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Secret Identities: (Un)Masking Gender in *Le roman de Silence* by Heldris de Cornouaille and *L'enfant de sable* by Tahar Ben Jelloun

Florence Ramond Jurney

Even though they were written approximately seven hundred years apart, *Le roman de Silence* (thirteenth century) and *L'enfant de sable* (1985) have much in common. Both deal with the issue of transvestism, the socio-political reasons why it is practiced, and its consequences, not only in the life of the transvestite characters, but also in the development of their identity.

L'enfant de sable and *Le roman de Silence* tell the stories of two girls raised as boys so that they can inherit the family property. This gender decision is taken by their fathers, with the acquiescence of their mothers, at birth. *L'enfant de sable* and *Le roman de Silence* both narrate the problems of identity faced by the girls as they grow up: whether these questions of their gender roles materialize under the form of a conversation between Nature (supporting the view that the powers of Nature win over those of Education) and Nurture (supporting the opposite view) as in *Le roman de Silence*, or under the form of a dialogue with an anonymous pen-pal in *L'enfant de sable*, the results seem to be identical. The two girls are forced to keep evolving in an identity that is not of their own choosing, and in a secret that was created for them. This secret, that they nevertheless accept to carry on when they become aware of their double identity, becomes the symbol of a mask of their femininity. From then on, the two heroines take an active part in the propagation of the deception in all domains—from clothes to language via education—when they become themselves, and for a time at least, accomplices of what is not told.

However, as Mikhail Bakhtin explained in his study of the works of Rabelais, masked characters must be unmasked (196-277). This appears to be also true in both works examined in this article. The focus here will be mainly on the actors who are part of the unmasking process, and on the consequences of their revelations. In light of this unmasking, we will see whether the endings of the two texts should be analyzed from a feminist perspective as "repressive endings," as Elizabeth Waters does it for the *Roman de Silence* (37), or if we should simply see in the abrupt (*Le roman de Silence*) or blurry (*L'enfant de sable*) endings the possibility of a feminine self in the making emerging from secrecy.[1]

In both works, secrecy comes into play as a response to a law created and enforced by the masculine voice. In *Silence*, King Ebain's decision to prevent women from inheriting after two of his counts die in a fight over a question of inheritance, will prompt the creation of the mask. As women are legally allowed to inherit, the disagreement between the counts has to do with determining who is the oldest of two twin women and thus the rightful heir. The counts decide to fight over the matter leaving the winner with the inheritance. When they both die in the battle, the King decides to prevent women from inheriting since they are, in his mind, the reason why two of his good men are dead:

Mais, par le foi que doi Saint Pere,	But by the faith I owe Saint Peter,
Ja femme n'iert mais iretere	No woman shall inherit again
Ens el roiame d'Engletiere	In the Kingdom of England

1. The romance will now be referred to as *Silence* (abbreviated as RS) and the novel as *Enfant* (abbreviated as ES).

por tant com j'aie a tenir tiere. As long as I reign over the land.[2]
(RS 313-16)

In *Enfant*, the law that will prompt the masking is a religious one, spelled out by the prophet and reported to the reader by the narrator:

> Vous n'êtes pas sans savoir, ô mes amis et complices, que notre religion est impitoyable pour l'homme sans héritier ; elle le dépossède ou presque en faveur de ses frères. Quant aux filles, elles reçoivent seulement le tiers de l'héritage. (ES 18)

In both texts, the initial situation that will lead to the creation of a masked identity is established by a masculine character who actively invokes a law that goes against feminine rights (*Enfant*) or revokes the existing ones (*Silence*).

In both cases, the fathers are prisoners of the decision taken by their patriarchal societies. Victims of the fate linked to biological conception, they cannot choose their children's gender and are forced to deal with the female one. In both works, the fathers try to ignore the biological reality that makes their children females and circumvent the law by creating a lie. In hiding the real identity of the child, transforming girls into boys, one father is trying to preserve his estate for his daughter (*Silence*) while the other wants to prevent the family property from leaving the immediate parentage (*Enfant*). It is ironic that masculine characters create the need for secrecy by implementing specific laws, and that masculine characters also find themselves prisoners of a lie necessitated by those laws with which they have to live in constant fear of discovery.

Secrets and lies are thus linked to the birth of the girls and with them appears first the masking, and then the suppressing of womanhood which can be seen in the texts through language, clothes and education. The name is the first visible sign of the mask: the girl in *Silence* is baptized Silence by her father. In Old French, the adoption of that name is a play on words: in choosing to name the girl "Silentius," the father keeps some leeway in case the secret is discovered since "Silentius" can easily be changed into "Silentia":

Il iert només Scilenscius ;	He will be called Silentius.
Et s'il avient par aventure	And if by any chance
Al descovrir de sa nature	His real nature is discovered,
Nos muerons cest –us en –a,	We shall change this -us in –a,
S'avra a non Silencia.	and she'll be called Silentia.
Se nos li tolons don't cest -us	If we deprive her of this -us,
Nos li donrons natural us,	we'll be observing natural usage,
Car cis –us est contre nature,	For this -us is contrary to nature,
Mais l'altres seroit par nature.	But the other would be natural.
(RS 2074-82)	

Keeping this leeway, the father indirectly considers the possibility that the mask may fall. When he refers to what is "in" nature ("natural us") as well as to what is "outside" of it ("contre nature"), he seems to indirectly wish that fate could give him the opportunity to straighten things out, foreshadowing a willingness to participate in the unmasking.

By contrast, the girl in *Enfant* is associated with the masculine from the very beginning of the novel. This child, as Odile Cazenave argues (439), is already a man at birth: "L'enfant que tu mettras au monde sera un mâle, ce sera un homme, il s'appellera Ahmed même si c'est une fille !" (ES 23). Here the name does not lead to any confusion and is not interchangeable either: it is clear that there is *no space* for change. In *Enfant*, the father takes complete possession of the identity and the body of his last-born girl: not

2. Translations by Roche-Mahdi.

only is the masculine gender declared three times: "c'est un homme, un homme, un homme..." (ES 26),[3] but the birth of a boy is also recognized by the entire community through the ceremony of baptism.

In *Silence* public recognition through baptism is linked to a lie—the fact that the child was dying, thus preventing any public celebration, forced Silence to be baptized in haste and wrapped in a piece of cloth (RS 2099-2126). On the other hand, baptism in *Enfant* is the opportunity for a "grandiose" celebration (ES 29), and even a political statement for the father:

> Dieu est clément
> Il vient d'illuminer la vie et le foyer de votre serviteur et dévoué potier Hadj Ahmed Souleïmane. Un garçon — que Dieu le protège et lui donne longue vie — est né jeudi à 10h. Nous l'avons nommé Mohamed Ahmed. Cette naissance annonce fertilité pour la terre, paix et prospérité pour le pays. Vive Ahmed ! Vive le Maroc ! (ES 30)

In *Enfant*, baptism enables the father to mask his child as well as himself in helping him adopt a new identity: he uses the birth in order to reaffirm his male creative powers in society, and in doing so stresses his power in general.

Apart from naming, the second way of masking the feminine happens through clothing which hides the body and becomes another mask. This mask is created according to certain social rules (some clothes being automatically associated with the masculine), and enables the writers to insist on the fact that such a simple artifice can easily hide the true nature of the character.

Both Ahmed and Silence go through the ritual of the costume when they dress as men. For Silence, the artifice seems to be an easy one, and it is mentioned quickly in a few verses, as if unimportant, insisting on how easy it is to deceive those who are not part of the secret:

Quant li enfes pot dras user,	When the child was of an age to wear clothing,
Por se nature refuser	in order to deny her nature,
L'ont tres bien vestu a fuer d'ome	they took care to dress her in male clothing
A sa mesure, c'est la some.	made to her measure.
(RS 2359-62)	

Silence further uses a double mask: at the time when she flees with the minstrels, not only does she use the mask of the masculine clothing, but she also blackens her face with coal. Once the first mask is discovered (the black coal), who would even think that there is a second one? Masks lead here to a double dissimulation as well as to a deception aimed at those who expect it least (the fathers, in particular).

The ritual of the clothes becomes for Ahmed a real "cérémonie" (ES 31) starting with the experiment of the hair-dresser that lasts two days and in which some details point to the possibility of an androgynous experience: "On coupa les cheveuxd'Ahmed, on lui maquilla les yeux avec du khôl. On l'installa sur un cheval en bois après lui avoir passé une djellaba blanche et couvert la tête d'un fez rouge" (ES 31). Apart from the fact that the hair-dresser is said to come "régulièrement tous les mois" (ES 32), the make-up worn by women, the fez worn by men, and the djellaba worn by both genders, all lend themselves to an androgynous experience, suggesting the possibility of a double identity.

The experience of the mask is pushed to the extreme in the case of Ahmed when his womanhood is not only masked but simply erased: first of all with the bandages used to prevent his breasts from growing (ES 36), then with the apparition of the first menstrual

3. In opposition to this, it can be stressed that the father resisted even the presence of his daughters: "Il faisait tout pour les oublier, pour les chasser de sa vue. Par exemple, il ne les nommait jamais" (ES 17).

flow when Ahmed is forced to act like a "voleur" (ES 47) in order to find layers of absorbant material reserved only for women. Femininity is thus repressed not only in language—Ahmed becomes "voleur" and not "voleuse" thus erasing the feminine space—, but also in the feminine nature. This repression is symbolized by the body which rebels with the bloody trace it leaves—the period—becoming the "résistance du corps au nom" (ES 46).

However, the rebellion is soon quashed by the mask of masculine identity: "C'était bien du sang ; résistance du corps au nom ; *éclaboussure d'une circoncision tardive*" (ES 46, my italics). The period is not analyzed for what it is supposed to be. It takes the color of the masculine when it is transformed from a period to a circumcision. A double mask appears here: first, femininity is hidden by bandages, repressed in the unconscious with the image of breasts that would grow hidden inside the body, and then the menstrual flow—a feminine sign impossible to repress—is subverted to be identified with a masculine sign—circumcision.

The mask is complete when after the change in names and clothes appears a change in education. Let us note here that in Europe in the Middle Ages as well as in Morocco, education reflects the sexual division imposed by society. In the works studied here, education is directed by men (the father [ES 32] or the seneschal [RS 2469-80] according to the directives of the father), and it becomes the path to follow. When gender is shrouded in deception, however, education is perverted and used as a mask by the feminine in order to learn activities usually reserved to men only. The mask is almost perfect, since it is very easy for a young girl to pass as a young boy, and the sexual switching happens here without any obvious problems.

An almost perfect mask appears here, but not *really* perfect, since ambiguity remains present and is brought into play through a language which has a different significance depending on the work. In *Silence*, the language of the masculine is the language of the law, which is impossible to change. It is created and enforced by men, such as the law on inheritance, as well as the name given to Silence—and this is revealing—by her father. On the contrary, the language of the feminine is that of the petty and the mean, of manipulation to serve personal ends—such as the language used by Queen Eufeme to get rid of Silence. In both cases, however, they are languages of cheating, of deception, because if the language of the feminine deceives to serve personal ends, the language of the masculine becomes the language of secrets.

In *Enfant,* however, the language of the feminine is the one that is liberated in the hammam, the one that leads the narrator to dream:

> Je voyais des mots monter lentement et cogner contre le plafond humide. Là comme des poignées de nuage, ils fondaient au contact de la pierre et retombaient en gouttelettes sur mon visage. [...] Curieusement, les gouttes d'eau qui tombaient sur moi étaient salées. Je me disais alors que les mots avaient le goût et la saveur de la vie. (ES 33-34)

On the other hand, the language of the masculine linked to the hammam is dirty and cannot lead to dreaming (ES 37), whereas the language of the masculine linked to the mosque (language of religion, of the Koran, of power) is the one that can lead to dreams but mainly because the feminine character uses it in an illicit manner. Ahmed should not be able to enter the mosque with men because this space is theirs only. Nevertheless, it is because of the transgression that pleasure can be felt, for there, language evolves freely:

> L'important, pour lui [mon père], c'était ma présence parmi tous ces hommes. Ce fut là que j'appris à être un rêveur. Cette fois-ci je regardais les plafonds sculptés. Les phrases y étaient calligraphiées. Elles ne me tombaient pas sur la figure. C'était moi qui montais les rejoindre. (ES 38)

The languages of the masculine and the feminine are brilliant when they are free, when they evolve without boundaries—the hammam is one of the very few spaces that enables women to have some freedom: she is with her peers and men are not allowed. On the other hand, under specific constraints, in a patriarchal society, for example, language is only a mask, a means to hide lies.

A somewhat ironic element of these tales strikes the attentive reader: when the masculine wants to take away all powers from the feminine (by creating laws that prevent women from inheriting, for example), it inadvertently is forced to give women an identity and a power that it finds it cannot master afterwards. In both works, it is first clearly seen in the character of the mother: even if the father makes the decision to hide the gender of the girls, he raises his wife to the rank of an accomplice without being fully aware of it:

> Ainsi le pacte fut scellé ! La femme ne pouvait qu'acquiescer. Elle obéit à son mari, comme d'habitude, mais se sentit cette fois-ci concernée par une action commune. Elle était enfin dans une complicité avec son époux. Sa vie allait avoir un sens ; elle était embarquée dans le navire de l'énigme qui allait voguer sur des mers lointaines et insoupçonnées. (ES 23)

The irony is found as an echo in Eufemie who first agrees with masculine authority: "Bials sire, / Ja rien que vostres cuers desire / N'orés par moi estre escondie // Sweet lord, / nothing that your heart desires / will I refuse you" (RS 1725-27), and then becomes as enthusiastic as her husband who shared with her his reasons for acting that way: "Dex me doinst, sire, mal encontre, / Se jo nel fac moult volentiers // May God see fit to punish me, / if I do not do this most willingly" (RS 1762-63). The simple thought of being a part of the secret, of having an active role and of transgressing the law of the masculine, is certainly one of the reasons why these women are so enthusiastic. The necessity of their complicity is a subtle transfer of power between the masculine and the feminine.

The power is thus transferred, but it is also perverted, as it is far from its initial goal, especially in the case of the children: the masculine gives them full power and they go beyond what is expected of them and become unmanageable. First in the case of Ahmed: not only does he like his situation (ES 36), but he goes further on the path that was delineated for him (ES 51). Ironically, this power allows him to discover his feminine side. As for Silence, it is the dialogue between Nature and Nurture that provokes a reevaluation of her situation (RS 2541-2632). That reevaluation is followed by her fleeing with the minstrels without the male's consent (RS 2836-38 and 2849-50). In both cases, the masculine character is not only overwhelmed by the situation, but is also caught in its own web. He will then become a victim of the secret he had invented.

The secret is thus a double one: it is present in the narration through names and thus identity (with female characters who have masculine names), in the (hi)story as well as in History in that the narrative is constructed around the secret, but also in that the socio-historical situation of the characters is a secret as well; the abuse of inheritance and power leads to a destabilization of the basic structure of society, which is nothing less than a destabilization of the patriarchal structure. Finally, since every secret is bound to be revealed, the masculine is responsible for the consequences of its revelation since it is responsible for its fabrication in the first place.

Masking is begun by the masculine, and so the female characters who misuse masculine identity are unmasked according to what Bakhtin calls a "decrowning" (Bakhtin 197). Bakhtin explains that in some cases, thrashing and abuse are not "a personal chastisement but are symbolic actions directed at something on a higher level, at the king" (Bakhtin 197). He gives the example of the carnival where clowns are disguised as Kings and then go back to being clowns, being thus "transvestites" once their reign is over. For him, "abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change in costume, to a

metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the king's uncrowning" (Bakhtin 197).

Silence and Ahmed can be symbolically seen as clowns who usurp the power of the King in that they usurp the power of the masculine. In Silence's case, abuse and thrashing are perpetrated by Queen Eufeme who tries to discredit her: first doubting her sexual "stability" (RS 3817)[4]—thus accusing her indirectly of homosexuality—and then accusing her of rape. These various steps in thrashing and abuse will bring Silence to reveal her identity. This in turn decrowns the patriarchal structure itself, as the lie is a lesser evil than the societal falsehood which necessitated its perpetuation.

In Ahmed's case, abuse and thrashing are started by the audience of the circus in front of which he transforms himself from woman to man to become woman again, but also by those who force him to play this awful show, the old woman and Abbas:

> Ça va être excitant..., je vois ça d'ici..., un vrai spectacle avec une mise en scène, du suspens et même un peu de nu, pas beaucoup, mais une jambe, une cuisse..., c'est dommage, tu n'as pas de gros seins... Ici les hommes adorent les grosses poitrines et les gros culs... Tu es trop mince... C'est pas grave ! On va travailler les gestes et les sous-entendus ! (ES 121)

Here also, abuse and thrashing are supposed to force the character into revealing his/her identity publicly. The atmosphere of the circus reminds us of that of the carnival mentioned by Bakhtin, but the revelation remains an ambiguous one since there is a passage from a woman to a man and finally back to a woman. Unlike Silence who switches from Silentius to Silentia after her public exposure, Zahra becomes Ahmed but his identity is not fixed because he then goes back to Zahra.

The revealing of the secret happens in progressive steps. In the case of Ahmed, the first step is marriage. It is what leads Ahmed to face his gender, and it is Fatima who forces the revelation:

> Merci de m'avoir sortie de l'autre maison. Nous serons frère et sœur ! Tu as mon âme et mon cœur, mais mon corps appartient à la terre et au diable qui l'a dévasté. (ES 76)

Finally, it is Fatima who favors sorority by inviting Ahmed's feminine self to reveal itself: "J'ai toujours su qui tu es, c'est pour cela, ma sœur, ma cousine, que je suis venue mourir ici, près de toi" (ES 80). The second step in the revelation of identity is the public one of the circus where the importance of the naked body as well as the feminine body is underlined (ES 121).

In Silence's case, it is the father who reveals his child's secret identity (RS 2439-95), but it is the discussion between Nature and Nurture that awakens in Silence the first doubts about the supposedly positive aspects of a change of identity. In fact, she wonders rightly: "'Voire', fait il, 'a la male eure / Irai desos, quant sui deseure. / Deseure sui, s'irai desos ?' // 'Indeed,' [s]he said, 'it would be too bad / to step down when I'm on top. / If I'm on top, why should I step down?'" (RS 2639-41).[5] As for the public unmasking, the focus is also on the naked body. It is when they see Silence's naked body that the members of the court recognize a "she" in the "he." So, in Silence's as in Ahmed's case, the real nature of the human being as well as the public exposure of the naked body are what leads to the revelation of the truth.

There is a third intermediary step between the internal and the external revelations. It is the "new baptism" of the characters themselves. Silence chooses for example to

4. Let us underline here that in the Middle Ages, the term "homosexuality" did not exist. In the works studied here, and in this particular quote, the sexual behavior is referred to as either "stable" or "unstable."
5. It is crucial to note here that the narrator refers to Silence as a masculine character using "il," thus underlining the fact that if her nature is feminine, the masculine education seems to have been a stronger influence.

name herself "Malduit"—the one who was badly raised or badly led. As for Ahmed, he becomes "Lalla Zahra" or "Amirat Lhob"—the love princess. Thus the false identity of their birth names is countered by a renaming. In both cases, this new baptism represents a certain irony: in Silence's case, because her identity remains secret whereas it could be clear to all people who understand language and the real meaning of the words—Silence was in fact "badly brought up" in that she is a girl and was raised as a boy; and for Zahra because she is the opposite of what should be a love princess since she has a repulsive physical appearance (ES 143).

In both texts, it seems that the goal of the unmasking is to stress the victory of Nature over Nurture. At the same time, it is the victory of the unmasked and still dominant patriarchal society. Everything returns to the order defined by the masculine. This dual unmasking can be seen at two different levels: first at the societal level, where Silence marries and thus acts in society according to her nature (she is a woman and can only see her future in marriage)[6]; and then at the level of the character and identity, both women being forced to accept their new and predestined identity as women, and having to take the place and play the role assigned to them by the patriarchal order.

From that point of view, neither *Le roman de Silence* nor *L'enfant de sable* is a feminist success: Ahmed/Zahra dies in exile without giving the reader many more details, and Silence's wedding is followed by a very abrupt ending, defined as "repressive" by Elizabeth Waters: "Not only does Silence renounce speech and offer herself to the king's pleasure, she also responds 'come sage,' wisely, like a good girl, to his gift of an inheritance that is rightly hers, and prays that God show who is lord. This repressive ending seems to nullify any sense that the rest of the text may have given of alternatives to strict gender roles" (Waters 37).

However, when the mask hiding the gender is finally lifted, one can see the beginning of a search for the feminine. This search is in the making and could be found in a second volume that we do not have, but at which the narrator(s) let us have a glance:

> Je suis voyageur ; je ne m'endors jamais sans avoir parcouru quelques sentiers obscurs et inconnus. Ils sont tracés par une main familière — peut-être la mienne, peut-être celle de mon père — dans une page blanche, nue, déserte, que même le vent évite. C'est cela l'avenir, une statue voileee qui marche seule dans cette étendue blanche, un territoire de lumière insoutenable. (ES 66-67)

The introduction of the secret in both works thus challenges all societal values. When the mask cannot be perceived by the masculine, the secret becomes the weapon of the feminine, because even if the gender is unmasked, the feminine identity continues to be free, fed as it has been from all these rituals and an education reflecting the masculine. In becoming aware of the existence of the Other, the feminine self can then assert its identity, and only death will prevent it from transgressing the borders set by patriarchal society. The final victory here is that of Nurture. The mask that was deceiving in one way (physically) can continue to deceive in another (culturally), leaving the feminine with the possibility of shaking patriarchal society enough so that it can assert the multiple expressions of its identity independent of the authority and the schemes of the masculine.

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6. Ahmed's wedding is totally different: it takes place in the middle of the narration whereas Silence's occurs at the end, and it symbolizes a provocation (of society, of the patriarchal power). Moreover, this wedding is not really a wedding since Fatima dies, and finally it is only one step in the discovery of Ahmed's real identity.

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