22

Roman Gender in the *Roman de Silence*

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Si com l'estoire le nos livre,
Qu'en latin escrite lizons,
En romans si le vos disons.
(1660–62)

Just as it was written
in the Latin version we read,
We will tell it to you in French.[1]

This statement from the poet-narrator in the *Roman de Silence*[2] exemplifies the work of many medieval authors: transforming Latin source material into something that could be directly understood by the vernacular-speaking audience. While there is no evidence of the book 'Qu'en latin escrite' mentioned by Heldris, there is clear evidence of reception of multiple ancient Roman texts and concepts, which this work will identify and explore further. The three key texts that will be discussed with relation to the *Roman de Silence* are Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Phaedrus' *Fables*. This chapter will explore the effects of Camilla from the *Aeneid* and Iphis from *Metamorphoses* 9.666–797 on the characterisation of Silence, a character whose actions often speak louder than words. Before delving into the gender identities of atypical AFAB (assigned female at birth) characters in Roman epic poetry, this chapter will begin with one of the few ancient sources which deals with the origins of gender-nonconforming people; in this case, those whose sexual desires do not match the heteronormative, socially acceptable standard. Following the analysis of the three textual aspects of reception that help shape the concept of gender in *Silence*, this chapter will focus on two key areas that are central to understanding gender in *Silence*: transformation and language.

From the very beginning, it is clear that there are many different aspects of transformation at play in the *Roman de Silence*. First and foremost is the transformation of Latin source materials and/or concepts into the vernacular of thirteenth-century France, exploration of which will be woven into this chapter. As will become evident, one of the key aspects of both *Silence* and

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the *Metamorphoses* is the transformation of an AFAB infant into a gender-transgressing teen[3] and a final transformation which removes the transgressive aspect.[4] These transformations and the forces behind them will be analysed and the power brought to post-transformation characters by their changes will also be explored, in terms of the social power granted to Iphis and Silence as men. This chapter will also reveal that Isis (transformer of Iphis) herself undergoes a physical transformation in Egyptian sources, leading to increased magical powers.[5] This work will also explore the potential for reading Iphis and Silence as trans men who have undergone gender transformations or transitions. This analysis will reveal a clear parallel between the power gained by characters in literature across the millennia who undergo gender transformations (physical and/or social) and any and all trans, non-binary, or otherwise genderqueer people today who undergo whatever kind of transformation they choose which grants them the power to live their lives beyond the limitations of a gender identity assigned at birth.

Language will be shown to play a key part not only in the presentation of gender in the *Metamorphoses* and *Roman de Silence* but also in the Roman concept of gender, as highlighted by Corbeill, with regards to the effect of grammatical gender on Roman attitudes to masculine/feminine people.[6] The later part of this chapter will explore the importance of grammatically gendered names and the grammatical presentation of gender identity in both the *Met*. and *Silence* in order to demonstrate how essential the study of language in these texts is to understanding the reception of Roman gender and sexuality at play. Study of these texts will also reveal the ways in which words uttered in specific circumstances can alter textual reality, mirroring the way in which "coming out" as trans/non-binary/otherwise gender-nonconforming in words alters one's reality. Coming out rejects the previous reality of being perceived and/or treated as the gender assigned at birth, stripping that former identity of its power, and ushering in a new reality in which gender (or even a lack thereof) is determined by the individual themselves and not by secondary observation.

One of the keys to understanding the Roman concept of gender, and how it differs from our own, is to recognise that gender was constantly and consistently being reinforced through appropriately gendered behaviour performed in front of others. Women were considered to be "naturally" passive, meaning the expected action for women to take was not to act at all, in both social and sexual settings. By contrast, men were "naturally" active, both socially and sexually, explaining patriarchal social dominance and male dominance in the bedroom as the active (penetrating) partner. One of the ways in which gender was reinforced was through the expression of "appropriate" sexuality, wherein women desired to be passive figures upon whom sexual intercourse was inflicted and men desired to actively take pleasure.[7] It should be noted that the active/passive paradigm does not simply correspond to penetrator/penetrated, as Kamen and Levin-Richardson have shown.[8] By using definitions of "active" and "passive" which correspond to the Roman use of the active and passive grammatical voices in order to indicate agency (or a lack thereof), we are able to comprehend the nuance of Roman sexual structures independent of penetration. This agency can take the form of actively moving during intercourse or of actively desiring, that is, being a subject rather than an object of desire, which Romans considered to be the natural domain of men. One of the few extant ancient sources which attempts to explain the origins of people who behave in "unnatural" ways in terms of their sexuality, is Phaedrus' fable 4.16, in which a drunken Prometheus attaches the wrong genitalia to the incorrect bodies. Phaedrus claims that this tale explains the origins of *tribades* and *molles* men, but a closer look reveals that there is yet more to this fable than meets the eye.[9]

Phaedrus' fable opens with Prometheus hard at work forming the 'naturae partes' (5, 'parts of nature') that he will later affix 'corporibus suis' (7, 'to their own bodies'). However, after

a night of dinner and drinking with Liber, Prometheus returns to work inebriated and half-asleep, leading to him attaching 'errore ebrio' (11,'in a drunken error') 'virginale generi masculo, / et masculine membra . . . feminis' (12–13, 'the virginal part to the masculine race and masculine members to women'). He thus creates men with vaginas and women with penises, but he does not identify which of these "incorrectly made" humans is the *mollis* man and which is the *tribad*: is the woman with a penis the *tribad* who penetrates women and boys alike in Martial? Or is she the man with the vagina? Textually, Phaedrus does not offer a concrete answer (although arguments have been made for each reading).[10] However, this is where exploration of not only Phaedrus' language but of the Latin language itself comes into play. Phaedrus speaks of Prometheus fashioning genitalia for 'their own bodies', meaning that there is something about the bodies he has made that are suited to having either a vagina or a penis later attached. Using the grammar-based active/passive dynamic put forward by Kamen and Levin-Richardson, the fact that the role of women was to be a passive object of desire and never an actively desiring subject, suggests that Prometheus' accidental *tribad* is in fact the male body with the female sex organs: one who seems physically suited to the passive sexual role but who actively desires to sexually subjugate those more passive, that is, "naturally" passive women and (at least in Philaenis' case) boys, rendered passive by youth and inexperience.

While Phaedrus' fable presents us with an integral tool for the understanding of the Roman concept of gender and sexuality as the expression of appropriately gendered behaviour, it also forms part of the tradition of non-Christian creation myths Heldris' figure of Nature responds to. There are clear similarities between Prometheus, sculptor of humankind (4.16.3, 'auctor vulgi fictilis'), and Nature who sifts her material like a baker sifts flour (cf. 1808–22) in order to create the best humans like the best loaves of bread from the finest flour. Both control completely the shape that human beings take: as seen before, Prometheus sculpts figures from clay, and Nature uses her different degrees of material formed from her separated 'flours' in moulds (1896, 'formes'), of which she has a great, diverse multitude (cf. 1899). Both texts also demonstrate that it is not only the shape of human beings that their creators control; they also determine the nature of their creations. Whilst Prometheus' drunken error creates two races of people whose insides do not match their outsides in terms of "appropriate sexual expression", Nature's carelessness due to a foul mood (cf. 1835–36) can mean 'C'un poi del gros al delié viegne' (1837, 'that a bit of coarse material gets mixed in with the fine'). This leads to beautiful nobles of high station with ugly, vulgar hearts and low-born people with noble hearts, full of integrity (cf. 1842–60). Both texts clearly use their creator figures to explain the existence of human beings whose behaviour goes against the grain: Prometheus' inebriation is responsible for anyone who expresses inappropriate sexual desires and Nature's carelessness while separating her material leads to members of the nobility who lack the noble hearts which were supposed to make them naturally suited to their higher stations.[11] However, there are also key differences. Prometheus works with pre-existing material whereas Nature sorts and mixes her own, depending on the type of person she intends to create, making fine folk from the refined material and rabble from the coarse.[12] Sculpting is also a considerably more masculine-coded activity than baking, particularly in the thirteenth century.[13] Despite these considerable differences and the lack of direct evidence that Heldris was aware of Phaedrus' *Fabulae*, the similarities between these creator figures who can be held responsible for seemingly unnatural behaviour are strong and should not be ignored.[14]

While this chapter will mostly focus on the Ovidian reception at play in the *Roman de Silence*, that has rarely been recognised in most secondary literature on *Silence*.[15] Even the translator and editor of the most recent English translation of the text, Sarah Roche-Mahdi, focuses only on Camille from the *Roman d'Enéas* while making no mention even of Virgil's

Camilla: 'Camille, the warrior queen of Vulcane, serves as both model for and contrast to Silence'.[16] There are clear similarities between the two beautiful blondes in their prowess as warriors but an equally clear difference lies in the fact that 'Camille is queen in her own right and feels no tension between womanhood and the practice of chivalry' (cf. 3959–86), whereas the central tension of the *Roman de Silence* lies in Silence's unease regarding the combination of a feminine nature and masculine nurture.[17] This internal conflict is echoed in one confrontation between Camille and a Trojan warrior who taunts that the place to do battle with a maiden like Camille is in bed (cf. 7081–89) only for Camille to kill him and declare that she knows better how to kill a man than to make love to him (cf. 7117–25). Silence similarly reflects 'Trop dure boche ai por baisier, / Et trop rois bras por acoler. / On me poroit tost afoler / Al giu c'on fait desos gordine' (2646–49, I have a mouth too hard for kissing and arms too rough for embracing. One could make a complete fool of me in games played under the covers).[18] While there is no direct precedent for such a sexually charged exchange between Camilla and a Trojan warrior, there are some sexual aspects to Camilla's interactions with the warriors she conquers. In 11.667 Camilla pierces with her long wooden shaft ('adversi longa transverberat abiete') Euneus (whose name may derive from the Greek *εὐνάω*, 'to lie in bed', used of intercourse in *Iliad* 2.821) as he faces her, evocative of missionary position. Adams states that one of the 'largest semantic fields from which metaphors for sexual acts were taken in Latin is that of striking, beating and the like'[19] and identifies *uerbero* used of a sexual act in Hor. *Serm*. 2.7.49 (cf. Adams, *Sexual Vocabulary*, 149.), supporting the potential for this act to be read sexually and thus adding to the transgressive tone of Camilla's *aristea*. Not only is a woman capable of conquering men in battle but linguistically she seems capable of sexually subjugating them also. While killing Ornytus shortly after, Camilla is described as *super* (11.670, i.e. above Ornytus or on top of him) which may simply be a euphemism for her superiority over him in battle or could be read as Camilla taking the active, dominant sexual position of the partner "on top".[20]

Another distinct similarity between Virgil's Camilla and Heldris' Silence is their wild upbringing: Virgil makes explicit in 11.570 that Camilla was raised 'in dumis' and Silence lived 'El bos, soltive et solitaire' (2153, 'in the woods, isolated and solitary'). Another key character of the *Roman de Silence* 'noris en bos' (l.6003, 'nurtured in the woods') is Merlin, of whom Silence says 'Ne sai s'il est u hom u bieste' (5908, 'I don't know whether he is man or beast'). As Conklin Akbari notes, the woods frequently represent the antithesis of civilisation or more generally of order in the medieval period to the extent that the Latin word for forest, *silva*, is used to mean 'chaos'.[21]

While the parallels between Silence and Camilla/Camille are certainly both evident and worthy of exploration, the fact remains that parallels between Silence and Iphis have been largely neglected. Both are assigned female at birth (AFAB) and yet raised as male due to reasons that relate to money/wealth. Whereas Silence is raised male in order to secure inheritance of her parents' estate (cf. 1751–60) despite King Evan's decree that no woman would inherit as long as he reigned (313–16), Iphis is raised male by her mother (without her father Lidgus' knowledge) as they lack the *vires* to raise a girl.[22] Emphasis is placed by both authors on Iphis and Silence being 'cultus erat pueri' (9.712, 'dressed like a boy') and 'vestu a fuer d'ome' (2361, 'dressed in male clothing') and both authors highlight these characters' beauty. Iphis' beauty is more overtly androgynous pre-transformation: with a face, 'quam sive puellae, / sive dares puero, fuerat formosus uterque' (9.712–13, 'whether you gave it to a boy or a girl, would be beautiful'), whereas depictions of Silence's beauty (particularly earlier in the text) have a distinctly feminine lean (e.g. 1882–84, where Nature speaks of putting more beauty in Silence than a thousand of the most beautiful girls in the world currently possess).[23] Particular

parallels such as the linguistic importance of the gendering of the names Iphis and Silence will be explored later in this work, as will the transformations of Iphis to *puer* and Silence to *feme* of King Evan.[24]

Whilst it is in the *Roman de Silence* that that the allegorical figure of Nature appears, it cannot be denied that the concept of both "natural" behaviour and the way that humans are made predetermining our paths were important parts of ancient Roman society, particularly with regards to gender-appropriate behaviour and what determined it. Phaedrus' Prometheus fable illustrates Roman preoccupation with the nature of human beings and Corbeill demonstrated in his *Sexing the World* that grammarians consistently listing genders in the order of masculine, feminine, neuter eventually came to be seen as conveying 'a natural linguistic and social order'.[25] Roman interest in the "natural order" can also be seen in Iphis' soliloquy in *Met*. 9, as Iphis wishes the gods had given her a 'naturale malum' (730), as opposed to a love of Ianthe who is as physically female as Iphis at this point. Lines 731–34 focus on Iphis' belief that nowhere else in the animal kingdom do we see one female creature desiring another, characterising her own passions as unnatural but also as given to her by the gods, making Iphis' love for Ianthe in its own way a natural event. Iphis did not love Ianthe due to nurture, but due to what the gods gave Iphis as part of her nature. The allegorical debates between Nature and Noreture highlight the way in which this medieval text is taking the ancient interest in the "natural" origins of behaviour one step further to interrogate whether behaviour is truly determined only by one's nature or whether one's environment (or Noreture) had any effect. Various proverb collections and similar sources from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries demonstrate prolonged medieval interest in the competing powers of nature vs nurture.[26] According to Akbari, the 'formulations which most closely predate the *Roman de Silence* and would have provided its proverbial context indicate that while nurture may affect an individual's character, in the end nature must finally manifest itself'.[27] The power of nature to shape people is not an idea unique to Heldris; however the way in which Heldris presents his figure of Nature shows a clear departure from both earlier and contemporary medieval examples.[28] Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose* (a text roughly contemporary with *Silence*) also features an allegorical Nature who forms human beings, though in a manner more akin to Phaedrus' Prometheus who sculpts humans. Jean's Nature appears in her forge, minting people like coins of different monies (cf. 15985), giving each their 'fourmes veroies' (15986, 'true forms'). While there is some degree of difference in people produced suggested by 'quoinz de diverses monoies', the emphasis placed by Jean on all coins matching the exemplar in their true forms suggests that some form of homogeneity remains. There is thus a sharp contrast with Heldris' Nature who has a huge variety of forms and moulds to choose from (cf. 1895–99) and has kept one aside (1900) which she uses for Silence and will never use again (cf. 1956–57). It is also important to note that Heldris significantly modifies the preceding literary traditions as, unlike Prometheus who forms human bodies from pre-existing clay and Jean's Nature who stamps form onto pre-existing matter, Nature in *Silence* cleans and sifts (1829–32) her 'matyre' (1828, 'raw material') like a baker sifts their flour to form the dough from which to shape her people.

The allegorical figure of Nature can be contrasted not only with the Prometheus of fable 4.16, but also with the goddess Isis as she appears in *Met*. 9 as these are the forces which enact physical changes at the end of their respective tales. Before we turn to a comparison of the roles of Nature and Isis, there is one more key form of ancient reception at work: namely the reception of the Egyptian goddess Isis in Roman culture. Shrines and altars to Isis were set up by private citizens in early first century BCE before Isis-worship was forbidden within the *pomerium* by Augustus in 28 BCE and the ban was extended to apply to the whole city in 21 BCE (cf. Dio Cass. 53.2.4, 54.6.6). Ovid is therefore drawing on a figure as unpopular with

Augustus as he would later become himself, one consistently marked as non-Roman, which fits with his use of the setting of Crete, 'notorious for the bizarre and transgressive acts of some of its inhabitants'.[29]

Elsewhere in Ovid's corpus, he focuses on Isis as linen-wearing (cf. *Ex ponto*. 1.1.51–52 and *Amores* 2.2.25–56), echoing Plutarch 352.4.D and its associations of Isis with the purity of linen, not formed from leftovers from food like animal hides.[30] The emphasis placed on the way Isis and her followers dress suggests that presentation of the self to the world is an important part of Roman understandings of Isis. It therefore seems almost appropriate that such a goddess would be involved in transforming Iphis' self-presentation. *Am*. 2.2.25–56 is also interesting as it plays with the fact that men were barred from knowledge of the rites women observed in Isis' honour.[31] Ovid is clearly aware of the strong associations between Isis and the feminine, particularly with the feminine that excludes men, which might seem to make her an odd choice[32] for transforming an AFAB character into one whose physically male attributes are emphasised (cf. 786–89).[33] Ovid also mentions Isis in book 1 of his *Amores* (1.8.71–74) as a way for a woman to avoid intercourse with her male lover with the intention of "treating him mean to keep him keen" and thus ensuring she profits from their relations. As noted by McKeown, references to ritual abstinence from sexual intercourse in honour of Isis are frequent in elegy (e.g. Tib. 1.3.26, Prop. 2.28.61T),[34] which reinforces the Roman idea of Isis as a goddess who grants an unusual level of freedom to women, as they worship her unobserved by men and can use her as an excuse to refuse the advances of men and actively take control of a sexual situation in which they would otherwise be expected to be an entirely passive object of desire, regardless of their own feelings. Isis' associations with the nurturing, motherly role of saviour-goddess devoted to her husband and son, as well as with mourning and healing (cf. Pinch, *Egyptian myth*, 40) are attested in *Met*. 9.699–700 when Isis states 'dea sum auxiliaris opemque / exorata fero'.[35] The associations of Isis with help and healing clearly suggest her suitability for "fixing" Iphis' gender problem through transformation, as does her own mutability in Egyptian sources. In the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*, Isis changes from an old crone into a young girl, then to bird of prey (cf. Pinch, *Egyptian myth*, 37ff.), demonstrating that she knows the necessity of adapting the physical body for different situations and also, as will be discussed later, of the increased power that can accompany physical transformations.

Isis does not physically appear in the narrative to enact Iphis' transformation beyond a show of power in lines 782–84 that Iphis' mother Telethusa takes to be a good omen (785). Iphis' body changes gradually upon leaving the temple: first comes the longer stride (787), then a change in complexion (787–88), 'vires augentur' (788, 'his strength seemed increased'), sharper features and shorter hair follow (788–89) and finally 'plusque vigoris adest, habuit quam femina' (789, 'he appeared to have more vigor than he possessed as a woman'). This gradual change is both mirrored and magnified in the *Roman de Silence* where Nature spends three days refining (literally repolishing, cf. 'repolir' at 6671) Silence's body, removing anything 'de malle' (6673) from her form.[36] This includes specifically removing sunburn and restoring her complexion to rose red and lily white (cf. 6669–76). This contrasts sharply with the previous lines: 'Silence atornent come feme. / Segnor, que vos diroie plus? / Ains ot a non Scilensiüs: / Ostés est -us, mis i est -a / Si est només Scilentiä'.[37] There are few other references to what differentiates the Silence of whom King Evan said that neither king nor count ever fathered a better knight (6581) from the one he sees naked and states 'Nos veöns bien que tu iés feme'.[38] The lack of references to Nature weakening Silence's body suggests that her physical form places no limitations on her potential achievements in the masculine chivalric sphere, especially given the omniscient Merlin, upon exposing her before the court states 'Ne sai home qui tant soit fors / Ki le venquist par son effors'.[39]

Such depictions raise the question of how we should read gender identity in both the *Roman de Silence* and the *Metamorphoses*. Roman ideas of gender, as discussed earlier, were centred on an active/passive dynamic which mapped on to a simple masculine/feminine binary. However, both Ovid and Heldris present characters who do not fit this binary and analysis of the presentation of their bodies and behaviours will reflect this.

As previously discussed, physical descriptions of Iphis, pre-transformation, focus on the androgynous nature of Iphis' beauty, creating a physically ambiguous character.[40] Iphis' behaviour has, historically, been just as difficult to decipher. Scholars such as Hallett have read Iphis' behaviour as indicative of female homoerotic desire, gendering Iphis as a girl in love with another girl.[41] This would seem to make perfect sense, especially as Iphis' soliloquy devotes four lines to a lament of how no other female animal lusts for another female (731–34), suggesting that Iphis sees herself as female.[42] However, if we return to our active/passive definitions, we will notice that Iphis *actively* desires Ianthe, as demonstrated by the linguistic representation of Iphis' desire for Ianthe. Iphis despairs of being unable to "enjoy" Ianthe (cf. 'frui' in 724) and her preoccupation with sex is evident in lines such as 722 ('sic et aves coeunt') in which she uses 'the verbal euphemism par excellence for copulation' and 761 which features the pervasive Roman metaphor of thirst for unfulfilled sexual desire.[43] Line 761 also features *contingo*, linked by Adams to *tango*, a verb usually used to refer to the male role in sex (although it should be noted that there is an attested use of *attingo* with a female subject).[44] Iphis' desire to be able to take the male role is clear in her lament that she cannot 'have' Ianthe (cf. the use of 'potiunda' at line 753). This use of *potior* is important as it emphasises the importance of men 'having' or 'possessing' women sexually in the Roman sexual system which perpetually leaves women as objects to be desired, had, and enjoyed by men and reaffirms Iphis' position as one who *actively* desires to take the active (male) sexual role. This presentation of Iphis as one who actively wants to take the male role in intercourse but despairs of the physiological impossibility of doing so suggests an FTM trans man as opposed to the pre-modern "lesbian" suggested by scholars such as Hallett.[45] Iphis also chastises herself to 'ama quod femina debes' (748, 'love as a woman should'), passively as opposed to actively, reinforcing the potential for reading Iphis as a trans man.[46] At the very least, Iphis is not a typically passive Roman female but a figure more reminiscent of Prometheus' accidental *tribas* from fable 4.16, a physiologically female body with an actively desiring "male mind".

There are moments in the depiction of Silence that show a similar echo of 4.16's *tribas*:[47] the seneschal who aids in Silence's upbringing takes Silence out into the heat of the woods to make Silence 'plus malle' (2474, 'more male'), clearly suggesting that Silence is already a male child.[48] However, the author never leaves us in suspense as to whether or not Silence is physiologically male, emphasising Silence's "lacking equipment" in multiple scenes, such as when Queen Eufeme attempts to seduce Silence and Heldris makes it clear that 'Il n'a poöir de li rien faire' (3869, 'he [Silence] couldn't do anything for her').[49] Heldris also outright states at 2480 that 'II est desos les dras mescine' ('he's a girl under the clothes'). Silence also provides a grammatical challenge for Heldris and for characters throughout the text. Silence's father Cador calls him 'fils' ('son') at 2455 and Silence is referred to as Cador's 'fil' seven times in lines 3616–34. Silence is referred to using male pronouns in this passage even as he claims 'N'ai que les dras, / Et Ie contenance et Ie halle / Ki onques apartiegne a malle' (3644–46, 'I have only the clothing, the countenance and the bearing that belong to a man').[50] The grammatical challenge posed by Silence is even present after Silence's body has been re-feminised by Nature (cf. 6671–76) as the king takes *him* as wife in 6677 ('Li rois *le* prist a feme').[51] Silence is often referred to as 'li vallés qui est mescine' (3785, 'the boy who is a girl') or some variation thereof (cf. 3704, 3763, 3871 and 3954), an epithet which foregrounds Silence's

masculinity even as it denies it. Descriptions such as these could characterise Silence as a genderqueer figure,[52] whose existence moves beyond the male/female binary but what do we know of Silence's sense of self? Silence outright states 'vallés sui et nient mescine' (2650, 'I am a boy and not a girl'), suggesting that Silence is a trans man. This has echoes of *Met*. 9.735 when Iphis wishes that she were no female ('vellem nulla forem'), suggestive of a trans longing for a body more suited to Iphis' active, masculine nature. We could therefore read Iphis as a pre-transition transgender man before he later transforms (transitions) with the help of Isis (in place of a medical team). How, then, should we read Silence? I argue that Silence is a trans man who has socially but not surgically transitioned, living life as the gender he feels most connected to.

The power of such transformations is key not only to the *Metamorphoses* and the *Roman de Silence* but also to much older sources. Transformations across Egyptian mythology bring increased power and Isis herself was subject to a transformation in the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*.[53] After being beheaded by her own son in a fit of pique, Isis is given a cow head by Thoth, allowing her to acquire the powers of the cow goddess Hathor.[54] It is therefore important to note that the Isis we see in the *Metamorphoses* is one post-transformation, when she has become associated with the image of the cow's crescent horns (an image which appears at 9.688–89 and 782–84). Most importantly, at the moment of her divine intervention in the temple, lights shoot forth from moon-shaped horns (783–84), tying Isis' power in this text to her post-transformation body and its bovine associations. Iphis' transformation brings power in the form of the social ability to marry Ianthe and the sexual ability to possess her. Ovid ends his myth with 'potiturque sua puer Iphis Ianthe' (797), clarifying that post-transformation, Iphis can "have" Ianthe as he expressed a wish to at line 753 and can now "enjoy" her as he wished to at 724.[55]

Silence, in contrast, effectively has two transformations: from AFAB infant to chevalier and then from chevalier to queen. The transformation through a masculine upbringing under Noreture's guidance leads to Silence being singlehandedly responsible for putting a stop to a rebellion against the French king while in his service (5636, 'Dont Silences a tolt le pris') after inspiring an entire battlefield with his exemplary conduct (cf. 5550–52), making him the best knight King Evan or Merlin have ever known (cf. 6581, 6543–44).[56] While it is obvious that the Queen of England would have more social power than a chevalier, no matter how exceptional he was, Heldris' text makes clear that Silence loses power when her 'nature' (6606) is revealed to the court. As a child, Silence's father did with her as he saw fit (6592) but once Silence became a teen and left the house in the woods, he was able to become not only an exceptional chevalier but also an exceptional minstrel, to the extent that no one could outdo him (cf. 3232). Silence's body and skills are honed through practice (cf. 3229–30) but no transformation beyond that is necessary for Silence to achieve excellence in whatever field *he chooses*. Silence's final transformation leads to a clear capitulation to the will of King Evan: 'Faites de moi vostre plaisir'.[57] Where masculinity equals independence, once Silence's "true feminine nature" is revealed, Silence once more becomes a thing for a man to do with as he will. The last we hear from Silence is her short praising of Evan's decision to allow women to inherit again in 6645–46. She says nothing as Nature re-feminises her body (6669–76) or as Evan takes Silence as his wife (6677). As Evan said earlier, in the medieval world, 'Sens de feme gist en taisir'.[58]

It should come as no surprise that a text all about Silence/silence is ultimately a text all about language and the power and potential thereof. However, the *Roman de Silence* is not the only text discussed in this chapter that recognises the central importance of language. The power of language is a key aspect of multiple Egyptian sources which may well have

influenced Ovid's presentation of Isis and is also key to the genre of fables (as Bettini's recent research has demonstrated).[59] The power of language is well-attested in the reception of Egyptian sources such as the Memphite Theology, both by contemporary and later audiences. The Memphite Theology, a creation narrative which explains how Ptah brought creatures into the world by 'devising them in his heart and naming them with his tongue', 'whether it was read aloud or inscribed on stone, was thought to have the power to influence reality for the better'.[60] The power of names is highlighted in myths such as *The Secret Name of Ra* in which Isis poisons the sun god and blackmails him into giving her the power that went with knowledge of his true name in exchange for the antidote.[61] Names and particularly the grammar thereof play a large role in both the *Metamorphoses* and *Silence*. The fact that the gender of Iphis is 'commune' (710, 'unisex') causes Telethusa to rejoice (709) as she can use the name without deceiving anyone (710, 'nec quemquam falleret illo'). Silence's Latin name is slightly more challenging: Silence is christened Scilensius (2074) with Cador stating that if the ruse is discovered, 'Nos muerons cest -us en -a, / S'avra a non Scilencia'.[62] As Akbari recognises, there is clearly a play on words with the Latin masculine suffix '-us' and the French 'us' ('usage'), reflecting the effect of nurture/Noreture on an individual.[63] Cador recognises that both the suffix and a masculine up bringing are 'contre nature' (2081, 'against nature') and that the natural ending for Silence's name would be '-a', like the third person singular present tense of *avoir* ('to have'). This 'a' represents what Silence *has*, a feminine 'nature' (2076). This is reflected in Silence's final transformation from chevalier to queen as masculine usage is removed and "natural" female identity restored.

The power of language is recognised not only with regards to names but has also been shown to be central to the genre of *fabulae* (fables) by recent work by Bettini, who examines the derivation of *fabula* from *fari*, a verb used by Jupiter in *Aeneid* 1 to reveal the fate of Aeneas that Jupiter will also set in motion (1.262, 'et volvens fatorum arcana movebo').[64] *Fari* in this case seems prophetic, corresponding directly to the realisation to the statement, "making real" the substance of the enunciation through the act of *fari*.[65] That spoken words can bring destiny to life calls to mind Austin's performative utterances, which when spoken under specific circumstances[66] do not simply describe or report an action but cause the action to be taken, ushering in a new reality. Both the *Metamorphoses* and *Roman de Silence* feature performative utterances relating to the gender of Iphis and Silence.[67] In a moment reminiscent of Isis naming the three children of the Westcar Papyrus, Iphis is told 'femina nuper eras, puer es!' (791, 'you who were once a girl, are now a boy!'). Here, Isis is not naming Iphis, but reworking the moment the doctor in the delivery room announces the sex of the baby which sets their gendered life in motion. Isis has now caused Iphis' physical body to match his active, masculine nature. King Evan is responsible for the performative utterance which transforms Silence into a social woman (with all the accompanying limitations) in line 6586: 'Nos veöns bien que tu iés feme'.[68] Thankfully the legacy of queer performative utterances is more positive than Silence's experience: coming out is its own kind of performative, a statement which changes reality as it is uttered. Once queer individuals are publicly recognised for what they are (as opposed to Silence who is recognised for what others want Silence to be), they are able to experience a new reality in which their truth, whatever it may be, is recognised. Queer self-affirmations are thus their own form of transformation, transforming reality itself without any need for physical changes, reinforcing the legitimacy of all coming out stories, regardless of the shape they take.

In conclusion, reception of Roman ideas about gender is rife within the *Roman de Silence*, taking Phaedrus, Ovid, Virgil (and earlier Isis-myths) as source material. *Silence* stands as a testament to the legacy of the power of transformation narratives and of the power of language

itself in the medieval period. Texts such as *Silence* offer an opportunity for trans/non-binary (or otherwise genderqueer) people to read their own history in the past and to prove that queer people are in no way a modern "phase", but a group with thousands of years of history. Whilst one might be tempted to conclude from the reestablishment of Silence's "natural" feminine position at the close of the text that Heldris demonstrates a rigid concept of gender wherein Noreture can never triumph over Nature, this chapter has demonstrated that nothing is quite as it seems in this text. Like Merlin who 'Alques priés de la verté fine, / Mais la parole est moult obscure /Car dite est par coverture' (6488–90, 'almost reveals the truth but the words' meanings are veiled in obscurity'), Heldris almost reveals the complex truth of gender, determined not by the physical body but by the individual, before obscuring it with the veil of "natural" medieval social order restored.

Notes

1 This translation is Sarah Roche-Mahdi's work: Heldris de Cornuälle, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance: Newly Edited and Translated with Introduction and Notes by Sarah Roche-Mahdi* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 79.
2 This thirteenth-century text focuses on Silence (child of Cador and Eufemie), a character born female but raised male in order to circumvent English inheritance law which forbids women from inheriting. Allegorical figures of Nature and Noreture (Nurture) each try to convince Silence to live life either "naturally" as a woman or as a man, matching the way Silence was raised. After attaining success as both a minstrel and a knight, Silence catches the eye of Queen Eufeme of England who tries and fails to seduce Silence. In an attempt to get revenge, Eufeme convinces her husband King Evan to send Silence on what she thinks is a wild goose chase: to capture Merlin, who prophesised that he can only be caught by a woman's trick (*engien de feme*). Silence succeeds and is then revealed by Merlin to be a woman before the entire court. Eufeme is exposed as a liar and an adulteress and sentenced to death, women's right to inherit is re-established, and King Evan takes Silence as his wife.
3 This is also true of Camilla: as 'bellatrix' (7.805, 'female warrior'), she is clearly atypical of Roman women both in Virgil's time and in his *Aeneid*.
4 Iphis is transformed into a "real man" and lives happily ever after with his wife Ianthe.
5 Iphis and Isis both undergo physical changes which bring power, though only one relates specifically to gender whereas the other relates to the physical body outside of gender identity.
6 See A. Corbeill, *Sexing the World: Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
7 Adams indicates that *patior* (a passive verb linked to at best enduring, if not outright suffering, sexual intercourse) was 'the technical term of the passive role in intercourse'. J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 179. For verbs evocative of men "taking pleasure" (e.g. *fruor*) see Adams, *Sexual Vocabulary*, 197–98.
8 Cf. D. Kamen and S. Levin-Richardson, "Lusty Ladies in the Roman Imaginary," in *Ancient Sex: New Essays*, eds. R. Blondell and K. Ormand (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), 231–52.
9 Tribadism, from the Ancient Greek '*τρίβω*' ('to rub'), corresponded to the Roman idea of a woman who usurped the active, masculine role in intercourse with another woman. Martial 7.67.1–3 depicts *tribas Philaenis* as penetrating both boys and girls, in a parody of the active, virile Roman male. The verb used, *pedicare*, is commonly used for penetration of another male, though it can also be used of penetrating a woman, cf. Adams, "Latin Sexual Vocabulary," 123–25. This genders Philaenis' behaviour as male whilst the use of *tribas* emphasises that Philaenis is not a "true man". For an analysis of the activity of *tribades*, see Kamen and Levin-Richardson, "Lusty Ladies," 244. A *mollis* man (often also called a *cinaedus*) is an effeminate man, assumed to enjoy the female sexual role: being passive and penetrated. For an in-depth discussion of the *molles* man/*cinaedus*, see A. Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law Against Love Between Men," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (1993): 523–73.
10 For a brief discussion of these approaches, see K. Mann, "Reading Gender in Phaedrus' *Fabulae*," *The Classical Journal* 115, no. 2 (2019): 213–15.

11 In order to justify a small number of people being born to higher stations than others, some medieval authors (such as the author of *Guillaume d'Angleterre*) attempted to explain that nobles were born inherently suited to their lofty positions and possessed of innate moral qualities, meaning their social stations were predetermined by nature or, in this case, Nature. For more on this concept, see S. Gaunt, "The Significance of Silence," *Paragraph* 13, no. 2 (1990): 204.
12 1833–34, 'De cel delié si fait sans falle / Les buens, et del gros la frapalle'.
13 Indeed it is the preparation and provision of food by Silence which acts as the 'engien de feme' (6179, 'woman's trick') that leads to Merlin's capture, demonstrating a clear association in the text between women and the culinary sphere. For a discussion of how Nature as baker can map on to author as mother/gestator of text, see S. C. Akbari, "Nature's Forge Recast in the *Roman de Silence*," in *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture*, eds. D. Maddox and S. Sturm-Maddox (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 39–46.
14 Also, given the exceedingly small amount that we know about the person who called himself Heldris de Cornuälle (cf. de Cornuälle, *Silence*, xi.), there is effectively no direct evidence about his influences or his life.
15 Jewers sees echoes of Ovid in the 'Ovidian-inspired shrewishness' of characters such as Eufeme (C. Jewers, "The Non-Existent Knight: Adventure in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana, Le Roman de Silence* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 104.). Watt directly likens Yde of *La Chanson d'Yde et Olive* to Silence in her article comparing Iphis and Yde (D. Watt, "Behaving Like a Man? Incest, Lesbian Desire, and Gender Play in Yde et Olive and Its Adaptations," *Comparative Literature* 50, no. 4 (1998): 266.) and also recognises the similarities between Iphis' and Silence's upbringings (Watt, "Behaving Like a Man," 275), although her article does not focus significantly on the *Roman de Silence*. For a more comprehensive discussion of the parallels between Iphis and Yde, see N. V. Durling, "Rewriting Gender: *Yde et Olive* and Ovidian Myth," *Romance Languages Annual* 1 (1989): 256–62.
16 de Cornuälle, *Silence*, xiii.
17 Ibid.
18 All Latin and Old French translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
19 Adams, *Sexual Vocabulary*, 145.
20 A similar play with "on top" socially and sexually is made in *Silence*, cf. 2639–44.
21 Akbari, "Nature's Forge," 44. I would add that it is also worth recognising that the feminine gender of *silva* means that wildness, chaos, and a lack of civility are associated with the feminine.
22 This is likely due to the cost of a dowry (cf. 9.676–77).
23 'Metrai plus de bialté ensanble / Que n'aient ore.m. de celes / Qui en cest monde sont plus beles.'
24 Unsurprisingly, the text makes great use of the pluripotentiality of *feme*, which can mean both 'woman' and 'wife'. Silence's transformation, as we will see later, makes her both, reducing Silence's existence to her relationship to her husband.
25 Corbeill, *Sexing the World*, 7.
26 For a more in-depth discussion of these proverb collections, see Akbari, "Nature's Forge," 41. See also Gaunt, "Significance of Silence," 204.
27 Akbari, "Nature's Forge," 41.
28 For analysis of the potential connections between Nature in *Silence* and Natura in Alanus de Ilanus' *De planctu Naturae*, see R. H. Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The Roman de Silence and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies*, no. 70 (1986): 83–88.
29 R. Armstrong, *Cretan Women: Pasiphae, Ariadne, and Phaedra in Latin Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.
30 It should be noted, as Pinch does, that while Plutarch probably did visit Egypt during the first century CE, sources such as these 'gave rise to the habit of perceiving Egypt through Greek or Roman eyes'. G. Pinch, *Egyptian Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.
31 Cf. J. C. McKeown, *Ovid, Amores: V.3. A Commentary on Book Two* (Liverpool: F. Cairns, 1987), 41.
32 In the Westcar Papyrus (from the Middle Kingdom), Isis calls out the names of three children as they are born, suggesting omniscience or at least precognitive abilities. If Isis can know the names of three children before their parents have named them, is Iphis not simply another child whose future Isis knows? While Isis knew the true names of the three Westcar Papyrus children, perhaps it is the true nature of Iphis that Isis knows here.
33 Although, as will be discussed later, the one physical attribute (and arguably the most "inherently masculine" one) never explicitly mentioned is the penis, the one part of Osiris that Isis could not find and had to fashion herself, cf. *Moralia* 358.18.B.

34 J. C. McKeown, *Ovid, Amores: V.2. A Commentary on Book One* (Liverpool: F. Cairns, 1987), 240.
35 'I am the goddess who brings aid and assistance to those who call upon me.'
36 While 'de malle' here refers simply to the traces of the masculine that Nature is removing from Silence's body, the use of something so phonetically similar to 'mal' (as in bad, or evil) in combination with 'repolir' evokes the idea of removing stains or blemishes.
37 6664–68, 'They dressed Silence as a woman. Lords, what more can I say? Once he had the name Silentius: the -us was removed, an -a was added, and so she was called Silentia'. There is no pronoun to indicate whether Heldris intended there to be a grammatical or linguistic shift and I have chosen to move from 'he' to 'she' to reflect the change in the Latin and also to reflect the tone of the original which seems to suggest Silence's transformation was the simple process of acquiring a new outfit and changing a Latin suffix.
38 6586, 'We can clearly see that you are a woman'.
39 6543–44, 'I don't know any man, no matter how strong, who could have conquered him in combat'.
40 Iphis is able to "pass" completely as a typical Roman *puer* (boy) and no mention is made of Iphis gaining a penis in the moment of transformation. In Nicander's earlier myth of Leucippus (which was likely Ovid's source material for the Iphis myth), specific mention is made of Leucippus (the character who corresponds to Iphis) developing male genitalia. For an in-depth discussion of these differences, see K. Ormand, "Impossible Lesbians in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," in *Gendered Dynamics in Latin Love Poetry*, eds. R. Ancona and E. Greene (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 99–100. The lack of overt mention of genitalia might surprise a reader familiar with Plutarch's depiction of Isis fashioning a replacement penis for Osiris as that was the only dismembered body part she could not find when restoring her husband's body (*Moralia* 358.18.B). Such readers would be familiar with Isis as a goddess with experience of creating penises to "complete" a male body.
41 J. P. Hallett, "Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature," in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. J. P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 255–73.
42 This is also suggested grammatically by Ovid who states 'ardetque in virgine virgo' (725, 'a girl burning with love for another girl'), gendering Iphis linguistically as female.
43 Adams, *Sexual Vocabulary*, 179. See also Adams, *Sexual Vocabulary*, 197–98 for discussion of *fruor* as "taking pleasure from/enjoying" women.
44 Adams, *Sexual Vocabulary*, 186.
45 It should be noted that Hallett specifically discusses Iphis as a *tribas* or one who experiences 'revulsion' at her own 'female homoerotic passion'. See Hallett, "Female Homoeroticism," 263.
46 For an excellent and far more in-depth discussion of Iphis as a trans man, see J. L. Watson, "Reframing Iphis and Caeneus: Trans Narratives and Socio-Linguistic Gendering in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *Helios* 48, no. 2 (2021): 67–96.
47 I do not mean to imply that Silence has sexual interest in women, merely that despite a physically female body, Silence shows signs of a similar "inner masculinity".
48 It is also interesting to see the woods being used as a masculinising environment, given the association of *silva* with feminine wildness and uncivility.
49 Literally this line states that he did not have the power to do anything for her; however *pooir* also has the meaning of 'partie charnue' (literally 'fleshy' or 'body' part). Cf. F. E. Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IX^e^ au XV^e^ siècles* (Paris: Vieweg, 1880–1902), 277. Clearly, the only body part that would grant Silence the power to give Eufeme what she wants is the penis, making Silence physiologically female.
50 Heldris seems to be stuck in a tense cycle where he recognises Silence as Cador's son, refers to him with masculine pronouns but must then reassure his medieval audience that Silence is not *really* a man. The form of this reassurance itself raises questions relating to gender identity: if Silence dresses like a man, looks like a man, and behaves like a man then is it purely the lack of male genitalia that prevents Silence from being a "real man"? If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and talks like a duck then it's a woman?
51 My emphasis to demonstrate the use of the masculine pronoun.
52 Interestingly, the French King refers to Silence with the gender-neutral term 'creäture' ('creature') in line 4399 while struck by Silence's beauty (cf. 4399–400).
53 The intact eye of Horus could heal the living, bestow kingship, and make the dead whole again while the intact body of Osiris, made complete by Isis, had the power to make the Nile rise and crops grow, cf. Pinch, *Egyptian myth*, 97.

54 Pinch, *Egyptian myth*, 97.
55 For a discussion of *fruor* as taking pleasure and other similar verbs for men sexually taking women, see Adams, *Sexual Vocabulary*, 197–98.
56 The sheer scale of Silence's accomplishments in the masculine chivalric sphere not only undermine the supposed "natural" basis for patriarchal power structures where the active, "stronger" men take care of the "weaker", passive women, but reveal that a physical transformation into a "true man" with a physiologically male body is as unnecessary as medical transitions are for some trans people to live a completely fulfilling life.
57 6628, 'Do with me what you want'. (Although the line literally reads 'make of me your pleasure', suggesting that Silence has accepted that she will never again be socially or sexually "on top", cf. 2639–44).
58 6397, 'A woman's role is to be silent'.
59 This is relevant not only for Phaedrus' fables but also for the *Metamorphoses* which is akin to a series of multiple *fabulae* or myths woven into a larger epic narrative.
60 Pinch, *Egyptian myth*, 49; 51. This deliberate (linguistic) method of creation has led to comparisons between the Theology and the start of St John's Gospel: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Cf. Pinch, *Egyptian myth*, 51.
61 See Pinch, *Egyptian myth*, 106.
62 2077–78, 'We will change the -us to an -a and she will be called Silentia'. It is also worth noting that Silence's Latin name is only used at the beginning of the text, when the AFAB infant Silence gains a masculine social identity, and at the end of the text when this masculine identity is stripped away. The use of Latin grammatical endings is thus presented as being an important part of establishing gendered identity and both *Silence* and the *Metamorphoses* show a preoccupation with grammatical linguistic accuracy in terms of names. Reception in *Silence* goes beyond the reception of linguistic ideas about the link between grammatical gender and individual gender to demonstrate reception of the grammar of the Latin language itself: Heldris takes a simple discussion of grammatical suffixes one step further by layering French word play over the top. -Us becomes the French *us* or *usage* and *a* becomes that which Silence *a* (has), *sa nature*.
63 See Akbari, "Nature's Forge," 42.
64 See M. Bettini, "*Mythos/Fabula*: Authoritative and Discredited Speech," *History of Religions* 45, no. 3 (2006): 201.
65 Ibid.
66 Austin claims that there must be an accepted conventional procedure having a certain effect which includes the uttering of words by certain people in certain circumstances and that the persons and circumstances must be appropriate for the particular procedure. For more on these, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 14–15. The procedure echoed in these textual performative utterances is the announcement of the sex of a child at birth which begins their gendered existence. As we will see, rather than a doctor's authority, these textual performatives are spoken with the authority of a goddess and a King (note also that medieval kings were considered to have been chosen by God, lending them His divine authority). While announcements of the sex of children are typically immediately post-birth, an argument can be made that normal rules need not apply to situations influenced and conditions enacted by goddesses and divine kings.
67 This is despite the fact that (to the best of my knowledge) the only performative utterance in *Silence* identified by scholars is King Evan's edict that prohibited female children inheriting (313–16). Cf. Waters, "Third Path," 39.
68 'We see very well that you are a woman.'

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