The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*

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The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*

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Defining gender difference as a result of performance, enforced by shame, this essay moves beyond questioning the origins of the nature/nurture debate, examining instead what stakes the dominant culture has in understanding as original the identity categories that are only the effects of that culture's institutions and discourses.(EAW)

A new and challenging critical approach known as queer theory applies questions of gender performance, desire, and sexuality, explodes confining categories based on heteronormativity, and challenges the institutions that define these categories. To some it seems anachronistic or presentist to apply contemporary notions of identity politics to a medieval text, but, as Simon Gaunt suggests, in its deconstructive linguistic play and feminist investigation of gender as a cultural construct, the *Roman de Silence* 'appears to engage deliberately with problems that interest modern theorists' (202). What is this story of a woman cross-dressed as a man to escape the economic sanctions of a capricious king, in which Nature and Nurture are personified in a debate over her true identity, if not an interrogation of both identity and politics?

Queer readings rethink the feminist conflation of the domains of gender and sexuality. The critical separation of sexuality from gender serves to free our readings of medieval literature from some heterosexist assumptions that guide even feminist approaches to these texts. Such assumptions have led to their own binary divisions: gender male or female, desire hetero- or homosexual; they do not allow for identities that explode these categories, *i.e.*, queer identities. In fact, readings of medieval literature are anachronizing precisely when they do *not* separate gender and sexuality, and thus fail to account for the full array of desires represented in these texts.[1] Queer theory can do this for medieval texts; but what can medieval literature do for queer theory?

In her recent book *Bodytalk*, E. Jane Burns defends the import of medieval conceptions of female subjectivity, sexuality, speech, and body for modern feminist criticism. Familiarity with medieval texts, she argues, provides a more complex framework for what are often considered presentist arguments and interpretations. As 'historically specific accounts of the founding moments of Western conceptions of love, desire, and sexuality' (ix) and, I would add, of gender as performance, medieval literature constitutes a historical matrix for issues that inform current critical debate. For Burns, this debate is the contemporary evaluation of the female body in literature, in such works as Jane Gallop's *Thinking Through the Body* and Susan Suleiman's *The Female Body in Western Culture* (xvi); for my purposes it is the theorizing of shame and performativity such queer theorists as Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick (*Tendencies*, 'Queer Performativity') and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*, *Bodies that Matter*). In addition to interrogating female identity in culture, medieval texts such as the mid-thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence* raise in productive ways related issues of drag, performance, gendered identity, and shame.

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Critical interest in the *Roman de Silence* has centered on the subversion of gender norms; this is not surprising, given the romance's plot and the academic climate of feminist criticism at the time of its recovery.[2] The romance's heroine Silence is disguised as a boy from birth to avoid the consequences of a law preventing female children from inheriting their parents' wealth. Although Silence makes an exceptionally successful man—she wins jousting contests, becomes a popular jongleur, attracts the ladies and is eventually knighted by the king of France—the story nonetheless ends with her marriage to a king in a scene in which her passive acquiescence stands in sharp contrast to her previous vitality. Once Merlin reveals her true identity and Silence explains her side of the story, she tells the king:

> 'Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir.
> Faites de moi vostre plaisir.' (6627–28)
>
> ['I care only to be silent.
> Do as you wish with me make of me your pleasure, my translation'].[3]

When the king repeals the law against women inheriting land, Silence comments 'come sage' (6644) [wisely]:

> 'Chi a gent don, Dex le vos mire,
> Et al fait pert quels est li sire.' (6645–46)
> ['This is a noble gift; may God reward you for it,
> and show clearly who is the lord.']

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.[4]

For most critics, the central problem is whether the *Roman de Silence* supports or subverts the hierarchical gender structure with which it ends.[5] Silence's success as a knight argues that gender roles are culturally constructed (and thus alterable), but the story's predictable ending and the narrator's frequent misogynistic speeches insist upon the 'natural,' and thus immutable, patriarchal gender system. How do we account for this incongruity between the traditional frame and the subversive center of the story?

Feminist critics have argued convincingly that this prolonged meditation on possibilities of radically other conceptions of gender itself queries the text's misogynist tirades and simplistic ending.[6] Even though *Silence* carefully reestablishes familiar gender structures, its very insistence on gender, in for example the debate between personifications of Nature and Nurture, opens a space for resistance. As Roberta Krueger explains, 'Precisely because [the text] reveals so clearly the repressive political matrix of gender, the observant reader might glimpse a chink in the narrator's antifeminist armor' (112). Even the text's insistence on rigid and binary definitions of gender alerts the astute reader to the possibility that there is some anxiety, some space for opposition (Gaunt 212). It recalls conventional wisdom that the schoolyard bully only puts others down because he is insecure about himself; this text only refutes possibilities of multiple gender identification because it worries that they do exist, within the text and potentially outside it as well.

Burns discusses this multiplicity of possibilities in terms of a subject formed outside of the binary logic of *either/or* (either man or woman, either masculine or feminine), a subject who instead evokes the plurality of *both/and*. In order to refigure gender roles, Burns suggests, Silence needs

> a third term between the dyadic pairs that structure her existence...[s]he needs a way to be a subject without playing at being a male subject, a way to move from subjection to subjecthood without the transvestism that her story enacts. (245)

Silence needs this third term, but also a fourth, a fifth, a sixth—an infinite number of terms to express gendered identities. She needs a term to describe cross-dressing as something other than 'playing at being a male subject.' Burns likewise invokes a 'third path' that Silence might follow, a path that would allow her to acknowledge the truth of her biological difference as a female,

but empower her to act outside the gender roles prescribed for her. One direction this third path might lead is toward a valuation of cross-dressed, drag, or transgendered identities: queer identities.

Queer theories of identity insist that gender is performative; gendered bodies, that is, have no ontological status outside of the acts that constitute them. Queer readings of the *Roman de Silence*, then, focus not on the origins or causes of gender in the nature/nurture paradigm; they rather question the political stakes that the dominant culture has in designating as origin and cause the identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions and discourses. Whether the emphasis in the repeated appellation 'li vallés mescine' (3763) [the boy-maiden][7] is on the *vallés* or the *mescine* are mere distractions from a larger question of why the text keeps us focussed on this question of nature versus nurture. Why would the hegemonic discourse dictate an understanding of gender as an either/or proposition? What does this prevent us from seeing? What is at stake is not only the possibility that gender is culturally constructed; that women are not weak; that Silence is, after all, a successful knight: the stakes are the whole binary system.[8] If we can see outside this system, we realize that the important questions are not about nature or environment shaping identity, but how gender oppression works—which in turn offers us a glimpse down this third path.

In her defining book on the subversion of identity, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states, 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (25). She uses drag as an example of this kind of performance. When this statement is later misunderstood by her readers, she explains in *Bodies That Matter* that 'citing drag as an example of performativity [is] a move that was taken...to be *exemplary* of performativity...but I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman' (230–31). In the terms of the argument developed in the *Roman de Silence*, this conception of gender seems to err on the side of nurture rather than nature. It is at least an anti-essentialist argument: we can imagine that for Butler, the fact of Silence's successful life cross-dressed as a man makes her gender identity fluid. Several heroines of medieval literature, inspired by Ovid's story of Iphis, adopt male clothing for various purposes, usually to escape unwanted desire. At least two of these heroines, Blanchandine of *Tristan de Nanteuil* and Yde of *Yde et Olive*, pray to God for transformation and actually become men.[9] But Silence did have a gendered identity prior to her cross-dressing: her parents cross-dress her. Drag is not necessarily a gender expression she herself would have chosen. And what keeps her cross-dressed, despite various arguments by nature and her own pained internal monologues, is the force of shame.

In her foundational work 'Queer Performativity,' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses J.L. Austin's definition in *How to Do Things With Words* of performative statements as speech that does not describe but performs actions. The example that figures most prominently in Austin's discussion is 'I do [take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife],' as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony. In fact, Sedgwick suggests, the heterosexual marriage ceremony is central to Austin's origins of performativity (3). Sedgwick wonders what would happen to Austin's formula of first-person present-indicative active phrases if different kinds of utterances were given such exemplary power. She suggests 'Shame on you'—equally a performative utterance; one that, without first-person pronoun and without explicit verb, effectively forces attention from the speaker to the object of the utterance; one that is as foundational to queer identity as 'I do' is to heterosexual identity. 'Shame on you' is, after all, 'unsanitizably redolent of that long Babylonian exile that is queer childhood' (4)—an exile not unlike Silence's formative years, spent in a house in the woods far away from civilization.

Images and evocations of shame surround Silence's cross-dressing. The king's edict that female children could no longer inherit their parents' wealth—incidentally, another performative utterance—

> 'Mais, par le foi que doi Saint Pere,
> Ja feme n'iert mais iretere
> Ens el roiame d'Engletiere,
> Por tant com j'aie a tenir tiere.' (313–16)
>
> ['but, by the faith I owe Saint Peter,
> never again shall a woman inherit
> in the kingdom of England
> as long as I hold this land.'] [10]

makes the couple worry that their child will be a daughter. When Eufemie tells Cador that she has given birth to a girl, she 'en a moult grant vergoigne' [was greatly ashamed, 2007]; according to Cador, the woman who raises Silence need fear no shame: 'Mar avra ja de honte soig / S'or me secort a cest besoing' (2061–62) [She will never have to fear shame / if she helps me in this need]. The pretext Cador invents for his cousin to explain why she is raising the child alone in the woods is also based on shame: she is to tell strangers that since she is related to a count, 'ele a de l'enfant norir honte' (2173) [she is ashamed to rear a child]. Once Silence reaches the age where her situation can be explained to her, her father tells her:

> 'Bials dols ciers fils, n'est pas por nos
> Cho que faisons, ainz est por vos.

Tolte l'oquoison, fils, savés.
Si chier come l'onor avés,
Si vos covrés viers tolte gent.' (2453–57)

['Fair dear son, it is not for ourselves
that we do this; it is for you.
You now know the entire reason, son.
As you hold our honor dear,
conceal yourself from everyone.']

The entire romance obsessively plays *honte* against *honor*; in this passage Cador appeals to Silence's sense of honor, using guilt to convince her not to shame the family. He insists that it is for Silence's own benefit that they have raised her this way. In the fourteen-line speech from which this excerpt is taken, Cador refers to Silence no fewer than four times as *fils* [son] or *bials fils* [fair son], emphasizing that what they want from her is that she live as a boy. Here the emphasis on shame—from the very people who, in Sedgwick's description of the exile of queer childhood, would be saying 'Shame on you'—is used not to shame Silence *away* from the unnatural act of cross-dressing, but to shame her *into* her transgendered performance, so that she will not embarrass the family. Sedgwick claims that 'for certain (queer) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metaphoric possibilities' (14). While shame clearly performs this same founding function of identity in the *Roman de Silence*, it does so in a manner even queerer than queer.

Shame also has a function of titillation in the text. There are several examples of a sort of shame *manqué*, moments when the revelation of Silence's true identity would have shamed people around her; in these situations, the fact that her identity remains secret piques the audience's interest. When the queen Eufeme attempts to seduce Silence, the latter uses shame and honor as excuses not to succumb:

'Se jo ma loialté perc chi
Donques sui jo enfin honis
Et as piors del mont onis. '(3802–04)

['If I lose my loyalty here
Then I am shamed forever,
Equal to the very worst in the world.']

If Silence were to do nothing more than part her garment and reveal her sex, she would shame Eufeme into silence. The audience's knowledge intensifies the irony of Silence's predicament. Similarly, when Silence defeats a knight in

battle, the narrator invites us to ponder how much more painful the loss would have been if the knight had known he was vanquished by a woman (5157–64). The audience can relish its knowledge of Silence's secret, one that the characters in the story do not know.

Simon Gaunt provides a useful reading of this passage, though he relies too heavily on conjecture about authorial intention. He says that Silence's victory in battle is seen not in relation to women's potential outside culturally-constituted gender norms, but as a reflection on men, which 'indicat[es] that the clerk who uses a female character cross-dressed as a man could be said to show anxiety about masculinity, as much as femininity' (212). The masculine/feminine opposition at work here, light and dark, exterior and interior (Silence's clothes and dark complexion cover her femininity), is played out in other moments in the text as well. In the dark, Silence is not a man. If Nurture has made her complexion ruddy and has provided her with masculine apparel, Silence still has only flour in her pants ('el a en tine que ferine, 2479').[11] What Gaunt does not reflect upon is the sexual dynamic, driven by desire, that is also at work in this anxiety about masculinity.

The text does not play with double-entendres about queer sexuality as often as one might expect, but the anxiety around homosexual desire is nonetheless palpable. Although there is some mention of shameful desire in the form of blushing and stammering between Cador and Eufemie, the only threatening desire is that of Eufeme for Silence. It is as forbidden for its breaking of the courtly code as for its transgression of gender boundaries. There is, however, no little insinuation of anxiety about queer desire in several instances in the *Roman de Silence*. Eufeme is attracted to Silence, and her other extramarital conquest is a man who dresses as a nun, ostensibly to be near her, although the text provides no explanation of this. Her desire seems drawn toward gender-blendings of men as women and women as men.

In addition, it is in the scenes in which the queen is trying to seduce Silence that the text underscores her contradictory identity as 'li vallés mescine,' and in fact when Silence refuses her advances, Eufeme accuses the cross-dressed woman of being a homosexual:

> '...gel verrai tolt desjoé,
> Enfin honi, se gel puis faire...
> Certes, gel croi bien a erite
> Quant a feme ne se delite.[...]
> As vallés fait moult bele chiere
> Et a lor compagnie chiere.
> Herites est, gel sai de fi,
> Et jo de m'amor le deffi.

Honte li volrai porcacier.' (3932–33; 3935–36; 3945–49)

['...I will see him completely miserable,
shamed in fact, if I can manage it....
Truly, I think he must be homosexual,
since he takes no joy in women.[...]
He is very pleasant indeed to boys,
and enjoys their company.
He is a homosexual, I know it for certain,
and I withdraw my love from him.
I will devote myself to shaming him.']

In a strictly binary discourse where an accusation of homosexuality should imply feminine characteristics, this one functions, paradoxically, to reassert masculinity. Eufeme's seduction attempt leads not to the revelation of feminine identity (as it would if Silence were a man and called homosexual, or if she revealed her 'nature' to silence the queen) but to the intensification of Silence's queer otherness. A homosexual male is exactly what she is not; the fact that the audience of the *Roman de Silence* knows her true identity stresses the irony in this name-calling. This irony demands that we meditate on identity and sexuality, and in this way the text forces thought toward a third possibility, outside the heterosexual matrix: attentive readers *must* make sense of incongruous textual identities, to keep them from collapsing in on themselves. Silence is more than a female, less than a male; we need a term to describe her that is not dependent on these either/or models.

This anxiety about homosexuality, answered always by shame, is more concerned with the queen's femininity, her ability to attract men, than it is Silence's queer desire for other men. Men, on the other hand, do desire Silence. When the king of France is agonizing over whether to carry out what he supposes to be the order for Silence's death, he reports,

'Sa grans bialtés m'a afolé
Que baizié l'ai et acolé.' (4469–70)
['His great beauty made me act rashly,
for I kissed and embraced him.']

The king is so dazzled by boy-maiden Silence's beauty that he kisses and hugs the youth and is thus rendered impotent to carry out what his friend the English king requests. And, as Michèle Perret notes, the French king uses only gender-neutral terms to refer to Silence, words like the rhyming couplet *creäture / engendreüre* (4399–400) (333). The third path we see developing here in the space between male and female, this path tempered always by shame, forges a space for queer identity in specifically sexual terms.

Indeed, the evocation of shame, darkness and covering in the passage about the shame of the defeated knight, implies sexuality. When Nature presents her argument to the adolescent Silence, reminding her that she is female, Silence is about to agree with her when Reason materializes and reminds her that if the king perceives her true nature, she will be punished for having lied. Silence concedes this point and goes on to meditate on the condition of women. She discusses the 'jus c'on siolt es cambres faire' [games people play in private] (2633) and weighs 'l'us de feme a son usage' [the woman's role against his own] (2636). Implying that her customs are not feminine, she sees that a man's life is better than a woman's:

> 'Voire,' fait il, 'a la male eure
> Irai desos, quant sui deseure.
> Deseure sui, s'irai desos.
> Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.
> Nel sui, par foi, amis sui honis
> Quant as femes voel estre onis.' (2639-44)
>
> ['Truly,' he said, 'in an evil hour
> will I go underneath, when I am on top.
> I am on top now, and I would have to go beneath.
> Now I am most valorous and strong,
> but I wouldn't be any longer; rather, in faith,
> I'd be shamed if I wanted to be like the women.']

As a man, Silence has the qualities of a knight: she is *vaillant* and *preux*; she is on top of the social order. She realizes that if she were to live as a woman, she would have to be on the bottom not only in sex, but in her passive social role. It would be dishonorable in her identity as a knight to want to be like women; she would be *ashamed*. She makes the top/bottom distinction more explicitly sexual as she continues:

> 'Gel pensai por moi aäsier.
> Trop dure boche ai por baisier,
> Et trop rois bras por acoler.
> On me poroit tost afoler
> Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,
> Car vallés sui et nient mescine.
> Ne voel perdre ma grant honor,
> Ne la voel cangier a menor.[...]
> Ja n'en ferai descoverture.' (2645–2; 2656)
>
> ['I thought of it for my own pleasure.
> I have a mouth too hard for kissing,
> and arms too rough for embracing.
> I would quickly be beaten

> at the game people play under the covers,
> for I am a boy, and not a girl at all.
> I don't want to lose my great honor,
> nor exchange it for a lesser one....
> I will not reveal my secret.']

Here Silence speaks specifically of pleasure, of her own pleasure (moi aäsier), and plays again with the cover/uncover dyad. Roberta Krueger points out the irony that Silence can only choose to live at the top as a man by virtue of *couverture*. Krueger also finds it ironic that the text uses a female character to speak against the female condition:

> Silence does not point up the essential injustice of her predicament, and thereby promote womanhood and equality, but rather agrees with the traditional devaluation of the subordinate sphere of the 'cambres des dames' in the natural order. (120)

In the above passage Silence explicity sides with the masculine, both in society and in her own identity ('vallés sui et nient mescine,' 2650), but within the text as a whole her queer existence proves otherwise. Although she speaks and acts as if masculine were superior, she remains silent at the end when the king marries her, except to say 'faites de moi vostre plaisir' (6628) [make of me your pleasure]. True, she does not register defeat in language. This significant move from 'moi aäsier' to 'vostre plaisir,' coupled with her acquiescence to the king's desire, does imply Silence's undoing. But the fact remains that she exists textually as a man. Her performative identity, the desire she arouses and the respect she commands, added to her incongruous silence, indicates the injustice of her predicament.

So I too follow the path of criticism of the *Roman de Silence* and return to the question with which I began: is the cross-dressing in this text finally supportive or subversive of hegemonic norms? Following Judith Butler's definition, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure that produces hegemonic gender itself, and thus disputes the claim of heterosexuality to naturalness and originality (125). When drag makes explicit the fact that not only transgressive genders but *all* gender is performative, it denaturalizes gender. This process is made evident and even rendered hyperbolic in the *Roman de Silence* in several ways, including the proof of Silence's success as a man when she acts the role of the knight in tournaments and the condemnation of Eufeme as an evil (if typical) woman after her failed performance of self-rape.

Butler notes, however, that the denaturalization of gender does not inevitably serve to destabilize hegemonic norms:

> there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion...drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and the reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. (125)

This is because in drag, a person is implicated in the regimes of power that constitute him or her, and thus implicated in the very power structures that he or she opposes. The *Roman de Silence* manages, despite its apparent subversive qualities, to reiterate hegemonic norms. Men are still *preux* and *vaillant*, women are roses and lilies. While Silence engages successfully in drag performance, she does not enter into the performance by choice; shame enforces her participation. However, although she capitulates in the end to the desire of a powerful man, she also attracts formidable female desire. The text allows us no real glimpse of Silence's response to her impending marriage. The feminist reader longs to see Silence value her own pleasure and volition. But the romance points toward both complicity in and subversion of the status quo and, as Sedgwick suggests, one strains to judge whether a text leans one way or the other:

> The bottom line is generally the same: kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic. I see this as a sadly premature domestication of a conceptual tool [drag] whose powers we really have barely begun to explore. (15)

This conceptual tool works along the shame/performativity axis that is so prominent in the *Roman de Silence*, and points toward a third path of refiguring gender.

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NOTES

1 To illustrate this idea, Bruce Holsinger of Columbia University gives the example of Eufeme: is she executed because she lied about attempting to seduce Silence in addition to keeping a male lover disguised as a nun, or because she has a weakness for crossdressers? (electronic communication, 6 December 1993). This is the kind of radical reading outside the realm of compulsory heterosexuality to which queer theory can open us up.

2 The romance, of which only one known manuscript survives, was not edited completely until 1967, or published in book form until 1972. English translations were published in 1991 and 1992.

3 Although Regina Psaki translates l. 6627 'I no longer wish to be silent,' Simon Gaunt suggests that *mais* means 'but' or 'only' rather than *jamais*, 'never' (213). Throughout this essay, all translations are Psaki's unless indicated.

4 Indeed, Krueger, Gaunt and Allen give versions of this reading of the text.

5 Peggy McCracken's reading of the *Roman de Silence* offers a complex analysis of gender as more than an either/or proposition, and of the effects of the story as more complicated than this supportive/subversive dyad. Her article appeared after my own article was in press, so I have been unable to take her insights into account.

6 See Psaki, Krueger, and Burns.

7 Variations such as 'li vallés qui est mescine' [the boy who was a girl] also occur (ll. 2209–10, 2480, 3704, 3871 and 3785).

8 These questions are inspired by Michel Foucault's idea of genealogy, as explored in the preface to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and defined cursorily in her *Bodies that Matter*: 'the genealogical critique of the subject is the interrogation of those constitutive and exclusionary relations of power through which contemporary discursive resources are formed' (227).

9 On these heroines in drag, see Valerie Hotchkiss and Michèle Perret.

10 This utterance is performative by virtue of the king's authority. After he makes this vow, he has everyone in attendance swear to it as well, 'to solemnify it' (320).

11 The narrator employs a simile involving flour to explain how Nature created Silence of such unique beauty that she literally threw away the mold. Nature makes this 'ouvre forcible' as a baker makes a fine cake, sifting the flour to separate the bran, the straw and the chaff from the fine white flour (cf. 1808–39). As Kate Mason Cooper suggests in an oblique reference to sexual difference in discourse, 'The substance of Nature's creation is white and pure, refined to the point where difference is no longer discernible' (345).