

A QUESTION OF HONOR:
EUFEME'S TRANSGRESSIONS IN *LE ROMAN DE SILENCE*
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Just before *Le Roman de Silence* concludes with a request that God bless its narrator, composer, and audience, Heldris de Cornuällé makes a special plea for forgiveness from any "good woman" hearing or reading the tale. Anticipating that some members of the female public might react angrily to the thirteenth-century romance's severe criticism of Eufeme, the first wife of King Ebain of England, Heldris argues that the high praise of the hero(ine), Silence, mitigates the negative depiction of Eufeme. Heldris has good reason for concern, having treated Eufeme harshly indeed. After repeatedly seeking to seduce and then dispose of the cross-dressed Silence, taking a lover who dons nun's garb to be near her, and compromising her husband's authority both at home and abroad, Eufeme meets a particularly violent end. The narrator informs us that "[t]he king despised Eufeme. In no circumstances did he want to pardon her, nor did anyone ask him to. As the king ordered, the nun was executed and the lady torn apart by horses. The king exacted great justice" (ll. 6651-57). With none to mourn her, the queen disappears from the romance definitively, opening the way for Ebain to wed Silence.

Eufeme's fate itself comes as no surprise. Heldris emphasizes

the queen's negative qualities—especially her lustfulness—for much of the romance; she must depart to enable a happy ending. The extreme nature of her punishment, however, is less expected. The false nun, after all, is merely put to death, and most female characters accused of serious crimes were condemned to burn at the stake. Drawing and quartering, on the other hand, was usually reserved for treasonous men in the Middle Ages. In fact, even if Ebain has his wife torn apart by horses rather than formally drawn and quartered, the act signifies the gravity of Eufeme's transgression. The method of the queen's execution then, invites critical scrutiny. What specific crime or crimes lead to Eufeme's condemnation to die in a manner befitting a traitor?

Most immediately, the queen's adultery justifies her death. Clearly, she has betrayed her husband, and, by extension, the kingdom, by taking a lover. The lust she cannot control never presents as much of a menace as it could: like other adulterous queens, Eufeme remains barren, thereby neatly sidestepping any questions of legitimacy for her offspring. Still, she endangers both her own reputation and that of her husband. Scholars have noted other reasons for Eufeme's fate, as well. As Bruce Holsinger



reminds us, the queen's attraction to cross-dressers places her outside of acceptable limits when heterosexuality serves as the social norm. She must therefore die as the romance reaffirms conventional hierarchies at its end. Political expediency, too, may play a role. Sharon Kinoshita suggests that the change in Eufeme arrives at precisely the moment that the war between England and Norway ends and Eufeme (the Norwegian king's daughter) accompanies Ebain to England, at which point the narrative turns to politics at the English court. Deprived of her value in being able to bring peace to two countries, Eufeme becomes expendable. Similarly, Keene views the dismemberment as a metaphorical remedy for Ebain's fractured kingdom—a realm subsequently unified by the king's marriage to Silence.

All of these factors undoubtedly contribute to Eufeme's execution. Yet a close examination of the queen's reprehensible acts reveals that her death must also be understood in the context of a theme at the romance's heart: that of honor and shame.⁷ By studying two lengthy episodes in which Eufeme attempts to manipulate the discourse of honor—disguising herself literally or figuratively to be able to do so—I will propose that the queen ultimately plays a role in

her own demise because she understands only superficially the ideals that subtend her words. Unlike Silence, in whom masculine values and a male persona coincide, Eufeme does not successfully conjoin the masks she adopts and her behavior. Her attempts to use the vocabulary of honor threaten her husband's rule and can only lead to her own eventual—and permanent—shame.

Eufeme first employs terms associated with honor as she pursues her goal of seducing Silence, giving authority to her words by making them dependent upon a man. Silence rebuffs Eufeme's initial sexual overtures and then avoids entering the queen's bedchamber for five months. Finally given the chance to speak to Silence, Eufeme adopts a new strategy: she assertively defends herself by veiling her motives behind her husband's name. The queen announces that her effort to lure Silence into an amorous relationship was actually designed to test the young knight's fidelity—a trial made necessary, according to Eufeme, by her husband's persistent requests that she help him to learn which of the young men at court is the king's most faithful follower (ll. 4002-06). By claiming that King Ebain himself encouraged the seduction attempt (albeit indirectly, since she never states that

the English sovereign suggested this particular method of testing Silence), Eufeme denies responsibility for what has occurred and casts herself in the role of an innocent, forced to act to satisfy the king's demands. She thus disguises her lust as a test imposed by her husband.

More strikingly, the queen bases her defense on the concept of honor. Within twenty lines (ll. 4002-21), she uses the terms "loial" or "loialté" three times—first in revealing her husband's request, next in noting that a mere look at Silence convinced her that the youth had more loyalty than any other young man at court, and finally in affirming that the king must certainly have something great in mind for his most loyal follower. The passage reinforces this insistence upon the importance of loyalty with several mentions of the truth: initially, Eufeme in truth did not know which youth she should present to Ebain as the most loyal, after the test she realizes the truth of Silence's fidelity, and she cannot truthfully tell Silence why her husband has asked her to do this. Moreover, the queen calls upon God as she justifies her actions, which further implies her innocence. Eufeme thus effectively hides the desire that she feels for Silence by using language understandable to a young knight—the need to prove one's loyalty to the king and the necessity of uncovering the truth. Underscoring such terminology actually allows the

queen to mask her dishonorable lust with honor for both herself (after all, she recognized Silence's potential to pass the test and then carried out her husband's wishes) and Silence (who has demonstrated exceptional fidelity). Yet her noble words evoke both honor and shame. Even as they conceal the queen's base desire from Silence, they recall to the audience that whereas Silence remains faithful to the king, Eufeme does not.

Initially, Eufeme's tactic proves to be effective, for she is able to lure Silence to her bedchamber once more. Nevertheless, Silence quickly learns that the king behind whom Eufeme allegedly stands is no more than a mirage. Again, Silence rejects Eufeme, and again, Eufeme adopts a disguise, this time physically transforming herself into the victim of a fictitious rape attempt. As the narrator explains, the queen marks her body with signs of violence, providing tangible evidence to confirm her story. She pulls her hair, bloodies her nose, tramples her wimple, and sheds tears (ll. 4077-83), thus setting the stage for the invented accusation of attempted rape with which she intends to compel Silence's condemnation. As Kate Mason Cooper notes, Eufeme makes herself the object of Silence's lust, inflicting signs of the violent desire that she wishes Silence felt for her.⁸ Yet her false tale surpasses the realm of sexual desire, for it permits Eufeme to shift the focus from Silence's alleged act to the issue of honor.

While the queen wants Silence punished for displaying unacceptable behavior, she also implies that clemency would reflect poorly on Ebain, telling him: "But I do not at all want to let him so diminish your honor" (ll. 4141-42). In other words, Eufeme enlarges the scope of the attempted rape's impact. More than a sign of Silence's supposed desire, it becomes an assault on the king's honor.

Eufeme, however, demonstrates very little understanding of how men define honor. On the one hand, the system of honor at court allows her accusation to proceed; Silence refuses to deny Eufeme's allegations because of her position as queen, which makes her reputation of paramount concern. Not only would Silence have to admit to cross-dressing and thus to tricking the king, but also the youth realizes that the truth would lead to the queen's disgrace (ll. 4174-76). Silence thus reacts in the fashion that male honor dictates, remaining loyal to both the king and queen.

At the same time that a male conception of honor protects Eufeme, it also prevents the queen from succeeding in her plot to have Silence killed. When Eufeme makes reference to Ebain's honor, she assumes that any attack on her body causes her husband's shame. Ebain, however, perceives the situation differently. While he recognizes the threat that allowing Silence to go unpunished poses to his reputation for justice, he also understands that executing Si-

lence will lead to the knowledge that he found the pair alone in the queen's bedchamber—a compromising position that risks causing Ebain's own disgrace (ll. 4240-42). In this case, his honor is at odds with Eufeme's; the queen has a poor understanding of what will dishonor her husband.

The romance ensures that the audience does not overlook the discrepancy between Eufeme's conception of honor and that of her husband. Implicitly supporting the king, the narrator states: "And each man should strive so that he may succeed in saving his honor, if he can. And if he sees that it is necessary that he accept one of two evils, he must amass his wisdom in himself to determine which will harm him less. A man should not destroy himself for his own misery. What man will honor him, since he degrades himself?" (ll. 4199-4209). In short, while the narrator recognizes that no perfect solution exists, a lack of justice for Eufeme equates to honor for the king in this instance (and to true justice for Silence, falsely accused by the queen). It is thus best for Ebain to act unfairly (at least in Eufeme's view) to preserve his own reputation. While Eufeme may invoke her husband's name and honor in her attempt first to seduce Silence and then to punish the recalcitrant youth, her "disguise" can never be truly effective, for her beliefs concerning honor are at odds with her husband's.

Eufeme's dishonest accusation does more damage than

her earlier attempts at seduction, for she puts the very stability of Ebain's realm at risk. Although Ebain refuses to command Silence's execution, he realizes that he must take some action so that Eufeme will have her revenge (knowing full well, as the narrator tells us, that an argumentative woman will never hold her tongue until she is appeased). He therefore sends Silence to France, along with a note for the French king. While the hero(ine) is away, some of Ebain's barons rise up in revolt—and only Silence's return can quash the rebellion and ensure the continuation of Ebain's reign. Furthermore, the fact that Silence can assist Ebain at all comes as a surprise to the queen, who has continued to work to have the youth killed. Had Eufeme succeeded, Silence's death would have permanently deprived Ebain of his most loyal—and most talented—knight.

Eufeme's plan for revenge once again depends upon her ability to appropriate the discourse of male honor by disguising herself and her intentions. She surreptitiously replaces the letter that Ebain's chancellor has written to the French king—asking that Silence be welcomed and later knighted—with a missive of her own composition, demanding that the king have Silence beheaded for a reason too shameful for Ebain to admit. Much as she did to lure the wary Silence to her bedchamber, Eufeme conceals herself behind her husband's name,

donning a "mask" that gives her power. This time, Eufeme does not link her husband's dignity to her own but instead shifts the emphasis firmly to Ebain's reputation alone. Silence has brought shame to Ebain, according to the false letter, which means that only the youth's death can restore the sovereign's honor; as the French king's chancellor informs his master, "As you value his honor, that he might not lose or have less of it, he has faith in you that you will avenge his shame" (ll. 4445-48). Eufeme thus attempts to create a bond based on honor between the two kings, and her success in doing so would enable her to punish Silence.

Yet making Ebain's honor a central issue in the letter has ramifications that surpass justice for the English king: carrying out the request would imperil the French ruler's reputation. Upon learning what "Ebain" has supposedly asked of him, the French king is faced with quite a dilemma. He has already been so impressed with Silence's noble qualities (as evidenced through the youth's beauty and bearing) that he has kissed the newcomer in peace. Whether he chooses to respect the wish expressed in "Ebain's" letter or to privilege the welcome that he has pledged Silence with the kiss, the king risks causing his own disgrace. His lamentations to his chancellor reveal his awareness of the complex situation. On the one hand, he acknowledges his debt to Ebain, which makes refusing

to honor the appeal inappropriate. After all, the English king has earlier supported the French sovereign (assistance that seems to be at least in part financial, although the romance never specifies details); if the French leader does not respect the bond that this aid creates—which demands that he punish Silence—he casts doubt upon his credibility. Moreover, such a decision would call into question the nobility of his character, since someone of such high rank would be expected to honor his obligations to other kings.

On the other hand, putting Silence to death would also jeopardize the French ruler's credibility. No one could trust him to keep his word, should he break his promise of peace to Silence, and the French king recognizes that he would be the one to suffer were he to do so. As he explains, he cannot carry out the letter's request "[...] without lowering myself greatly" (l. 4490). The French king, then, realizes that his duties as lord demand that he behave honorably toward both his allies and toward his subjects. For Eufeme, the equation seems straightforward: any action that compromises—or is made to appear to compromise—royal honor necessarily leads to punishment. Just as Ebain has done when confronted with "evidence" of an attempted rape, however, the French king displays a more nuanced understanding of the problem. Rather than take Ebain's side immediately, he probes

beneath the surface in order to determine what choice he must make, and this choice takes multiple facets of honor into account. He behaves with prudence, calling together three counts to give him counsel.

The trio's deliberations as they seek to provide the best advice to the king reveal the potentially negative consequences that a hasty decision—even one that ostensibly upholds honor—has for a man's reputation. The first counselor, the Count of Blois, quickly adopts Ebain's position: he has proven himself to be such a friend to the French court, according to the count, that the King of France must do as the letter bids and kill Silence (although after a forty-day reprieve for the kiss). The Count of Nevers agrees. The Count of Clermont, on the other hand, is not ready to pass such a judgment so hastily—and his hesitation stems from the fact that he has his lord's honor in mind. He suggests that should Ebain remind the French king of the sovereign's debt to the English throne and criticize the decision not to kill Silence, the king of France ought to repay Ebain twice as much as he owes. He continues with the observation that although lost property may be recovered, no such possibility exists for lost honor, concluding that "[a]s much as silver is worth less than gold, so is honor worth more than treasure" (ll. 4670-71). The comparisons that the Count of Clermont draws between money and honor suggest

that the latter is at once far more valuable and more difficult to acquire and retain. One false step can destroy the French king's standing.

Moreover, the French king's honor is directly linked to Ebain's; one's shame can lead to the other's. In potentially compromising the reputation of both rulers, Eufeme's act also threatens the relationship between her husband and the French sovereign, and thus between England and France. After debating the appropriate measure for the French king to take, his advisors reveal their conclusions in terms that shift the focus to whether or not Ebain is honorable himself, and to what his request means for his alliance with France. In a lengthy passage, the Count of Clermont defines friendship and political obligations, both of which, not surprisingly, rely heavily on honor. Clermont explains that he would quickly end a relationship with a friend who asked anything that might damage his reputation but notes that the situation is more complicated when one is dealing with one's liege lord, where loyalty outweighs honor—to a point. He notes:

And if he bids me to do something shameful, I do not alone bear the shame. Rather, my lord, whom I must serve without hesitation, takes it. Just as he earns the glory for the good deeds of all his men, I daresay that if he leads me to a shameful situation he should also receive the blame, my

lord who can punish me and lead me as his man. But if he requests an overly shameful action of me, I can leave his service. I can and must leave him, if I greatly love honor and fidelity, if God is dearer to me than my fief, I must renounce him completely, by my head, rather than do something for which God and men would hate me. Certainly, he who asks a man to do something shameful does him much harm. (ll. 4813-32)

The Count of Clermont simultaneously lays the blame at Ebain's feet—defining him as dishonorable and making him responsible for the potential disgrace of the French ruler—qualifies Ebain's request as so outrageous that it should break the bond between a lord and his man, and raises the stakes by evoking the consequences that the king of France will face not only at home or abroad but before God.⁹ The repercussions of putting Silence to death far surpass revenge for the spurned queen.

In emphasizing the importance of honor in the letter, Eufeme thus demonstrates that her understanding of honor in the masculine world is too simplistic for her to manipulate it successfully. The discussion at the French court indicates that reputation is a serious matter. Whereas Eufeme, co-opting Ebain's identity, seems to assume that her request will be granted quickly be-

cause honor is at stake, the French counts instead take into account the larger picture, and finally decide to reject the letter's demand precisely because honor requires that they do so. Furthermore (and fortunately for Ebain), the Count of Clermont believes that the fact that the letter proposes an excessively shameful deed exculpates the English king, who has never before made such an outrageous demand (ll. 4837-42). He quickly, if unknowingly, solves the puzzle by suggesting that someone with a grudge against Silence might have altered the message and recommends sending Ebain a reply along with the original missive. Not long afterwards, Ebain understands his wife's perfidy, although he covers it up to protect his own reputation. While Eufeme easily takes her husband's name in the letter, she cannot adopt his value system.

The honor-based vocabulary that the queen believes will lead to Silence's death instead eventually brings about her own. When Eufeme accuses Silence of making advances toward her a second time—evoking, not surprisingly, the king's disgrace (ll. 5764-66)—the queen unwittingly seals her own fate. Ebain agrees to Eufeme's demand to send Silence in search of Merlin, a quest that only a woman can accomplish. Once the captured Merlin appears before Ebain and reveals publicly that Silence has cross-dressed and that Eufeme has shamed the king (l. 6526), Ebain must acknowledge

his wife's wickedness. Eufeme's manipulation of the discourse of honor, then, brings about her downfall as queen. Eufeme must die so that Ebain can preserve his reputation.

For what crime or crimes, then, is Eufeme executed in a violent fashion that may well evoke treason? At least several: adultery (undoubtedly); her attempts to dispense with an exceptional vassal; and the lust that motivates her actions. The queen's most serious offense, however, involves the means by which she endeavors to avenge her spurned sexual overtures. Unlike Silence, whose male dress and appearance align with a masculine conception of honor, Eufeme's masks never successfully conceal her true values. She can adopt her husband's name and the terminology of honor, but the meaning of the words eludes her; she brings her husband shame rather than respect. Her execution offers the audience a striking lesson concerning the value of honor. Silence, who has transgressed both gender norms and the law, eventually becomes queen of England. Eufeme, to the contrary, must die. She never truly adopts the code of conduct that corresponds to the roles that she plays. When it comes to honor, the wicked queen's greatest crime is that she is never masculine enough.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Line numbers refer to Heldris de Cornüalle, *Le Roman de Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse Romance*, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Heffer, 1972). Translations are mine; in some cases I have modified syntax or tenses to better convey the sense of the original. In their translations, both Regina Psaki and Sarah Roche-Mahdi render “a chevals detraite” as “drawn and quartered.” See Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence*, ed. Regina Psaki (Garland, 1991) and Heldris de Cornuälle, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (Colleagues Press, 1992). Katie Keene points out that being torn apart by horses does not necessarily imply drawing and quartering. See Katie Keene, “‘Cherchez Eufemé’: The Evil Queen in *Le Roman de Silence*,” *Arthuriana* 14.3(2004): 3-22; 15. Nonetheless, Eufeme’s demise is particularly violent.

² Lancelot rescues Guenevere from such a fate in the Prose *Lancelot*, and Gérard saves Euriaut from the stake in *Le Roman de la Violette*. In *The Crossroads of Justice: Law and Culture in Late Medieval France* (Brill, 1993), Esther Cohen argues convincingly that a woman criminal posed a particular threat to society: “Once dead, she was highly likely to come back as a maleficent revenant, intent upon harming the living. Hence, any physical remains

of an executed woman had to be thoroughly disposed of” (96). She notes that in France, live burial and burning offered popular methods of attaining this goal. As well, Keene remarks that historically, adulterous women were most often repudiated (see especially p. 13).

³ According to the chronicler Fredegar, Brunchildis, widow of the Austrasian ruler Sigibert, met an end very similar to that of Eufeme. In 613 CE, her nephew had her torn apart by a wild horse. Her punishment, however, stemmed from her involvement in political and familial feuds. See Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany* (Oxford, 1988), 120-121 and 151-152. I thank one of the *Medieval Feminist Forum* reviewers for drawing this example to my attention.

⁴ Elizabeth A. Waters, “The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*,” *Arthuriana* 7.2(1997): 35-46, n. 1, cites an electronic communication in which Holsinger asks whether Eufeme dies for lying about Silence’s seduction attempts and keeping a male lover dressed as a nun or for having a weakness for cross-dressers.

⁵ Sharon Kinoshita, “Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in *Le Roman de Silence*,” *Arthuriana* 12.1(2002): 64-75; 65. Kinoshita places Eufeme’s transformation in the broader context of Ebain’s assertion of his authority over the course of the romance.

⁶ Keene, p. 4.

⁷ Waters notes that the romance “ob-
sessively plays *honte* against *honor*”
(40).

⁸ Kate Mason Cooper, “Elle and
L: Sexualized Textuality in *Le Ro-
man de Silence*,” *Romance Notes*
25(1985): 341-60; 357.

⁹ Ebain is the French king’s man,
rather than his liege lord. If Ebain’s
request should break the bond
between a man and his lord, it cer-
tainly dissolves the obligations of a
lord to his man.