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The Silent Identity: Asexuality, Aromanticism, and Convention in *Le Roman de Silence*
and *The Story of Silence*

Anita Farrell

Summer Fellows Research Project, Summer 2025

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Le Roman de Silence has been a favorite of numerous scholars since its discovery in 1911 in Nottingham, England due to its treatment of gender.¹ The author, a man named Heldris of Cornwall, writes primarily about Silence, who was assigned-female-at-birth² and raised as a man to preserve the family's inheritance. Despite an isolated upbringing, Silence becomes a jongleur,³ joustier, a successful and well-traveled knight, and, eventually, the Queen of England upon the reveal of their sex. Many aspects of *Roman de Silence* conform to the medieval romance genre, such as its inclusion of legendary Arthurian figures, but Silence's interiority and determination to blur gendered categories have captured the attention of feminist and queer scholars alike. In this paper, I argue further that Silence's experience with romantic and sexual boundaries constitutes their identity as aromantic-asexual,⁴ critiquing the modern and historical institutions of romance.

Understanding Silence as aromantic-asexual, shortened to aro-ace from here onward,⁵ begins with reviewing how Silence interacts with gendered categories. Given that *Roman de Silence*'s plot centers gender and Silence's movement in, out of, and around this binary, many scholars have examined Silence's gender identity. While I understand Silence as non-binary⁶

¹ "How Roman de Silence Speaks to Today's Debate on Gender Identity." Medievalists.net, April 29, 2023, <https://www.medievalists.net/2023/04/how-roman-de-silence-speaks-to-todays-debate-on-gender-identity/>.

² A term used to describe people who were assigned the female sex at birth, usually according to their genitalia or other physical characteristics. While the term originally was used by and for intersex people (people born with reproductive anatomy that does not fit the boxes of "male" or "female"), it has also largely been adopted by transgender folks. To avoid using terms like "born a woman" or "born a man," which can invalidate present gender identities of transgender folks, people use terms like AMAB (assigned male at birth) and AFAB (assigned female at birth) instead. For more, see pridecorner's glossary on [AFAB](#) and [AMAB](#).

³ A medieval French entertainer, musician, singer, and performer.

⁴ Aromantic is an identity in the LGBTQ+ community that generally constitutes a person who does not experience romantic attraction. Similarly, asexual is an identity in the LGBTQ+ community that generally constitutes a person who does not experience sexual attraction.

⁵ I recognize that aromantic and asexual are two different identities and identifying as one does not necessarily mean that an individual identifies as the other. However, because Silence's experience with both identities are highly connected to the other, I use this portmanteau for the remainder of this paper.

⁶ A term used to describe people who, for a variety of reasons, do not identify as strictly a man or a woman. Because non-binary is an umbrella term, the meaning of the word varies from person to person. Some non-binary people identify with aspects of both genders; some identify with neither; some find that their gender changes; others identify with genders that are not "man" or "woman."

(and, as such, use they/them pronouns for Silence), they defy typical conventions of gender regardless of specific identity. Silence is born more beautiful “than a thousand of the most beautiful girls”;⁷ they are “a triumph of Nature’s art,” crafted of fine raw materials and a rare, though beautiful, mold.⁸ Heldris never forgets to remind the audience of Silence’s “true” identity, referring to Silence as “the youth who was a girl”⁹ and calling them a “she beneath the clothes.”¹⁰ Despite this attempt to categorize Silence as female, the narrative almost exclusively uses he/him pronouns for Silence, and they partake in activities associated with masculinity and men. Silence “[wins] the prize”¹¹ of a jousting tournament held in their honor after being knighted, itself a title restricted to males. Their gendered existence in the romance appears fluid above all else, as they can exit and enter “male” and “female” whenever they desire.

Silence also exists between these categories. Heldris attempts to reinstate gendered divisions, specifically after the jousting tournament ends; he reminds the audience that Silence is “a woman” very engaged “in armed combat,”¹² which only serves to highlight further that Silence currently straddles both “extremes” of the gender binary. The end of the romance tries similar backtracking. Silence is revealed as a “deceiver,”¹³ disrobed, and marries the King. Yet as Masha Raskolnikov points out in “Without Magic or Miracle: The “Romance of Silence” and the Prehistory of Genderqueerness,” Silence must undergo a change to become less of a man. Nature (a character in the romance) must remove Silence’s “sunburn”¹⁴ developed from extended

⁷ Sarah Roche-Mahdi, *Silence* (East Lansing, Mich, Lancaster: Michigan State University Press ; Gazelle distributor, 1999), line 1883.

⁸ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 1799.

⁹ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 3763, 3785.

¹⁰ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 2480.

¹¹ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 4144.

¹² Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 5147-48.

¹³ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 6530.

¹⁴ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 6674.

time outside jousting, suggesting that Silence’s “femaleness is [not] a self-evident fact”¹⁵ and instead must be cultivated in the same way that Silence cultivated their masculine identity. In other words, Nature *detransitions*¹⁶ Silence, offering credibility not only to their femininity but their masculinity, too. Nature’s behavior implies a change in Silence’s gender occurred initially—after all, if Silence had never transitioned into a male, then Nature would never have needed to spend three days reversing those changes.

The romance’s use of space also places Silence outside of gendered boundaries. Silence spends a significant amount of time in the wilderness, or the *bos*; Jessica Barr proposes that the woods are a place outside of “heteronormative patriarchy” that provide a space for Silence’s “transgender identit[y]” to thrive.¹⁷ “The hazards of both masculinity and femininity” separate systems of gender and social construction¹⁸ from the *bos*, and Silence’s extended stay in the wilderness allows them to separate themselves from the same hazards.

Various academics have explored Silence’s internal perspective—distinctive for the genre—on their surroundings. Erin Taylor argues that Silence’s identity is “clearly queer” and cultivated through conversation with themselves, noting both men and women show sexual or romantic interest in Silence, similar to transgender saints examined by Roland Betancourt.¹⁹

¹⁵ Raskolnikov, Masha, “Without Magic or Miracle: The ‘Romance of Silence’ and the Prehistory of Genderqueerness.” *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, November 15, 2021, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv1h0p5ng.12>.

¹⁶ A term that references the stop or reversal of transition taken to align a person with a specific gender identity. This may include legal, social, medical, surgical, or other means of transition. Importantly, not everyone who detransitions does so because they no longer identify with the gender they were transitioning to. Some feel pressured by social or practical difficulties to halt their transition (and, thus, detransition). For more, see [Michael Irwig's article](#) in *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*.

¹⁷ Jessica Barr, “The Idea of the Wilderness: Gender and Resistance in Le Roman de Silence,” *Arthuriana* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/27159040>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Erin Taylor, “‘WHAT PERSONS, MASCULINE OR FEMININE’: EXAMINATIONS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND QUEER POTENTIALITIES IN WESTERN MEDIEVAL EUROPE,” UMD, 2023, <https://api.drum.lib.umd.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/e5282bf0-8f75-4f24-b516-63ac19ad55e4/content>.

Masha Raskolnikov writes about the “undecidable genderqueerness of [Silence].”²⁰ However, scholars infrequently clarify *how* this queerness manifests.²¹ I intend to prove that Silence is aro-ace, as they fail to understand—and choose to opt out of—romantic and sexual expectations.

Silence’s lack of insight regarding romance, specifically, likely comes from continual opposition to it. From the beginning, Silence and romance stand contrary to one another. The first portion of the romance dedicates itself to the love story of Cador and Eufemie—Silence’s parents—which contains now-common tropes of the modern romance genre. When love is described as a disease,²² reminiscent of lovesickness, and courtship as a battle,²³ the narrative grants successes and losses to an inanimate concept. Love also causes “great distress”²⁴ and can “[take] up a dart / sharper than lance’s point” to “[strike]” Cador,²⁵ offering it the agency ascribed to humanity. Cador and Eufemie also serve as two secretly-pining lovers; Cador tells Eufemie that he wants to “devote [himself] completely to [her],”²⁶ setting up a stark contrast for how little Silence delves into romance compared to their parents. Being the child of a lovesick pair, Heldris places similar assumptions on Silence, who, though they only exist as an idea, is nonetheless expected to engage in romance.

As a child, Silence hardly interacts with or observes romance. Cador sends Silence to a household in the woods with only two individuals to raise them: a seneschal²⁷ and a lady, their primary teacher. With Silence’s closest friends being two unmarried adults, it makes sense that

²⁰ Raskolnikov, “Without Magic or Miracle.”

²¹ It is not always necessary to identify the identity of certain characters. At times, leaving the interpretation up to an audience generally results in a more nuanced reading, especially if the reading itself resists the need to organize and categorize every individual’s identity. Strict conventions around romance that require deconstructing necessitate exploring Silence’s aro-ace identity.

²² Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 1004.

²³ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 1152.

²⁴ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 677.

²⁵ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 680-2.

²⁶ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 933.

²⁷ A person who managed a lord’s estate.

their perception of relationships does not match that of individuals raised by a married couple. Silence understands early on that relationships do not necessarily have to be romantic *or* familial in nature to be important. Further, Silence skips the typical whispers surrounding crushes in childhood (most children's first or second experience with romance) because they do not know anyone their age.

The narrative also acknowledges Silence's lack of experience with courting. To remedy their inexperience with "women's arts,"²⁸ they decide to become a jongleur. While context seems to imply that women's arts are activities expected of women like sewing or cooking, it *also* makes sense for this phrase to refer to courtship. In *A Medieval Woman's Companion: Women's Lives in the European Middle Ages*, Susan Morrison indicates that the most privileged females "were those who remained virgins,"²⁹ then widows who did not remarry, and last of all, wives who created "new virgins" through childbirth.³⁰ Not knowing how to court does not necessarily signal aromanticism; after all, many alloromantic people find it difficult to express their feelings. But, as most women were not privileged enough to opt out of sex and romance (and thus, courtship), Silence's lack of knowledge and separation from it appears remarkable.

Silence first encounters romance when Nature tries to convince them that they should not present masculinely. Relying on amatonormative³¹ assumptions, Nature appeals to Silence's sense of romance, citing "a thousand women in this world / who are madly in love" with them,³² not aware that Silence *has* no sense of romance. With focus delegated to their gender identity

²⁸ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 2835.

²⁹ Susan Signe Morrison, "Understanding the Female Body: MISOGYNY AND SYMPATHY," *A Medieval Woman's Companion: Women's Lives in the European Middle Ages*, 2016, 88–95, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1dnb3.15>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The set of assumptions that indicate all humans desire a long-term, exclusive, often monogamous romantic relationship.

³² Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 2513-14.

instead of marriage, and with the seneschal and lady as their companions, Silence has no scaffolding from which to imagine an “ideal” partner. Nature also simultaneously suggests that Silence passes as male if women are falling in love with them, further weakening Nature’s point that Silence must return to their “true” identity.³³ As such, Silence does not address Nature’s comment. Their neglect of romance continues—they prefer minstrelsy and acting as “an outstanding and accomplished knight”³⁴ rather than marriage. They opt out of not just gender but romance, too, claiming that their mouth is “too hard for kisses” and their arms “too rough for embraces.”³⁵ Silence could be referencing their masculine identity—men are too macho to bother with love—but the first third of the romance focuses on Cador, Silence’s father, falling in love. As Silence cultivates a masculine identity that places them at odds with romance and sex, it seems that something different is happening.

Furthermore, Silence repeatedly avoids engaging in romance and sex. When the Queen expresses her desire for them and kisses them several times, they are “extremely upset”³⁶ for three reasons: they did not consent to these kisses,³⁷ the Queen’s unwanted attention puts their gender identity at risk of discovery, *and* they risk exposing their aro-ace identity. If they do not react appropriately, their disinterest in sex and romance could be uncovered. While options existed for individuals who wanted to be chaste in the Middle Ages, the Queen immediately mocks chastity. When Silence accuses her of ridiculing them, the Queen responds, “No I’m not,

³³ If Nature does not intend to validate Silence’s masculinity, then the other implication is, perhaps, that thousands of lesbians have fallen in love with Silence. Either way, Nature intends to insult Silence, suggesting that they exist too far out of line (whether those lines are gender-related or sexuality-related).

³⁴ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 5184.

³⁵ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 2646-7.

³⁶ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 3775.

³⁷ The Queen repeatedly assaults Silence in *Le Roman de Silence*; while the narrative does not address her behavior as such, it should be noted that this is likely a significant and understandable reason for Silence’s reaction.

not if you're normal."³⁸ Even though choosing to remain a virgin required significant privilege, the Queen sees this withdrawal from this part of society as deviant. The text specifies that "[Silence's] nature kept [them] from responding" to the Queen's embrace,³⁹ which again suggests something innate to the character being disinterested in sex. Silence's sex would not prevent them from being attracted to the Queen—unless their nature *itself* precludes attraction.

Ultimately, the final reason Silence provides for not engaging with the Queen is that they are in love with someone else.⁴⁰ Silence recognizes that while they may not subscribe to amatonormativity and allonormativity,⁴¹ the Queen certainly does and tries to appeal to this aspect as to prove why they cannot be with her. I explore Silence's relationship with the King shortly, but Silence never seems romantically interested in any character, suggesting they are lying. They understand that a reply relating to their aromanticism or asexuality would be met with more derision, as the Queen has already insulted chastity. Assuming Silence could love romantically, the only reason the Queen would accept their rejection is if Silence's love is sequestered elsewhere.

Despite not comprehending or caring about social categories, Silence expertly manipulates the power structures for personal gain. Most obviously, they gain political power with their gender identity and presentation, eventually becoming a skilled knight as they had dreamed. They also have a strong grasp on social prowess, endearing themselves to the French King despite the letter accompanying them stating that they should be put to death.⁴² Even after

³⁸ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 3817.

³⁹ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 3824.

⁴⁰ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 5726.

⁴¹ The set of assumptions that dictates all human beings experience sexual attraction to others.

⁴² Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 4396.

the Queen's falsely accuses Silence of assault, Silence does not fall out of the King's graces⁴³ and eventually marries him.

Still, it seems unlikely that Silence truly loves the king; they display no affection toward him after the marriage and lose their internal dialogue after the reveal of their sex, a stark contrast to the rest of the romance. While the absence of internal perspective does not necessarily imply their unhappiness with the proceeding events, it seems strange that Silence—whose opinions on romantic and social ideas the audience receives until this point—does not comment on the marriage. It seems likely that they chose to become the Queen to ensure social and political safety, as Silence understands the influence that comes with the position. After all, it had been used against them, and the ability to subsume that influence would be attractive to someone experienced with social jeopardy.

Le Roman de Silence may end with Silence's marriage, but Silence's story continues. Author Alex Myers wrote *The Story of Silence* in 2020, a modern retelling of the original romance that offers Silence increased interiority (and slight alterations to the adventure). To explain the misogyny of Heldris' authorship, in Myers' version, Silence re-tells their childhood and adolescence to a man named Heldris at a tavern. Unique to Myers' retelling, Silence interacts more with other characters, creating relationships with new characters and deepening relationships with pre-existing ones. Characters such as the nymph, Griselle (known in *Roman de Silence* as the lady who raised Silence), and Merlin (who features in *Roman de Silence* as a quirky, prophecy-giving wizard) challenge gender conventions and allow Silence to think more

⁴³ Silence's ability to stay in the King's graces is also due to, in part, the King's distrust of his wife (and, by extension, the way that Heldris treats women). When the Queen falsely accuses Silence of assault, the King decides to pretend it never happened (*Silence*, line 4245) and simply remove Silence from the household. It seems probable that Silence's social ability bolstered them to this position in the King's mind, but it is equally likely that it is not *only* Silence's ability that affected the King's choice to send them away.

deeply about society. They determine that they resent the pressure of sexual, romantic, and gendered conventions, and *The Story of Silence* carves a new space for Silence, splitting itself into two endings. One is a “true” ending, told by Silence, where they can live as a non-binary knight; the other mimics the original ending, which Heldris writes, unsatisfied by Silence’s open-ended conclusion. Myers’ retelling enriches Silence’s experience as a non-binary person, finding their way in a world that forces individuals to choose one option or another. Unfortunately, this retelling also falls into amatonormative assumptions that the medieval version does not always imply, reinforcing the idea of romance’s inevitability in modern society.

Like *Le Roman de Silence*, *The Story of Silence*’s gendered expectations help audiences understand its strict romantic and sexual categories. Nearly every character assumes that men and women have irreconcilable differences. Heldris, the author-turned-character, laughs and says that a “girl could never play like a boy” for she would be “crying, hurt, and bewildered within moments.”⁴⁴ Griselle also laughs when Cador asks her to raise a girl as a boy, comparing the request to raising a cat as a dog.⁴⁵ The humor associated with these interactions betrays the social inflexibility of these categories; both Heldris and Griselle cannot imagine the request made seriously because it is so outlandish. Ame, a woman Silence meets and befriends later in the story, explains her father told her “it is a great curse” to be a “curious” woman.⁴⁶ She adds that women are to “sit demurely and accept things as they are”; not only has she learned these roles through others’ reactions,⁴⁷ but also her father’s explicit teaching to follow gender conventions, much like how Silence receives training to be a man to protect their inheritance.

⁴⁴ Alex Myers, *The Story of Silence* (London: Harper Voyager, 2021), 52-3.

⁴⁵ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 55.

⁴⁶ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 299.

⁴⁷ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 299.

Most of this training surrounds preconceived notions of masculinity. Like in the medieval romance, Silence desires knighthood; the training required to get there serves as another presentation of gendered categories. When learning to strike, Silence has difficulty despite “[their] effort” to the contrary,⁴⁸ as the typical style does not fit their sex. Yet, with the help of a long-limbed knight named Sir Jackin, Silence effectively alters this display of gender to fit their needs. At the pell, Sir Jackin tells Silence that they must “use [their] limbs to [their] advantage” to avoid getting trapped close to their opponent, which allows them to succeed. Later, Silence, inspired by Sir Jackin’s advice, tries holding a lance underhand, explicitly an “improper” grip,⁴⁹ but one that allows them to joust successfully. Silence’s ability to manipulate training to suit them allows them to exploit gendered categories for their benefit.⁵⁰

Silence declares how ridiculous (their words, not mine⁵¹) these gender expectations are in *The Story of Silence*. The end of Myers’ tale sees Silence declare that they “were not *just* a man,” that “they were something more.”⁵² Silence recognizes the limiting force of Nature and Nurture,⁵³ resists choosing one option or the other,⁵⁴ and identifies how they are shaped by their society and their own actions.⁵⁵ Still, Silence’s actions place them outside of conceptions proposed by society.

Most prominently, Silence exists outside of romantic and sexual boundaries; like in *Le Roman de Silence*, I argue they are aro-ace. In *The Story of Silence*, Silence prizes platonic relationships, such as those with Griselle and Alfred, a knight Silence befriends. Myers attempts

⁴⁸ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 142.

⁴⁹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 284.

⁵⁰ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 145, 283, 284.

⁵¹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 299.

⁵² Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 423.

⁵³ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 440.

⁵⁴ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 442.

⁵⁵ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 435.

to make Alfred a love interest; Silence prefers to wrestle with Alfred rather than kiss the countessina,⁵⁶ and it seems that Myers implies romantic or sexual interest in this scene, too. Silence feels “a tingling in [their] thighs,”⁵⁷ and, while this could be arousal, asexual or aromantic people can be aroused. Arousal does not necessitate attraction. Preliminary research suggests that asexual individuals believe that “asexuality should be defined by a lack of attraction rather than desire or arousal,”⁵⁸ though such a concept is so understudied that only two minor studies (Bogaert, 2006; Bulmer, Izuma 2018) have focused on asexuals and their perception of romance and sex. Regardless, Silence feels tingling at different points in the story, not just when they are with Alfred. Most notably, they feel tingling when discussing their true identity with a crow,⁵⁹ indicating it may be motivation or excitement instead.

Myers seems to imply that Silence *would* feel attraction given they were not hiding their sex, though. Silence states (to themselves, not aloud) if they were not “as [they] [were],” they would have kissed the queen and “drawn her into [their] lap.”⁶⁰ However, Silence’s behavior suggests otherwise; they state they will not be marrying⁶¹ and that they “do not want to be drawn to this woman, to any woman.”⁶² Silence assures Alfred they do not want “any [woman]”⁶³ and they “haven’t the nature to be a wooer,”⁶⁴ vital as it also breaks expectations for knights. They also appear flustered or otherwise uncomfortable when others mention romance.⁶⁵ Even Alfred

⁵⁶ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 233.

⁵⁷ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 233.

⁵⁸ Maria Bulmer and Keise Izuma, “Implicit and Explicit Attitudes Toward Sex and Romance in Asexuals,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 55, no. 8 (October 2018): 962–74, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/26772790>.

⁵⁹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 254.

⁶⁰ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 375.

⁶¹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 300.

⁶² Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 373.

⁶³ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 226.

⁶⁴ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 362.

⁶⁵ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 234-5.

claims that Silence has “no sense of romance,”⁶⁶ a notable comment as Alfred knows Silence well. It seems that Silence prefers life without the complication of romance or sex, preferring to opt out of those conventions entirely. Their supposed desire to be near the Queen is likely a result of compulsory alloromanticism and allosexuality rather than desire.

That being said, Silence resists amatonormative assumptions in key moments. When the King suggests their marriage, Silence declines because they are “pledged to another,” clarifying a few lines down that this person is “a lady, a true friend,”⁶⁷ denoting this friendship holds the same amount of value that a romantic commitment does. Considering that this is one of Silence’s primary reasons for not marrying the king, their reverence for platonic relationships rivals that of other characters’ for romantic relationships. It could be assumed that this individual is Silence themselves, given that “a lady” refers glibly to their sex. Yet, I would argue that this “lady” is more likely to be Griselle. Silence offers many details when referring to this oath: they “[swore] on oath that [they] would be true to [themselves],” “before [they] ran away to Brittany and became a minstrel” and did so “on the relic of a saint.”⁶⁸ Silence’s promise to “be as [they] want to be”⁶⁹ to Griselle many pages before uses much of the same language. Griselle asks them to “swear” it, and Silence does so. Further, Griselle takes out a “long silver chain” from her gown with a vial that contains “a hair of St Agatha,” and it is later referred to as a “relic” in the same paragraph.⁷⁰

Certainly, Griselle serves more of a motherly role than a typical friend. However, this fluidity contributes to Silence’s existence outside of boundaries. The flux in their relationship—

⁶⁶ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 266.

⁶⁷ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 442.

⁶⁸ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 442.

⁶⁹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 190.

⁷⁰ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 190.

platonic, familial—and its importance to Silence (enough to deny a marriage proposal) speaks to the way they understand relationships. No type of relationship is better than another, and, given that such a view is popular among aro-ace people, Silence’s interiority indicates their aro-ace identity. However, the text often halts this possibility through other characters’ reaction and relation—or lack thereof—to Silence. Because aromanticism and its associated issues are still relatively understudied and unknown, I will first utilize gender to explore how romantic boundaries affect Silence and their relationships.

Most societies present romance, sex, and gender as inevitable and rigid social categories which people must fit into. Determining their origin can be difficult, though most have been used to discriminate at some point in history, whether via the patriarchal inheritance system or the continued erasure of intersex individuals. Some individuals use these categories to discriminate; others find a kind of comfort in them. Homosexual, bisexual, and queer people can find camaraderie with their heterosexual friends through their shared allosexuality or alloromanticity; many transgender people choose to transition into either a man or a woman to alleviate dysphoria.⁷¹

It should be noted, though, that these categories do not *always* provide comfort. As activist Adela Vázquez stated in the film *Diagnosing Difference*, “Passing is not the one and only goal of all trans people.”⁷²⁷³ Some trans people choose to have top surgery but not bottom surgery; others may undergo “multiple surgeries to feel affirmed,” where some may not be able

⁷¹ While dysphoria itself generally refers to a feeling of unease or unhappiness, here I utilize it to refer to gender dysphoria. Similarly, this is distress or unhappiness that may occur when a person’s gender identity and given sex do not match.

⁷² Sand Chang, Anneliese Singh, and lore m. dickey, “A Clinician’s Guide to Gender-Affirming Care : Working with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Clients,” EBSCO, 2018, <https://research.ebsco.com/c/fvrckp/ebook-viewer/pdf/b5tfunvgjn>.

⁷³ In trans circles, “passing” means that others see you as the gender that you identify with (as compared to the sex you were assigned at birth).

to afford gender-affirming medical care or cannot undergo it because of “medical conditions that make medical interventions risky.” Still, others may not want medical transition at all and instead prefer to only socially transition.⁷⁴ In both *Roman de Silence* and *The Story of Silence*, Silence seems to find most comfort in in-betweens or dismissal of these categories altogether, even while characters around them attempt to push these often conflicting conventions onto Silence.

The pressure of conforming to a male or female identity remains prominent in both Silence stories. In *Le Roman de Silence*, Silence’s father, Cador, strictly refers to Silence as “dear son” and “precious son,”⁷⁵ and as mentioned, the narrative repeatedly describes Silence as “the youth who was a girl,”⁷⁶ suggesting no middle ground or rejection of the gender binary. Nature and Nurture, personified into either real individuals or medieval allegories, also frequently argue about Silence’s identity. Nature expresses disappointment that Silence’s “complexion,”⁷⁷ which was painted and mixed “in such proportions / as to excite the envy of everyone,”⁷⁸ will be diminished by Nurture’s interjection. Nurture, though, refers to Silence with she/her pronouns⁷⁹ despite the fact that its own rules, Nurture should see Silence as a man. Still, Nurture calls Silence a “friend”⁸⁰ and attempts to convince Silence that their behavior will secure their knighthood and horse and chariot. Their argument proves interesting as these characters generally represent rigid pillars of a binary. They themselves, though, cannot effectively pull Silence into either category, struggling to identify Silence.

⁷⁴ Chang, “A Clinician’s Guide to Gender-Affirming Care.”

⁷⁵ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 244, 2448, and 2453.

⁷⁶ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 3763, 3785.

⁷⁷ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 2280.

⁷⁸ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 2283-4.

⁷⁹ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 2595-6.

⁸⁰ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 2615.

In *The Story of Silence*, Heldris of Cornwall fills much of the same role that Nature and Nurture do. He asks if Silence is Cador's son,⁸¹ turning to the bartender to ask if she knows the nature of Silence's identity. Specifically, he wants to know if Silence is a "he or a she," "a man or a woman,"⁸² removing the ability for the bartender to even suggest that Silence may not fit either of those categories. Further, Heldris attempts to read Silence's body for what he perceives as signs of gender. He looks at their "side-slit doublet and leggings," which apparently imply a man, but he notes "a certain slenderness" about them which signifies they are likely *not* a man.⁸³ He also observes "high cheekbones...[and] grey-ocean eyes" and comments on their "beauty," astonished.⁸⁴ While "beautiful" is not an exclusively feminine compliment, feminine-presenting people tend to receive it more often than masculine-presenting people, and so Heldris' use of "beauty" betrays an unconscious understanding that Silence exists outside of binaries, despite questions to pose the contrary. Regardless of instinctive awareness, Heldris' inquiries contribute to an assumed cisgender society.

In the same way that society assumes cisgenderness, society presumes amatonormativity, which may be unfamiliar. The much-more well known heteronormativity helps to understand amatonormativity. Most queer people are familiar with heteronormativity and its ubiquity. In her groundbreaking "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich writes extensively about the impact of heteronormativity. She posits that men use the idea of heterosexual romance, itself "beamed at [women] from childhood,"⁸⁵ to indoctrinate women into the belief that heterosexuality and, thus, marriage to men, should not be questioned. Similarly,

⁸¹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 11.

⁸² Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 37.

⁸³ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 3.

⁸⁴ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 3.

⁸⁵ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–60, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834>.

Warner and Berlant indicated that heteronormativity is not just “ideology or prejudice or phobia against gays and lesbians” but also “produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life,”⁸⁶ and I argue that the same applies to amatonormativity. While Elizabeth Brake originally coined the term in her book *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (2012), claiming that marriage has no more importance than any other relationship, I use this word in a strictly queer sense, referencing the assumption that all people desire a long-term romantic relationship (which includes sexual and romantic attraction) and the social structures used to uphold this ideal.

The social ideal of nature—that is, something inevitable, often in someone’s genes—receives criticism from Heldris (the author, not the character) at different levels of scrutiny. Robert Clark, in “Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the “Roman de Silence,”” suggests that Heldris’ categories (Nature and Nurture, specifically) are never “in danger of collapsing.”⁸⁷ Nature itself refers to sex and gender or class and birth. I propose that Heldris includes a third meaning of nature: romance and love. While he destabilizes the sex and gender system through Silence’s actions, he stabilizes the story in its treatment of class and romance. The narrative upholds Silence’s “good nature,”⁸⁸ invoking the amatonormativity surrounding a person of their class, which indicates Silence should marry soon, for political gain, and have heirs as soon as possible. As previously mentioned, Silence emerges from a stable and now-classic love story, and both stories play on this backstory to suggest that Silence must engage with romance and sex. Said involvement is even more noticeable in the contemporary retelling. *The Story of Silence* sees characters like Alfred tease Silence about their lack of romantic involvement, and troubles

⁸⁶ Barr, “The Idea of the Wilderness.”

⁸⁷ Robert L.A. Clark, “Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the ‘Roman de Silence,’” *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 50–63, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870413>.

⁸⁸ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 2384.

Silence, who finds it difficult to engage in any sort of romantic action⁸⁹ and scorns their Nature for making “everything such a tangle.”⁹⁰ Even when Silence does not play the part of a noble, they recognize that their other role—a musician at court—requires them to “spark romances” and “set the mood.”⁹¹ Silence observes the inevitability assigned to romance and seems to compromise with their own uninvolvedness by inspiring it in others. As an assumed foundation of “human nature,” complete disregard for romance would be impossible, at least in this society, which privileges it.

The privilege assigned to love and sex confuses Silence—why would anyone focus on love when they could become a knight instead? After preventing a murder attempt on their life, Alfred asks if they had kissed a girl, and Silence reacts appropriately: “Are you mad?”⁹² Prioritizing romance over health seems odd to Silence,⁹³ who understands the greatest honor not as marriage but as knighthood. Later in the story, Silence, feeling pressured to select a partner to avoid unwanted attention from other women, asks the widow Lady Elizabeth to return to Cornwall with them. Lady Elizabeth politely declines, telling them to “find [their] perfect match,”⁹⁴ presuming that Silence experiences romantic love for her when Silence simply intends the practical political move. Not only do Silence’s friends insist upon love, but strangers and acquaintances do, too.

Silence’s lack of understanding may come with their upbringing at Ringmar. With only Griselle and the seneschal as company, they experienced love through stories for an extended period of time, which likely colored their understanding of love. Griselle’s primary tale centers

⁸⁹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 229.

⁹⁰ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 226.

⁹¹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 229.

⁹² Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 263.

⁹³ Understandably so.

⁹⁴ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 366.

the great knight Gawain, who abandons his new wife in a forest and is punished by “a magical sword” for his desire.⁹⁵ The second story that concerns love is the tale of the selkie, who, according to Griselle, “comes ashore and seduces a beautiful woman and abandons her,”⁹⁶ and according to the seneschal, is a female selkie who does the same to a male sailor. These negative tales could have resulted in Silence’s poor understanding and disposition toward love or otherwise contributed to their dislike of it, considering that the concept itself baffles them. Yet, Griselle manages to effectively teach Silence many things, including tenets of knighthood and manners befitting of station. As the narrative places special emphasis on Silence’s trouble with romance and gender, natural focus helps the audience see something different happening with Silence—their aro-ace identity.

In contrast, the character most allosexual and alloromantic is King Evan’s wife, Queen Eufeme, and she serves to reinforce heteronormativity and amatonormativity. Heldris paints her as a villain,⁹⁷ linking her depravity to her sexual aggression and lust which results in her death. In both stories,⁹⁸ whenever Silence declines Queen Eufeme’s advances, she responds not with anger but also surprise, as if she cannot fathom why someone would not want to have sex.⁹⁹ It should be noted that *Roman de Silence* presents only one type of sex and romance as acceptable—Eufeme assumes that Silence must be gay when they do not have any attraction toward her, even calling them the f-slur.¹⁰⁰ While she prefers to bolster heteronormativity, she also inherently buttresses amatonormativity, as heteronormativity relies on the assumption that everyone desires a long-term relationship.

⁹⁵ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 81.

⁹⁶ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 78.

⁹⁷ Or as close as you can get to one.

⁹⁸ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, lines 3775-7 and 3780-2.

⁹⁹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 373-4.

¹⁰⁰ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 3947.

While *The Story of Silence* avoids the blatant homophobia of its medieval counterpart, Eufeme still speculates on Silence's sexual and romantic identity, asking if they and Sir Alfred "prefer each other's company to the company of women."¹⁰¹ When she receives no answer, she attempts to pull their tunic and brushes their crotch, where she "gasp[s]" and wonders aloud if they are a eunuch.¹⁰² In all scenarios, Eufeme cannot imagine a life willingly withdrawn from sex or romance, presuming there to be a different force that demands someone abandon such parts of life. Not only does Eufeme suggest a strict adherence to sexual and romantic roles (these most often being heterosexual in nature), but she proposes this as part of life that one cannot opt out of. While Eufeme can, at times, lean against patriarchal expectations, she still reinforces amatonormativity. Similarly, this is not uncommon among well-meaning queer people; phrases centering the romantic love of different queer identities¹⁰³ can provide a lot of comfort but also isolate identities who do not experience those attractions. Amatonormativity has settled into the cracks of life, making itself omnipresent in a way that demands study.

Given that amatonormativity is underresearched, it would be impossible to observe all of its impacts when they are not fully understood. However, beginning such research seems vital, especially in the wake of growing queer theories. As Erin Taylor points out in her thesis, literature does not "exist in a historical vacuum" and takes influence from its creator and audience.¹⁰⁴ As such, taking a closer look at *The Story of Silence* (especially in comparison with

¹⁰¹ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 378.

¹⁰² Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 378.

¹⁰³ Technically, "love is love" doesn't exclude, for example, platonic love. However, the phrase has almost exclusively been used for romantic or sexual love. To highlight this sort of love fits a certain kind of queerness that is easier to digest; it is harder to brand t-shirts and bags with "assuming romance can be harmful," to be fair, but the point should still be made.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, "WHAT PERSONS, MASCULINE OR FEMININE'."

its medieval counterpart) highlights the cultural keystones and popular understandings of our world.

As established, examining gendered institutions of power helps to understand amatonormativity, which has yet to find footholds in popular culture. M.W. Bychowski asserts in “The Transgender Turn: Eleanor Rykener Speaks Back” that cisgender is assumed to be the norm, so much so that the identity is “treated as neutral,” especially in texts and histories. Given that males are also typically understood as neutral—“the female is as it were a deformed male”¹⁰⁵—*Le Roman de Silence* relies heavily on constricting Silence’s flux between and around the gender binary. It seems impossible that Silence could be anything *but* cisgender because transgender histories have been dismissed when studied by cisgender scholars. Bychowski’s “cisgender neutrality” is a helpful explanation for the ending of the romance. Silence becomes a queen, the narrative resumes using she/her pronouns for Silence,¹⁰⁶ and Nature detransitions Silence. Considering that Silence predicts that they will “lose everything”¹⁰⁷ upon the reveal of their sex, and earlier the audience sees Silence declare that being a man is better than being a woman,¹⁰⁸ it feels safe to conclude that Silence does *not* feel neutral about being placed into a cisgender position. Regardless, social foundations do not not permit Silence to straddle these categories. Being a gendered position, a queen must adhere to femininity, and the ultimate authority—the King—also enforces their adherence to being cisgender, given that he instigates their marriage.

Much the same can be said for romantic and sexual readings. Allosexual and alloromantic readings are considered neutral and inevitable, potentially even more so than cisgender readings.

¹⁰⁵ Morrison, “Understanding the Female Body.”

¹⁰⁶ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 6650.

¹⁰⁷ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 6454.

¹⁰⁸ Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, line 2637-8.

Most people understand terms like “heterosexual” and “cisgender,” but “alloromantic,” “allosexual,” and “amatonormativity” have yet to catch on and are thus understudied. Nearly every cultural or literary touchstone has romantic love or sex in its primary or secondary plots—the modern romance genre assuages this need for love, through both romance as side plot and the tendency of fans to create romance where it does not explicitly exist. Readers do not often actively consider aro-ace potential in the same way they consider romantic or sexual potential, as many believe these aspects key to human experience.

Alex Myers’ treatment of aro-ace Silence illustrates society’s inability to view aro-ace identities as neutral. While he improves representation of gender fluidity in *The Story of Silence*, he relies on the *assumption* that Silence is not aro-ace to tell his story. In contrast, Heldris’ society seems to have more options for aro-ace folks; as a result, *Le Roman de Silence* allows Silence’s identity to exist more fluidly.

In the medieval world, “the will to remain chaste” triumphed “bodily intactness” and “matrimony and widowhood,”¹⁰⁹ championing the resistance of the “temptation” of sex.¹¹⁰ Of course, a lack of sexual attraction would externally look like the ability to resist the temptation of sex; while it is difficult to prove that individuals conforming to chastity did so because of asexuality, it is worth noting that lack of sexual or romantic interest was more normalized then than it is now. If Silence wanted to join a convent to avoid sex or marriage, they could presumably do so (even though they risk judgment from someone like the Queen, who insults those living chastely). Now, living chastely or in a convent is seen as extreme or otherwise strange. Few places exist for aro-ace people to connect with one another. Research finds that

¹⁰⁹ Leif Sorenson, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Princeton, N.J: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

asexual folks may engage in sexual acts with partners, “sometimes due to peer pressure and a desire to be normal,”¹¹¹ highlighting how our society sees a lack of sexual or romantic contact much differently from our medieval counterparts.

While Myers never outright confirms Silence and Alfred’s potential romance, he does not have to. As observed by Rich’s *Compulsory Heterosexuality*, “the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality,”¹¹² which colors every interaction that Silence and Alfred have. Silence helping Alfred after he gets hit in the face¹¹³ cannot possibly be platonic because that is not an option; their play wrestling must have romantic undertones¹¹⁴ because Silence does not have the ability to opt out of romance. Still, Silence breaks the boundary and does opt out of romance and sex, and politically, this action has adverse consequences. Silence cedes “names and titles” to the King, including “land...money and property,” which “baffle[s]”¹¹⁵ him. Silence proceeds with no partner, telling Heldris that they must discover themselves “alone.”¹¹⁶ However, opting out of romance and sex came at the cost of money, titles, land, and knighthood, which had been their dream for their entire life and offered them security in the social order.

Similar consequences exist today for choosing not to engage in romance and sex. Marriage confers countless benefits related to finances, medicine, taxes, and employment. Married individuals receive family and bereavement leave for their partners, adoption and joint foster care rights, a tax deduction on any asset transferred to a spouse, the ability to file joint tax returns, the right to visit a spouse in the hospital, the right to make health decisions for an

¹¹¹ Bulmer, “Implicit and Explicit Attitudes Toward Sex.”

¹¹² Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”

¹¹³ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 269.

¹¹⁴ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 285-6.

¹¹⁵ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 443.

¹¹⁶ Myers, *The Story of Silence*, 445.

incapacitated spouse, and much more.¹¹⁷ Of course, social consequences exist, too. As established, even within the queer community, aro-ace folks can feel excluded from events centered around love (often perceived as romantic or sexual).

Due to a lack of research surrounding aro-ace identities, this paper had to be exploratory in nature. Still, it covers amatonormativity and its impact primarily through the analysis of *Le Roman de Silence* and *The Story of Silence*'s main character, Silence. Their experience with romance and sex in both stories constituted a closer look, and through studying how these stories treat gendered categories, it is appropriate to claim that Silence is aro-ace. Such a claim by itself provides an interesting reading of Silence and the world around them, especially considering that audiences can compare and contrast modern and medieval conceptions of romance and sex.

Unfortunately, these readings have yet to become popular; aro-ace identities find themselves isolated from everyday society and literature. The lack of research on these topics proves this fact. I believe this to be a realm of research yet unexplored but in sore need of attention; aro-ace readings have much to say about the societies in which they are written and the people to whom they refer. Further, they allow readers insight into unique perspectives on relationships that do not privilege romantic connection over any other relationships, which has the potential to change legal proceedings and social communication. Audiences gain a better understanding of the range of human experience when taking aro-ace readings into account, and they also assist modern readers in comprehending times when romance and sex had less normative power.

¹¹⁷ "Legal Benefits of Marriage: Key Rights & Advantages." GetLegal, January 14, 2019. <https://www.getlegal.com/legal-info-center/family-law-divorce/marriage/>.

Where the field should go from here, though, remains uncertain; is it worth reviewing old material with this lens, or should authors begin work on aro-ace novels to introduce the idea to society faster? I personally imagine this to take shape in academic circles first with the analysis of classics, which helps normalize these identities and draw attention to their long histories. Toni Morrison's *Sula* comes to mind, specifically in reference to Nel and Sula's relationship, which seems to border on romantic but never quite crosses the line and so perhaps deserves attention from an aromantic perspective. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* also appears to have significant potential; while no doubts exist about Gatsby's romantic love for Daisy, Nick's relationship to Gatsby seems less clear. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seems particularly ripe with opportunity for aro-ace readings, too. While general consensus states that Hamlet breaks up with Ophelia due to his obsession with revenge, perhaps he never had a romantic interest in the first place. His disregard for social expectations at that time would, presumably, include amatonormative norms; as such, he would not need to continue chasing Ophelia if his attention was elsewhere.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and *Story of an Hour* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* provide analysis not just for aro-ace identities, but also for how amatonormativity affects individuals. They also illustrate how women specifically suffer from the combination of heteronormativity *and* amatonormativity, often leading to their deaths.

Certainly, many more books, plays, movies, or even video games provide similar opportunities for aro-ace readings, though beginning with well-known stories may prove more fruitful due to existing research into social categories. Understanding aro-ace identities through gender is a helpful tool for the start of its academic life. Not only does this aid other queer fields, but it illuminates more clearly the structures upon which our societies exist. It may be beneficial,

then, to look at stories that play with gender and determine if they also experiment with romance or sex. I immediately think of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, which experiments with all of these categories. While it would be restrictive to both the field of gender and the field of aro-ace readings to permanently connect them, it seems now they may effectively grow with one another. Still, I hope that one day, aro-ace readings can find their place within a distinct academic category and further enrich the field of queer theory.

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