are destroyed. By speaking the truth at the end, she no longer has any need to speak—neither to herself in internally conflicted monologues nor to other characters in the story—because she has, like her mother and Eve (at least according to Cador), achieved a silent state of harmony, an identity (Silentia) which is unified, accepting of itself, and need not be spoken of. With the recovery of Eden, with the happiness of the individual, comes the death of the poet and his poetry.

was noght worth to make it wys, / And graunted hym withouten moore avys, / And bad him seye his voirdit as hym leste" (*General Prologue* 782-87).[39] Yet whether the pilgrims themselves realize it or not, these are not just tales to fill the silence of a long journey, to listen to and then forget. The stories may sometimes provoke an emotional response (usually anger) from a particular pilgrim, but they always provoke (or should provoke) reflection. They are complex to the point that interpretation is demanded (the question to the audience which ends the Franklin's tale being an explicit case of the text interrogating its audience). The indeterminacy we find in a text like the *Roman de Silence* suggests that, even though it was, like Chaucer's tales, a form of entertainment, reading it or listening to it was meant to be an exercise in critical thought and not passive absorption of knowledge or dogma.

There is a basic, deep-rooted, tension between silence and knowledge—between silence and Truth on the one hand, and narrative and the pursuit of Truth on the other. Lady Philosophy's interrogation of Boethius's silence is instructive:

> Knowestow me nat? Why arttow stille? Is it for schame or for astonynge? It were me levere that it were for schame, but it semeth me that astonynge hath oppresside the. (*The Consolation of Philosophy,* Book I, prosa 2)

When Boethius remains silent before Lady Philosophy, she demands an explanation. He is a philosopher, a man of words; how is it he has nothing to say to her? Is silence not antithetical to the very existence of such a man?[40]

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[39] Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*

[40] "And when sche say me nat oonly stille but withouten office of tunge and al dowmbe, sche leyde hir hand sooftly uppon my breest and seide: 'Here nys no peril,' quod sche; 'he is fallen into a litargye, whiche that is a comune seknesse to hertes that been desceyved. He hath a litil foryeten hymselve, but certes he schal lightly remembren hymself yif so be that he hath knowen me or now; and that he may so doon, I will wipe a litil his eien that ben dirked by the cloude of mortel thynges'…." (Book I prosa 2)

The next section is about light and blindness (metrum 3); the preceding section (metrum 2) was a description (by Lady Philosophy) about his life as a philosopher, also employing a metaphor of light. So while much emphasis is placed on light/blindness, the middle section (prosa 2) implies that while the lack of light prevents him from being a philosopher, it is the lack of speech which signals his failure to recognize himself; he cannot articulate his ideas and therefore who he is. He cannot even name Philosophy – he is not merely ashamed, but astounded, unsure of who she is and by extension who he is: "He hath a litel foryeten hymselve." As I noted above, the Roman de

In a medieval writer like Chaucer or Heldris we see that conflict between silence and speech, knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge, which is presumably faced by any scholar and thinker. Silence—in the sense of that which is unsaid, unsayable, or not needing to be said—is the enemy, by its very nature antithetical to the analytical life.

The *Canterbury Tales* is a monument to speech, to garrulousness, to the piling of word upon word and the delight which that brings. If the pilgrims had chosen the silence of the stone, to be "doumb as a stoon" (774) as the Host says in the General Prologue, over the tale telling game, there could be no "Book of the Tales." Once underway, the greatest threat to the game (and again, to the poem itself) comes when the Pardoner becomes so angry with the Host that the Pardoner stops talking and it seems that, if not for the intervention of the Knight, the game will end and the fellowship of pilgrims (if not their long pilgrimage) will collapse.

Not that the Host is necessarily Chaucer's spokesman, but when the Host proposes the game because the alternative—traveling silent as stones—is just too unbearably dull for him to contemplate ["confort ne myrthe is noon" (773)], there is a sense in which he articulates a feeling presumably familiar to Chaucer as to any writer. Without story, there is no meaningful life, because there is no way to generate more stories. While the purported goal of story-telling and intellectual discourse in general may be to arrive at an answer, a lesson, a sound conclusion, the fear of that end is as present in its pursuit as the fear of death which brings immortality is present in life. Silence, the state in which nothing can be said, nothing more needs to be said, is the sign that as a writer one is no longer a writer, no longer what one is or at least believes oneself to be, as much as it is a sign that one has reached the grave. In our own time, at the end of history, after Georges Bataille becomes a philosopher commenting on the end of philosophy, intellectuals struggle with the possibility of having reached this state where nothing more needs to be said, where there are no new, vital, ideas to be expressed, where the alternative to silence is unnecessary elaboration. To exist without having any more to say is less a sign of enlightenment than of

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Silence portrays the uncertainty of identity and the fracturing of self in the opposite manner: the silent individual is the confident, stable one who knows who he is and so has nothing to say. The individual (like Silence) uncertain of who he is, is full of questions and conflicted internal voices. The noisy life of the conflicted individual providing endless material for the discourse of the poet and philosopher, the silent world presents a problem only to the poet and philosopher.

exhaustion, of being dead, or married (which, as any novelist knows, is the same as death).

That particular malaise is our own and is at some remove from the Middle Ages; but in Heldris and Chaucer (among medieval others) we do witness a similar phenomenon in which the pursuit of truth (and the silence which it would entail) co-exists uneasily with the joy of speculative discourse and narratives without end. One mark of a Chaucerian text is its resistance to closure, to a definitive interpretive end, to the didacticism which marks so many other medieval texts. Many readers are reluctant to accept the Parson's tale and the Retraction as the final word (or at least Chaucer's final word) on the Canterbury project because the doctrinal sermon seems incompatible with the preceding narratives and the conclusions of the Retraction seem to dismiss all that is best in Chaucer's work, the ones which seem the most Chaucerian.

While Chaucer's work contains exemplars of patience, of spiritual stillness, such as Custance and Griselda, they exist as uneasy, rather cold, almost inhuman (or superhuman) beings among the flawed, but passionate and garrulous characters who surround them. Happy loving couples are hard to come by in Chaucer, though there is plenty of adultery and lust, and general suspicion and tension. Just as the tales contemplate marriage and the possibility of ideal marriage without really presenting such a case, so they pursue Truth without surrounding, trapping, killing and stuffing it for display in the end, in both cases taking pleasure in that endlessly deferred chase. To wish the Wife of Bath married only once is to beg her silence; to wish Dorigen less playful and more careful with her words, or May more faithful to January, is to seek the end of their narratives. And for all the sin that generates these stories, that causes the misery of the world for which they are a consolation, part of us does not wish that. To wish for that kind of silence is to wish for the end of the world as we know it, for a world without sin, without controversy, without uncertainty, without the need to have to say anything about anything. In theory, of course, that *is* what we want; but if we had it, would we know what to do with it? Griselda is at once ideal and yet hard to love. Because of the state we are in now, we paradoxically desire the silencing of this world (in all senses) and yet are fearful, suspicious of it. Such is an irony of the human condition that the author of the *Roman de Silence* and that master ironist, Chaucer, fully enjoy even as they struggle to speak of it.

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