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The Prescribing of Gender, A Scope on The Societal Ideologies

Showcased Within *Le Roman de Silence*

by

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Master of Arts in English

Department of English, School of Arts and Sciences


STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION:

Culture is constantly evolving, its ideologies cementing themselves within our minds, shaping how we as a society guide ourselves through living in such. Social class, religion, gender, all are forms of identity that have a place, and a certain understanding and standing within our culture and society. Through this understanding of ourselves, we are defined, creating multiple forms of distinct expression to help differentiate our place further. A pope is expected to wear a certain attire just as a bride is expected to. The same ideology trickles down, creating demarcations of attire that subsequently ingrain themselves into our culture and way of thinking. It's not only just the bride and pope who have limitations on how they must express and present themselves, everyone has a role, and naturally, everyone has an understanding of, and pressure from this. There is church attire just as there is wedding attire, and just as there is for both church and wedding, for pope and bride, there is for every event, for every person, for everyday, everyday. Social roles and conventions are strictly defined, and seemingly inescapable. Not only how we present ourselves, but how we go about living with ourselves is also seemingly so, and extremely limited. Its roots far pass one's expression through clothing, it advances on how we act and go about communicating with our friends, family, and society, on every fundamental level. This communication is culture, and the funny thing is that...it is constantly evolving and changing. Modern society and the ideals we have are different from the past, and thus our way of communication, our culture, must project accordingly. As we live in a society that's structured to prescribe how we must act, one's gender has become a crucial, distinctive, and encompassing

factor that affects one's standing and place within society, thus requiring demarcations that define culture and instill how we should “properly” express and understand gender.

ANDROCENTRISM/ STRUCTURE OF OUR SOCIETY:

The cultural expectations, especially ones that pertain to gender, are absorbed by everyone in society, as no one can fully remove themselves from the hegemony and androcentric views constantly instilled. Mary Ann Ciosk in her article, “Androcentrism: Learning To See The Invisible” defines this structure, showcasing the impact societal stigmas and conventions within culture have on people. When describing a moment in her childhood that stuck with her, Ciosk writes that, “As a child, I remember beginning to write a story and considering whether I should make my protagonist a girl or a boy. I chose a boy. I remember later justifying my decision to my parents by saying that I didn’t want to write a “girl story”, I just wanted the story to be about a person.” (Ciosk 2022). The story Ciosk wanted to write revealed something to her, she was bound by societal limitations. As a child it’s not as noticeable, but when looking back, it is clear Ciosk had made her decision to have a male-protagonist due to societal ideologies that limited her views on gender. Even as a child, it was clear to Ciosk that gender shapes the way someone is viewed, and thus the place they can take. In the article, Ciosk defines Androcentrism, the term that specifies the structure of society that caused Ciosk’s specific views on gender to ingrain themselves at such a young age in the first place. Ciosk writes,

Stories with a man in the leading role aren’t usually about the fact that the protagonist is a man, while stories about women are often seen as being only for female readers, or even as being feminist and taking a stance on gender issues. This is a result of androcentrism: a societal system placing men at the center, as

the standard and the norm, which results in marking a woman's gender more than a man's. (Ciosk 2022)

Provided with knowledge on Ciosk's childhood, as well as the effects and weight on society from Androcentrism, one can understand the drastic limitations and structuring genders prescription facilitates on agency.

HOW SOCIETIES STRUCTURE (ANDROCENTRISM) AFFECTS AGENCY:

Although crucial and profoundly in control, many view agency within our androcentric society in a simple manner, as only what they themselves have the personal ability to do. In actuality, one's agency tethers to thought, and controls the ways in which everyone thinks and goes about. Bryan W. Sokol, Frederick M. E. Grouzet, and Ulrich Müller in their book *Self-Regulation and Autonomy, Social and Developmental Dimensions of Human Conduct* discusses agency past the usual limited understanding, explaining that, "While some approaches to autonomy focus on the separation of independence of the self from others, other approaches view autonomy as resulting from a dialectical relationship between the self and the social." (Grouzet et al., 2013). Agency, as is described by Sokol, Grouzet, and Müller is not formed from a personal relationship one has with themselves, but rather the relationship they have with society. Thus, society and the ideologies within are constantly steering and defining agency for everyone, regardless of any knowledge or deciding on the relationship between person and society. Pertaining to education and how our autonomy shapes us, *Self-Regulation and Autonomy, Social and Developmental Dimensions of Human Conduct* as well discusses the impacts had on education and our way of thinking that societies ideological limitations facilitate and place on autonomy and agency. Examining this impact from a psychological standpoint, it is

described within the article how social psychologists “have emphasized the importance of autonomy, agency, and self-determined goal setting for healthy psycho-social functioning and academic achievement” (Grouzet et al., 2013). In short, autonomy and agency decipher what is learned, and how one goes about learning. Applied past a perspective of the education system, one’s agency can then be described as a dominating decider on how they view the world and tackle it. Considering agency and its originating from gender within our androcentric society, gender is then undoubtedly created to be a force that limits and confines thought, expression, and the autonomy people have.

LIMITATIONS OF AGENCY PLACED ON FEMALE GENDER IN 21ST CENTURY:

In the modern age, Androcentrism and prescribed agency stipulates and structures just as much as it is known to have done so in the past. Even now, there are strict limitations placed on agency and autonomy based on one’s gender. Nina Totenberg and Sarah McCammon in their article, “Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, ending right to abortion upheld for decades”, discusses the overturning of Roe v. Wade and how such is indicative of agency; or lack thereof. Totenberg and McCammon describe this overturning as one that, “means that “young women today will come of age with fewer rights than their mothers and grandmothers.” Indeed, they said the court's opinion means that “from the very moment of fertilization, a woman has no rights to speak of. A state can force her to bring a pregnancy to term even at the steepest personal and familial costs.”” (Totenburg and McCammon 2022). Totenberg and McCammon subliminally make an important distinction within what they share, that the political intentions of society supersede the intentions and desires of the general public. Women have been made to: forced to, undergo an extremely life changing thing in spite of the weight and pressure placed by this due to

the strict application of, and pressure from, societal ideologies. This supreme court decision also highlights societies desire to restrict and organize sex and gender to the extent that laws and rights are either limited or created by the whim of societal construct and opinion. Laws represent society's desires, rather than society's needs. Some women need abortions, yet all women are limited at their expense simply due to societal implication. This stipulation impacts more than body autonomy in terms of abortion and pregnancy, but also body autonomy in terms of expression as well. Joy Nash, a sophomore in highschool, articulates her thoughts toward gender expression in her article “Gender Roles in Modern Society” when she writes, "I have personally been pressured to behave and dress in more traditionally feminine ways by my mother and sisters. This often goes against my nerdy, tomboyish nature, especially since I do not enjoy wearing things like earrings, high-heels, (most) bright colors, or frilly clothes – the types of things that are equated to femininity.” (Nash 2016). Nash in her article highlights to her audiences how gendered implications create internal tensions within herself, as well as between her and her family. This tension showcases how gendered ideologies are not for the greater good, as many are burned by these strict societal policies. In addition, the tension between her family and herself that's created by her personal gender expression proves that societal ideologies and policed agency creep into every relationship, potentially creating tensions regardless of how close or important a person is to someone in comparison to society. This impact showcases that societal ideologies, especially ones that deal with gender, will facilitate within, and harbor within, every individual, regardless of their place or desire to represent society's conventions.

LIMITATIONS OF AGENCY PLACED ON MALE GENDER IN 21ST CENTURY:

Not only women and their femininity, but also men and their masculinity have been constantly constructed and pushed upon in society, having their agency and standing impacted due to androcentric values. Like women, men and their expression is highly defined. Dante Marquez in his article “The Evolution of Masculinity: Redefining Male Identity in Today’s World” allows his audiences to denote masculinity's effects. Contextualizing masculinity within our modern society, Marquez describes how, “Masculinity is undergoing a profound transformation, challenging long-standing ideals of male identity and inviting a redefinition of what it means to be a man in contemporary society. Historically, masculinity was often equated with strength, resilience, and dominance, leaving little room for emotional openness or vulnerability” (Marquez 2024). Framing the idea that men have been required to inhibit a certain quality or qualities of strength, Marquez allows his readers to understand that men have had their agency and gender expression created for them and defined. This defining in turn causes men to set aside their own values and expressions that don’t fit the status quo. Therefore, causing many men to throw their vulnerability to the side to frame themselves within the ideologies and strength that society prescribed to them and their gender expression. In his article as well, Marquez shares the repercussions of the prescribing and limiting of gender expression for men when he writes, “For decades, societal expectations discouraged men from acknowledging or addressing their emotional struggles, leading to significant consequences in their mental health. The stoic ideal prevented men from seeking help, often resulting in higher rates of depression, anxiety, and even suicide (Canetto & Sakinofsky, 1998)” (Marquez 2024). Not only defining one's expression, societal expectations on gender have a crucial role in defining someone's life, so much so that societal ideologies leave impressions on us that may be life-altering or even life-threatening. Considering Marquez’s statements, male gender expression has been prescribed,

and constantly limited, just as much as female expression and gender ideologies have for hundreds of years, farther back than even the thirteenth century.

LIMITATIONS OF AGENCY EXTENDED TO THE PAST:

Just as we reflect the same in our society, the societal stigmas and ideologies in place during the Thirteenth century instilled a control over agency. Additionally, just as we live in one now, an androcentric society was in place during the thirteenth century. This societal structure creates similar experiences regarding gender expression and the limiting of agency, even when branching off and comparing two time periods hundreds of years apart. Especially when considering the limitations controlled and created by defined gender expression in this structure, one's gender designated how one can go about their lives then, and now. Their fashion choices, their life choices, their relationships, their place in society, and overall everyone's agency and autonomy were incredibly restricted during the thirteenth century. Yes, society may not have the same methods or production of gender expression, but the constant defining by societal ideologies regarding gender and one's role in society are consistent and very much the same. Alexander Colchiski in his article, "Power, Agency, and Gender in Thirteenth Century France" goes over a letter sent by King Louis IX to his son Prince Phillip. In this letter, the monarch can be seen to contextualize a king's agency to his son, demarking actions befitting a ruler, and essentially, a man. Colchiski summarizes the letter, explaining that,

Phillips' main point is that sumptuary laws helped to enforce the patriarchy through the regulation of clothing, but sumptuary laws more broadly were a way to restrict private expenditures and gift-giving...He advises Philip to "have a pitiful heart for the poor [and to] comfort and aid them with some alms." Louis is

not mandating that his son care for the poor, but he is advising him to do so because it likely benefited Louis at some point in his reign. (Colchiski 2021)

Through King Louis IX's sentiments to his son Prince Phillip, readers of his letter can gauge the fact that societal expectations and guidelines changed the way that even a king goes about his rule. Even when in supreme power, one's agency is defined and limited by societal ideologies and expectations. In his letter as well, Louis mentions sumptuary laws, which goes to show the ingraining of societal ideology passed expectation, infiltrating even laws and what was considered legal. In "What are Sumptuary Laws?" Greg Beyer defines what these laws meant for Medieval society, allowing audiences to denote agency and defined expression at the time. Greg Beyer writes, "sumptuary laws were widespread and common for a massive host of reasons. Minorities were subject to dress codes for easy identification and for ease of discrimination...The specifics of the dress code were different for each region, but there were general trends." (Beyer 2022), before adding, "Although sumptuary laws were in effect across most of Europe, they were especially prevalent in England and were usually enacted for discerning social status or profession. Courtesans, for example, were required to wear striped hoods, while knights were forbidden to wear weasel fur. Esquires were forbidden to wear clothing costing more than five marks." (Beyers 2022). Bearing in mind the sumptuary laws Beyer describes within his article, one's role and place in society was incredibly definitive and affixed to the expression and choices they can make. A king had to give to the poor and enact certain laws, just as a courtesan had to wear striped hoods, all due to the abundant demarcating of roles under an androcentric society that ignited comparison and valuing through defined expression. In essence, one's agency during the thirteenth century, as is now, was undoubtedly restricted by the place and demarcations their role in society fastened to, limiting agency and

expression based on ideologies and impressions created by society, and applied to everyone within.

LIMITATIONS OF AGENCY PLACED ON FEMALE GENDER IN 13TH CENTURY:

Referencing the strict policies decided by someone's wealth and place in society, it comes to no surprise that gender would as well limit and define expression in thirteenth century Medieval society. It is clear that even then, the prescribing of gender was incredibly designating toward how someone went about their life, limiting agency and how people would view themselves and the world around them. Women and their gender were no exception to prescribed expression and agency in the thirteenth century. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras write in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender In Medieval Europe* on the subject, emphasizing to audiences the prescribing of expression and demarcating of a women's role during Medieval Europe and the thirteenth century. As societal ideologies are what guide thinking such prescription, it makes sense that, "gender was rooted in the three religions of the time, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; in scientific teachings; and in political traditions. Each constituted an authoritative literate discourse, and together they spoke about women and gender in a remarkably coherent chorus" (Bennet and Karras 5). Considering the fact that societal ideologies regarding women were roughly the same throughout the various religions present at the time, it can be safe to assume the role women played in throughout these beliefs were believed by the majority in society. Bennet and Karras then navigate their audiences through the ideas held at the time within these religions and society regarding women and their gender, clarifying that, "Women were understood as less than men, female attributes as less good than male ones, and gender relations as properly characterized by womanly submission and manly

governance.” (Bennet and Karras 5). Taking into account the ideologies Bennet and Karras describe, it is clear women were viewed as less than in society simply due to their gender, affecting how they were viewed; and subsequently, how they can go about their lives: their agency. In his article “Women in The Middle Ages” Joshua J. Mark delves into the lack of Agency women had during this period, just as Bennet and Karras do in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender In Medieval Europe*. Mark fills his readers in on the fact that women at the time did not have a choice in whom they would marry, the Lord would decide. Then,

Once the girl was married, her husband controlled her interests and was responsible for her behavior and, for this reason, women are not mentioned as often as men in legal matters in the Early Middle Ages. The woman's husband would be sued if a woman transgressed, not the woman herself. The woman's job was to take care of the home, help her husband at his work, and produce children.
(Mark 2019)

Mark in this moment of the text brings up an important point, that not only were women made to be incredibly subservient to society and their husbands, they lacked representation. This lacking influenced more than their social standing and agency, but also their representation and voice within society and history. Women were made to be voiceless, a fact made playfully privy to audiences by the thirteenth century French romance *Le Roman de Silence* through the female protagonist's name, “Silence”.

LIMITATIONS OF AGENCY PLACED ON MALE GENDER IN 13TH CENTURY:

Although not made up of the same infringements on women, men, their gender, male expression, and their agency, were incredibly defined by strict societal ideologies during the

thirteenth century. This gender prescription aimed by society toward men produced how men were viewed and able to act, defining how they should go about life. Societal standards and ideologies were extremely confining to men, just as they were to Women. Alexander Colchiski in his article “Power, Agency, and Gender in Thirteenth Century France” advances past describing the lack of agency men had that applied even to those in supreme power, examining how strict ideologies toward agency effected masculinity and male expression. Through the letter sent by King Louis IX to his son Prince Phillip, Colchiski opens up his audiences to conversations revolving around the demarcating of masculinity applied to power, specifically, how one’s wealth and place were connected to how one was viewed in the grand scheme of masculinity and male worth during the Medieval period. In the letter, King Louis IX, “instructs Philip to “Love your brothers..., and also be to them in the place of a father.” This is important because Louis is creating a masculinity hierarchy of man ruling boys just as fathers rule over sons. What constituted what a *man* was depended on his social ranking within the homosocial structure.” (Colchiski 2021). Social standing was crucial to how men were perceived, weighing in on their agency and success at displaying masculinity as made clear by Colchiski. The higher in power and wealth, the more masculine a man was perceived. Vern L. Bullough shares similar information to readers of “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages”. In the text, Bullough describes that men were expected to be a protector, impregnate women, and be the provider for their family. If not, “Failing at these tasks leads not only to challenges to one's masculinity, but also to fear of being labeled as showing feminine weakness, however a society defines that. This puts restrictions upon the man that , though quite different from those on the woman, are nonetheless burdensome” (Bullough 33). Making it known to audiences that the infringements placed by gender are different for men and women, Bullough makes the fact that gendered expression and

ideologies within society are incredibly restricting for men. Subsequently, this restriction in agency and expression based on gender creates a guideline for how men should “properly” act, making it so, “any male who demonstrates any inclination toward showing a more feminine side is deprecated, as this is a sign of weakness, not strength.” (Bullough 33). Based on how one expresses their gender, Bullough indicates that men during the Medieval period were not allowed to display femininity, or qualities designated by society to only be for women, causing men to be looked down upon if they exhibit such. Much like our modern world, men, the way they express themselves, and their overall agency, is limited and made to be demonstrated in a particular fashion at the discretion of society, creating tensions and catalysts for misrepresentation and criticism.

SUMMARY OF *LE ROMAN DE SILENCE*:

The plot of Heldris’s *Le Roman de Silence* hinges on societal ideologies of gender expression, and the subsequent definition of individuals due to the prescribing and limiting of agency that accompany. The story follows the aftermath of King Evan’s proclamation that women would no longer be able to inherit their families title and land. Due to this, Cadur, the Earl of Cornwall, and Eufemie, not to be confused with King Ebain’s Queen Eufeme, decide to raise their daughter as a boy in order to make it so their child, Silence, can attain his/her inheritance. Throughout the tale, Silence faces an argument within themselves on account of their false gender that is kept a secret from all others around them. Are they a girl? Is what they’re doing right? Within this, nature and nurture take hold, emphasizing how one’s agency and way of life are, or can be, strictly defined or adhered to either of the two. Nature argues the beauty and femininity imbued in Silence outweigh all infringement on account of procuring her

inheritance. While Nurture argues that the teachings instilled, and the life given to Silence, are what actually matter to him and his understanding of himself. Silence becomes lost, aiming to find answers to the questions they have regarding their gender and place within the society, as such truths define themselves and those around them. Naturally, readers of *Le Roman de Silence* are thrown into the argument as well, as many instances in which gender is articulated and defined appear within the story, highlighting how gender influences agency and expression within our society. Taking into account the story and subsequent conversations and arguments made about gender through such by Heldris in his *Le Roman de Silence*, the demarcation and instilling of gender by society is made incredibly clear, framing the argument that gender is not merely natural, but a prescribed and constantly shifting guideline for how one can and should act within our society.

ANDROCENTRIC/HEGEMONIC CULTURE WITHIN *LE ROMAN DE SILENCE*:

The thirteenth-century Arthurian work *Le Roman de Silence* encapsulates the encroaching nature of gendered expectations and prescribed autonomy within society. Heldris's work as well, highlights the weight societal ideologies, one of which being an androcentric structure, has on gender. We can see the defining of androcentric views from the very beginning of the work, as limitations placed on gender and the plot of the story are consistently framed and shown as ones that stem from societal ideologies. Opening up the story, the Master Heldris of Cornwall begins with a monologue, exhorting his audience to remember the value of stories, in particular his stories.. From this, those within society are defined by Heldris, placing his readers in two categories: those that learn, and those that continue the societal structure of Androcentrism without second thoughts as to how they go about such. For Heldris, "for those who possess them,

he commands and requests, right here at the beginning of the work he is creating, that anyone who has them should burn them rather than share them with the kind of people who don't know a good story when they hear one." (Heldris 3-8). Through this statement, Heldris backs up his story, subsequently backing up the content and structure, all being contents formed around androcentric ideals. As he backs up the content, he may also potentially be backing up the plot and the treatment toward gender and its expression. This may be proven when Heldris continues to write, "wealth only makes a man mean-spirited and makes him toil without profit. All he does is soil himself. He doesn't trust his wife any more: he doesn't want her to spend any of it...I don't know what more to say of those hateful men who thus abuse this earthly life" (Heldris 57-59). Defining the role in which men often take in society, being the support for a wife and possessor of wealth, Heldris in this moment articulates the deep-rooted expectations for men in thirteenth century society. Although slight, Heldris in addition articulates women's role of being provided for, and a stereotype often placed on women within society, being the "deceptive" and money grabbing partner to a man. Further in this story, we can see this female stereotype, and other structures placing men to be the money makers and distributors of society, very evidently. Eufemie for instance, although a Queen, is time and time again seen to harness her feminine qualities for her own gain, emphasizing agency and the impacts a structured, stereotyped, society has on those within it. Taking into consideration her lack of agency, and limited powers on account of her gender, Eufemie does what she can to gain what she desires, making use of her voice; lies, role as queen, and ability of seduction. The same goes with Silence, King Ebain, and every other character, as they all are products of their environment, and thus, have their goals driven, limited, and accomplished by what they are afforded in society by androcentric ideals. Katherine H Terrel in her article, "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of

Language in *Le Roman de Silence*” discusses Queen Eufeme and her prescribed role within the story and society during the Medieval period. In her article, Terrel notes the specific descriptors placed on Queen Eufeme in the text, including ““Sathanas” (3698), a “female Satan,” partially because of the freeness of her speech and her willingness to express and ruthlessly fight for her desires. Near the end of the poem, King Ebain firmly rebukes her, in the poem’s most definitive linkage of women with silence.” (Terrel 2008). King Ebain’s rebuking of Queen Eufeme that is noted by Terrel brings to light the power given to men to isolate and control the women in their lives. All-be-it a queen, Eufeme possesses no power compared to her male counterpart. At the discretion of the men in her life, at the discretion of not fulfilling the roles given to her properly by society, Eufeme is “drawn and quartered” (Heldris 6656) in revenge, discarded entirely. This moment in Terrell’s article also touches on the silence expected of women within society, exemplifying the gendered expectations and supposed right of men to voice and control women, who are almost always brought to subservience. In her article ““The Boy Who Was a Girl””: Reading Gender in the “Roman de Silence”, Peggy McCracken touches on views similar to Terrell that depict the androcentrism ingrained in the thirteenth century. Referencing Silence’s insecurity in her gender and eventual “decision” to become a women at the end of the play, McCracken explains that social ideologies, and the binary of gender that insists all fall under the category of male or female, made it impossible for Silence to go about her life without fulfilling either gendered role prescribed in society. McCracken writes how the Roman de Silence,

recounts the anxiety that the ambiguously gendered individual provokes in aristocratic society. Through the restoration of reproductive gender roles in its resolution, the romance locates that anxiety not in the possibility of women performing men’s roles as well as men, but in the disruption of “proper” avenues

for exchange that are essential to maintain the kinship alliances that structure medieval aristocratic society: marriage and succession. (McCracken 1994)

Implicitly touching on androcentrism, McCracken describes the structure of medieval aristocratic society that desires all those within society to adopt the ideologies that reassert gender as binary, and essential, to how one should go about and assert themselves. For Silence, she lacks the backing of society because of her undefined gender, making it so she can't confidently go about her life without worrying about her place. A place that naturally goes against the binary, and thus, goes against society's structure of marriage and succession. McCracken further establishes her point that emphasizes medieval societies' need for those within to support the structure of androcentrism when she further adds that, "From the beginning of Silence's story gender and identification is influenced by concerns about succession and dynasty. A reading of the efforts by various characters in the story to contain the mutability of Silence's body reveals the role of political and social institutions in maintaining a binary gender system and in both exploring and suppressing challenges to that system." (McCracken 1994). Herein, McCracken notes to her audiences the institution that supports, and actively suppresses what goes against, the structure of androcentrism within Silence, emphasizing her gender must fit into the binaries prescribed by society. Considering McCracken and Terrel's sentiments toward Androcentrism and the hold it has on society and Silence's story, insecurity, and agency were driven, and extremely limited by, the social and political structures within the thirteenth century.

GOD / SOCIETAL IDEOLOGY AND IMPLICATION:

Considering the binarized prescribing of gender, the expectations placed on Silence, and the stereotypes structured into society in *Le Roman De Silence*, it is evident that God and the

societal implications made from Christianity also take shape within the story's androcentric ideologies. Throughout, God is referenced and brought up frequently, showcasing the deep-rooted structuring christianity had on thirteenth century medieval society and the story of Silence. While introducing himself to the King of France, Silence calls upon God multiple times, revealing deep-seated structures of society. Heldris writes, just before Silence hands a letter to the king, a statement from Silence wishing good for both the King of France and King Evan that asks, "Sire, may God enthroned in Majesty, who always has been and always will be and holds the whole world in his hands, save you: this is the fervent wish of King Evan." (Heldris 4385-4388). From Silence's statement it is clear, God is a beacon of support, and is often used to uplift and uphold the rights of the king. Through this upholding of the crown, the androcentric structure that places the king at the top of society is therefore backed by God as well. With this in mind, Silence's statement not only highlights the power of God and the solidity of the societal structure in place, but also the inner imploring and appreciation of God and such structure in Silence and society overall. Loyalty to the structure of society is also shown by Silence through her appreciation of God, foreshadowing her choice, or lack thereof, to live as a woman at the end of the story. In her article "Sacred Romance: 'Silence' and the Hagiographical Tradition." Lynne Dahmen talks about God's relation to *Le Roman de Silence*, discussing how

church doctrine, often reflecting contemporary or earlier church decisions, appears explicitly in both secular and religious literature in the form of prayers, recitations, or even declarations of creed made by the characters...Many of these elements, including the insertion of prayers, the illustration of sanctity and faith through the behavior of the protagonist, and a willingness to be martyred, appear in Silence, though the main character never seeks a religious life. (Dahmen 2002)

Outlining the presence of church doctrine with *Le Roman De Silence*, Dahmen notes that Silence follows these traditions. Perhaps unknowingly, it is also made apparent to readers of Dahmen that Silence may represent the values and traditions of the church through her actions, emphasizing the deep-seeded nature of God within society and its structure. Later in her article, Dahmen adds on to this point as she mentions how Silence, through her devotion of God and thus society's structure, “puts herself not at the mercy of God, but in the hands of the king. Once again, the poet inverts the expectations of hagiography and places the narrative into a courtly context. The ending of the tale reaffirms the worldly and societal importance of the world of romance” (Dahmen 2002). Regarding Dahmen’s article, it is clear that Silence, although going against societal standards by disguising her gender in the story, is extremely representative of the cultural values and stigmas a part of the androcentric society she finds herself in. Through her appreciation and valorization of God, King Ebain, and the King of France, Silence showcases to readers that she is very aware of the androcentric societal standards and expectations rampant, and in place for her.

FEMININITY AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN SILENCE:

Being a story that tackles gender and its presentation, *Le Roman de Silence* naturally facilitates discussions on femininity for medieval and modern day readers alike. As society constantly frames and structures gender, it goes without saying that feminine virtues and femininity are structured as well. We can see this norm-prescribing in *Le Roman de Silence* through every woman in the story, even including Silence when she is still living as a man. In her article “Sacred Romance: ‘Silence’ and the Hagiographical Tradition, Lynne Dahmen, in addition to referencing God and religions impact on society, discusses female representation and

norms within the story's protagonist, Silence, and the religion of Christianity. In it, she writes of femininity's norms that limit the agency of women when she writes that, "Though Silence's deception is exposed, her life story illustrates that she is a woman to be admired and emulated for her patience, loyalty, beauty, talents, and ultimately, her ability to remain silent. Though Heldris clearly draws heavily from the familial forms and themes of romance, he also adapts aspects of popular hagiograph well-known to his Christian audiences" (Dahmen 2002). Defining feminine virtues, such as beauty, patience, and most importantly silence, Dahmen highlights the values in place within Heldris's story. These values, especially ones that place the subservience of women as a norm, are incredibly debilitating to agency, and yet, are instilled within thirteenth century medieval society. In *Le Roman de Silence*, the norm of female submission, and thus the submission of femininity in light of masculinity, is also highlighted by the plot, as well as various mentions of characters. One mention, being a statement from King Ebain, prescribes women's role in society when he exclaims, "A woman's role is to keep silent. So help me God, I think a mute can tell what women are good for, for they're only good for one thing, and that is to keep silent. They are all alike, and it's hardly a coincidence that there isn't one in a thousand who wouldn't earn more praise by keeping silent than by speaking." (Heldris 6398-6406). Not only prescribing silence, King Ebain lets readers know that such is preferred, and extremely appreciated by the men, and structure of society. In this statement he speaks out loud for many to listen to, and he implies that his comment was an obvious one, referencing that even a mute would be able to decipher a women's role to be silent in society. In connection with Silence's disguise of a man, King Ebain's statement highlights the feminine virtues required from Silence on account of her gender that did not align with her while living as a man, requiring her to stop and transition into a woman. In "The Boy Who Was a Girl": Reading Gender in the "Roman de

Silence”, Peggy McCracken mentions Silence’s disguise, since “a woman disguised as a man cannot engender a child, and a cross-dressed man cannot give birth, the transvestite figure disrupts the distribution of reproductive roles and frustrates the exchange of women in marriages that worked to create and ensure dynastic alliances” (McCracken 1994). As disclosed by McCracken, women were held to certain expectations, including getting married and having children, in order to support the structure of society, being an androcentric one. Silence’s gender, expression, and agency are all expected to comply with her gender and its normalized, usual, performance. Considering the standards of femininity that Heldris asserts in his story that are placed on Silence, it makes sense that she’d have anxiety within the story revolving around her gender and place because of such.

MASCULINITY AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN SILENCE:

The defining of gender naturally prescribes the potential expression and agency of those within society, making masculinity to be just as defined and structured as femininity’s virtues, expression, and place are within *Le Roman de Silence*. Throughout Heldris’s story, attention is brought toward what it means to be a man during medieval thirteenth century society, allowing readers to understand and denote the prescribed expression and gendered ideals placed on men. Lorraine Kochanske Stock’s article, “Arms and the (Wo)Man’ in Medieval Romance: The Gendered Arming of Female Warriors in the ‘Roman d’Eneas’ and Heldris’s ‘Roman de Silence.’” mentions a moment within *Le Roman de Silence* that showcases this. Stock writes how Silence must, “pass as a male knight” and how,

an elaborate, ceremonial arming scene is expected of a male warrior. Because the special dynamics of a gender-crossing story warrant it, Heldris includes a 30-line

version of this obligatory scene, even though Silence is really a female. In including a classic male-gendered arming scene, Heldris thus actually enhances the verisimilitude of this otherwise fantastic story. While actual male warriors seem to rely on the physical substance of the armor for their valor/protection, Silence's elaborate armor functions additionally as a disguise validating her male. (Stock 1995)

Referencing the ceremonial arming scene given to Silence, Stock asserts that ideologies and virtues assigned to men were given to Silence to affirm her masculinity. Through her arming, as well as the clothes in which Silence puts on, Silence validates her male identity. This validation, however, is only possible if Silence were representing herself with ideals and expressions assigned to the male gender, rather than the femininity and gender she disguises. As she affirms her male identity, Silence showcases to audiences that there are strict expressions put in place for men, and thus herself, that when accomplished is looked up to and incredibly valorized. Stock as well in her article articulates that, “As part of her French experience, Silence receives an opportunity to demonstrate all the male nurtured skills she has been practicing since infancy: hunting, jousting, and swordplay. At the age of seventeen, after she is dubbed a knight by the King of France on the feast of Pentecost, a tournament is held in Silence's honor, at which she excels over all the other knights and takes the prize.” (Stock 1995). From this, Stock highlights that men who perform their gender well, and exhibit all the traits expected from men, are held in places of honor, with Silence even having a tournament held for them and their apt masculinity. We can also see the strict prescribing of manly virtue, as Silence has been trained on how to be a man through jousting, swordplay, and hunting, at an incredibly young age in order to be in line with an “extremely successful appropriation of the typical activities and demeanor of the male

warrior” (Stock 1995). Repeatedly throughout *Le Roman de Silence*, Silence has their masculinity and strength affirmed, subsequently affirming the presence of gender roles and prescribed masculinity overall within the text and thirteenth century medieval society. Within Heldris’s *Le Roman de Silence* we not only see the agency and gender expression of men defined, but also coined as a rite of passage. Describing Silence’s childhood, the seneschal in charge of raising Silence, “took him out often in the scorching heat, in order to make a man out of him. He was so used to men’s usage and had so rejected women’s ways that little was lacking for him to be a man.” (Heldris 2473-2477). Considering Silence’s childhood and the sentiments of the seneschal, the idea of what it meant to be a man directly influenced how one went about raising their children. Silence’s femininity is juxtaposed to her masculinity, making it so one cannot exist with the other's presence, forcing the seneschal to only teach Silence the “ways of a man”. Silence’s riding through the scorching sun, or her doing of other activities only expected of men made it so no one would’ve denied the fact of her being a man. Without such training or treatment, Silence’s masculinity would’ve been questioned, subsequently making her place as a man less solid and grounded in society. Additionally, In the seneschal's statement the idea of “making” a man highlights the prescribing nature of gender in society, as “making a man” would imply that masculinity is something crafted rather than innate. Through *Le Roman de Silence* it is made clear that men within the story, and in thirteenth century medieval society, were expected to act and present their gender in a specific way, failure to do so would make it so they would have their worth and role as a man questioned.

NATURE VS NURTURE:

Heldris's *Le Roman de Silence* raises discussions to readers on the idea of nature vs nurture through its protagonist Silence, who was raised as a man despite being born a girl. Especially through the personification of Nature and Nurture as characters in the story that interact with each other and Silence, themes of taught action juxtaposing "natural" disposition are rampant through the story. In *Le Roman de Silence* the audience is introduced to Nature, who builds Silence with the finest clay and most beautiful form. Being that Silence is raised as a man, Nature is fueled with anger at this decision, and when she, "realized that they had tricked and deceived her by turning her work into the opposite of what she had turned out, you can imagine how disturbed she was and how much she wanted revenge upon them for changing her daughter into a son..." "They have insulted me," said Nature, "by acting as if the work of nurture were superior to mine!" (Heldris 2266-2268). In this scene, Nature places herself as something that is in direct opposition to nurture. In other words, Nature places Silence's gender as a female as something that opposes the male teachings and nurture she is given. Peggy McCracken's article "The Boy Who Was a Girl" builds on to the opposition created between Nature and Nurture when McCracken writes, "the very idea of nature remains problematic in this romance. "Nature" has many meanings in the *Roman de Silence* and is used to name anatomy, moral temperament, noble breeding, and even the status quo of gender roles. In Roberta Krueger's words, "Nature" is the justification of how 'culture' constructs women." (McCracken 1994). Considering McCracken's statement and the conversations explored by Heldris through the personification of Nature, it is clear that Nature is meant to represent the values and ideals prescribed to those within society that dictate how they should act and express their gender. The social roles instilled within the story, nature, are what fuel the conversations regarding nurture needing to align with nature, and are thus the reason Silence feels an anxiety regarding her life living as a man.

Heldris notes of Silence's insecurity of her gender expression when he writes, "I am a disgrace if I want to be one of the women. I was trying to make life easy for myself, but I have a mouth too hard for kisses, and arms too rough for embraces. One could easily make a fool of me in any game under the covers, for I'm a young man, not a girl." (Heldris 2643-2649). As Silence describes his body, it's clear that they don't feel as though they live up to the standards and virtues expected from women if they were to live as one. This standard seems to only stem from society however, as Silence in the story never relates their gender toward what they want to do, but rather what they should be doing due to being born a girl. In fact, Silence, "had no regrets about his upbringing, in fact, he loved it. He was a valiant and noble knight; no king or count was ever better. I can't tell you the half of his exploits. Before the year was over, all the people in the land considered him an outstanding and accomplished knight." (Heldris 5177-5179). With Silence's valiant accomplishments as a knight, and love for his nurture, it's evident that one's nurture doesn't naturally align, or have to align, with the gender one was born with. In *Le Roman De Silence*, "nature", the societal ideologies that defines gender and prescribes its expression, are directly placed in opposition with one's nurture, however, through Silence it is clear one's nurture is only usually prescribed to their nature, and is in no way an actual representation of what is naturally a product of their gender.

SILENCE'S NAME:

The character Silence in Heldris's *Le Roman de Silence*, showcases many instances of limited agency due to society's ideas of gender expression. Their name is an example, emphasizing the values constantly instilled toward gender in our androcentric societal structure. Silence's name and its connection to the prescribing of gender expression is discussed by Katherine Terrell in her article "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language

in *Le Roman De Silence*.” Terrel writes about the, “implications of gender for Silence’s name—that she will be “Silentius” if a boy, “Silentia” if a girl—he employs the Latin forms of her name, in which the cultural difference between boy and girl is reflected linguistically in the gendered endings of the masculine or feminine noun. Moreover, he clearly differentiates between the endings on epistemological and moral grounds.” (Katherine 2008). Naming Silence with the intention of changing the ending to an “a” to reflect her change into living as a woman, and vice versa, a changing if she were to continue living as a man, Silence’s name is made to reflect the linguistic choices applied to the gendered expressions ascribed in society. The ties held between language and identity are mentioned by Terrell in her article when she writes of, “Silence’s upbringing—violates nature, Cador not only sides with Heldris in suggesting that Silence’s masculinity masks an essential, unalterable femininity, he also establishes an intimate connection among nature, truth, and language. For Cador, language intimately corresponds with reality...in his view, grammatical gender and social gender are one and the same.” (Terrell 2008). Taking in Terrell's viewpoint toward Cador’s understanding of language and life, it is evident that Cador has allowed societal ideologies to weigh in on his child’s, making it so Silence is given a name that is considered “appropriate” for her gender. As Silence is raised as man, Cador’s choice to not name his daughter with the ending of an “a”, in order to disguise her gender further, showcases he allows society’s views on gender to facilitate how he goes about interacting with life, i.e. the naming and particular raising of his child, but also the fact he sees the connection of language and gender as solid identifiers to distinguish gender as well. This validating of social ideology that ingrain ideas of gender onto language isolates the fact that values of gendered expression have deep-roots that facilitate a particular understanding, the world is structured-whether natural or calculated. Through Silence’s name, this societal structure is rendered. Terrell

as well writes of Silence's gender and its relationship with society, italicizing that, "As she transforms from female to male and back again, the consequences are largely determined by gendered codes of speech and silence, which are a large part of what separates the male and female worlds in the poem." (Terrell 2008). Considering Terrell, Silence's name is not the only representation of her gender and the changes needed to indicate such. In addition to her name, Silence is given new social codes and roles that aren't allotted to men when changing her gender into a woman, one role being silence.

THE ENDING OF SILENCE / MARRIAGE TO THE KING:

The ending of Heldris's *Le Roman De Silence* is extremely indicative of the structured agency and limited expression of gender prescribed to those within society. After finding and capturing Merlin, a feat assigned to Silence by King Ebain that was intended to keep him unknowingly banned from the kingdom, Silence's disguise, and the truth regarding Eufemie's deceit, are both exposed by the wizard Merlin. Helen Fulton in her article "Gender and Jealousy in 'Gereint Uab Erbin' and 'Le Roman de Silence.'" discusses the final moments of the play, explaining how,

Silence is unmasked only by accident. Thinking to set her an impossible task, one of Silence's enemies orders her to find Merlin, living wild in the forest, knowing that Merlin can only be found by a woman. When Silence succeeds in the task, the logical fallacy can only be resolved by exposing—literally—the true sex of Silence. She is made to remove her male clothing and is proved without doubt to be female, a sexualized humiliation that is her initiation into womanhood. (Fulton 2014)

As described, Silence's gender had to be affirmed to the extent that they were undressed in that exact moment that their gender was called to question. In other words, at the moment Silence was made unfit to belong in our structured, gendered, and androcentric society, her gender needed to be known to place her back into the structure. This was done through her immediate undressing, and despite her nobility and the value in society toward privacy and maintaining a lady's virtue at the time, the question of her gender topped all other social ideologies in that moment. Mirroring the lack of agency women are often given in society, Silence is made to undress without any complaint or criticism. In Heldris's story, Silence is not only made to lack extreme agency when forced to undress when suspicion of them being a woman was created, but also through King Ebain's decision to wed Silence when Heldris writes, "Then the king took her to wife...They were overjoyed, as was only fitting. Master Heldris says here and now that one should praise a good woman more than one should blame a bad one. And I will tell you why: A woman has less motivation provided that she even has the choice to be good than to be bad." (Heldris 6677-6686). In this, Silence has no choice on the decision off King Ebain to marry her, nor does she ever get her thoughts and voice into words ever at the end once she is declared a woman. Much like her name, the protagonist of Heldris's story is made to be silent at the end, as she was made to be a woman in a society that limits agency and expression based on gender.

MY OVERALL ARGUMENT:

Considering *Le Roman De Silence*, the Androcentric structure of our society both during the medieval thirteenth century and our modern era, and the facilitation such structure has on gender and its expression, it is clear that gender has been made into a driving force for determining one's agency. Mary Ann Ciosk in her article, "Androcentrism: Learning To See The

Invisible” defines this structure, allowing readers to gauge the weight androcentrism has on people within our society, influencing how we perceive those around us and live overall. Like Ciosk, Bryan W. Sokol, Frederick M. E. Grouzet, and Ulrich Müller in their book *Self-Regulation and Autonomy, Social and Developmental Dimensions of Human Conduct* discuss Androcentrism. Through them, the influence the structure has is further expounded on, allowing readers to gauge that how we learn and perceive things can also be limited by androcentrism and societal ideologies. With the help of Nina Totenberg, Sarah McCammon, Joy Nash, and Dante Marquez, femininity and masculinity's presentation and expectations from society are highlighted, emphasizing the restrictions placed on agency through the defining and structuring of gender and its expression. Alexander Colchiski and Greg Beyer look into gender and agency as well, however, helping to present how agency was limited during the thirteenth century rather than our present day instead. With these authors, Heldris’ *Le Roman De Silence* is put into perspective, creating conversations on the text's relatability to our modern ideologies, thus showcasing its representations of gender and its prescribing throughout the text to audiences. With its analysis, *Le Roman De Silence* suggests the prescribing of gender that in turn limits agency through several moments of the story, such as, Silence's forced marriage and exposing at the end of the story. Moments like these are not simply plot, but incredibly noteworthy to readers as Silence, the protagonist, has her agency almost entirely stripped after she was forced from living as a man to a woman. Even with her amazing performance while living as a man that guaranteed King Ebain’s victory in war and the killing of a dragon, once Silence’s gender is revealed, the societal structure in place makes it so she is forced to change how she goes about as she now needs to express herself the way women in society are prescribed to, acting accordingly. Reading *Le Roman De Silence*, Heldris’ story allows audiences to view

the societal structure and subsequent limited agency placed on everyone in society that changes our perception and how we act, thus emphasizing the constant prescribing and fickle nature of gender overall. Gender is not a natural, all-encompassing factor that determines how we are able to act and the roles we can take, it is merely a societal structure and construct, a prescription on the agency one has based on the values and expressions adhered to, and limiting, either gender.

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