

**From Heldris de Cornwall's *Le Roman de Silence*
to Gian Francesco Straparola's *Le Piacevoli Notti*.
New Insights into a Significant Reception Process
Across Centuries, Languages, and Genres**

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Although we assume that the thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman romance Roman de Silence by Heldris de Cornwall experienced no reception at all apart from one manuscript containing the text, there is a considerable likelihood that the sixteenth-century Venetian author Gian Francesco Straparola somehow gained access to the medieval text and adapted it for one of the stories contained in his famous collection, Le Piacevoli Notti (1550 and 1553). Even though we cannot yet determine the exact process of reception, the strong similarities between both works go far beyond global archetypal themes. Straparola's work hence demonstrates that Heldris's work was known even long after the thirteenth century, or was simply rediscovered in the sixteenth century and put to good use in literary terms.

Introduction

It is not that long ago that *Le Roman de Silence* by the thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman poet Heldris de Cornwall (or de Cornuâlle) was still completely unknown to modern French medievalists and other scholars. Neither the author's name nor the title of his romance figured in any of the standard literary histories, whether focused on French literature or on world literature at large.¹ The manuscript of this Anglo-Norman verse narrative was re-discovered not until 1911 by W. H. Stevenson in Wollaton Hall in Nottingham, in a crate erroneously labeled "unimportant documents," obviously in full disregard of the actual literary quality hidden in it. The manuscript, now in the Wollaton Library Collection (WLC/LM/6), held by the Manuscripts and Special Collections of the University

¹ There is, for example, no reference to Heldris in the famous *Kindlers Neues Literatur Lexikon*; in *Dictionnaire universel des littératures*, ed. Beatrice Didier. 3 vols; in *De la littérature française*, ed. Denis Hollier, or in many other relevant literary histories. By contrast, recent online encyclopedias now include respectable entries on Heldris and his romance.

of Nottingham, contains, apart from Heldris's work, *Le roman de Troie*, *Ille et Galeron*, *Le roman d'Alixandre* (at least 4000 verses of the complete text), *La chanson d'Aspremont*, most of *La Vengeance Raguidel*, four anonymous fabliaux, six fabliaux by Gautier li Leus, and *Li dis Raoul de Hosdaing*. So, altogether, here we face a quite respectable selection of significant texts of major importance for medieval French literature, and the *Roman de Silence* constitutes an important addition.²

Despite early efforts by scholars such as Heinrich Gelzer (1927),³ and then by Lewis Thorpe who edited the text for the first time in a serial fashion in the *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* from 1961 to 1967, and then, in book form, in 1972,⁴ it took still quite some time to realize the enormous literary potentials and meaning of *Le Roman de Silence*. But since then, there has been an explosion of new interpretive efforts with this text, resulting in further editions and translations, and also numerous critical studies.⁵

In other words, although Heldris's romance has survived in only one thirteenth-century manuscript, recent research has amply documented and illustrated its great value as a literary work where such major issues of gender identity and the conflict or tension between nature and nurture are explored in depth.⁶ The poet signaled,

2 See the introduction to Heldris de Cornuâlle, *Le Roman de Silence*, trans. Regina Psaki, XII–XIII. Cf. also the introduction and notes by Sarah Roche-Mahdi in her critical edition, *Silence*.

3 Heinrich Gelzer, "Der Silenceroman von Heldris de Cornualle."

4 Michèle Perret, "Travesties et transsexuelles." For a criticism of Thorpe's 1972 edition, see Sarah Roche-Mahdi, newly ed. and trans. with intro. and notes, *Silence*, xxiii–xxiv; I will quote from this edition below. See also Inci Bozkaya, "Illuminiertes Schweigen." For a useful pedagogically developed webpage on the *Roman de Silence*, see Debora B. Schwartz, "Gender-Bending."

5 See W. H. Stevenson, *Report on the Manuscripts of Lord Middleton*; Lewis Thorpe, *Le Roman de Silence*; the complete work was then published as *Le Roman de Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse-Romance by Heldris de Cornuâlle*, ed. Lewis Thorpe.

6 Roberta L. Krueger, "Questions of Gender in Old French Courtly Romance"; Katherine Terrell, "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*"; Heather Tanner, "Lords, Wives and Vassals in the *Roman de Silence*"; Emma Campbell, "Translating Gender in Thirteenth-Century French Cross-Dressing Narratives"; Masha Raskolnikov, "Without Magic or Miracle: The Romance of Silence and the Prehistory of Genderqueerness."

for instance, that women could perform as major minstrels as well, although in the present context only in the disguise of a man. And the entire romance is really predicated on the presence of numerous secrets, that is, not only the secret of Silence's true identity but also the secrets which Merlin at the end knows how to reveal, which unravels the entire structure of pretenses both by the queen and by Silence herself.⁷

Studying the *Roman de Silence* thus continues to promise to yield significant insights into fundamental issues of late medieval literature, especially regarding the gender relationship, that is, above all, male perspectives on women and their public performance. Moreover, the author presents very contrastive female figures and questions, so it seems, the traditionally binary concept about women held by patriarchal society.

Cross-Dressing in Medieval Literature

Heldris's work is not the only one in medieval literature where cross-dressing takes place, but here the poet certainly goes beyond the standard playfulness of this strategy because the public switching of the gender roles assumes a significant political and economic function existentially determining the future of a noble family and their only daughter. In other literary examples with this strategy at play, cross-dressing serves primarily to safeguard a marriage or to secure a love relationship. We could, for instance, refer to verse narratives such as Dietrich von der Gletze's *Diu Borte*, the anonymous *Aucassin et Nicolette*, and to the quasi-autobiographical romance *Frauendienst* by Ulrich von Liechtenstein where the switching of gender roles matters significantly (all, thirteenth century). Cross-dressing also took place many times in hagiography and martyrology – see the famous figure of Marina the Monk (d. 508) – but then for rather different purposes and intentions – and happened also on the theater stage.⁸

7 Classen, *The Secret in Medieval Literature*, ch. 4.

8 Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*; Hotchkiss, *Clothes make the man*; Clark and Sponsler, "Queer Play"; see also the contributions to *Gender Blending: Transvestism*.

Reception History of Medieval Literature: Manuscripts

One of the mystifying questions regarding Heldris's romance pertains to the fact that it has survived in only one manuscript. We cannot say at all whether there were later copies, whether other poets picked up that material and transmitted it orally, or whether the topic and theme of this text displeased the contemporary audience so profoundly that it was soon forgotten and ignored. No other poet ever referred to Heldris or to *Silence*, as far as we can currently say, and there are, at least to my knowledge, no traces of this romance in other works from the late Middle Ages and the early modern time. A new discovery to be presented here, however, could suggest that we might be simply victims of wrong perceptions regarding the true success of literary works from the Middle Ages, hence of this *Roman de Silence* as well, and that we would have to approach this phenomenon with much greater care and sensitivity, never ignoring the great possibility of oral transmission, for example, or the preservation of an individual text within another context, adapted for a variety of purposes.

A major example illustrating the complexity of this issue would be the Old High German "Hildebrandslied," copied down only once in a Fulda manuscript sometime during the 820s, but a considerably transformed adaptation, the "Jüngere Hildebrandslied," appeared in 1472 in Kaspar von Röhn's song collection, in the so-called *Dresdner Heldenbuch*.⁹ Despite a number of references to the hero Hildebrand in various heroic epics, the jump over more than 600 years can only be explained through a reference to a variety of vocal transmissions.

At any rate, the greatest number of medieval manuscripts – literary, liturgical, legal, chronicle, medical, and other texts – was lost or deliberately destroyed in the subsequent centuries, and many times we today can only guess the actual reception history of an individual work, relying, for instance, on comments by later poets or on the visual representation of a specific romance (tapestry, wall frescoes, ivory caskets, tile works, etc.).¹⁰ In the case of the *Roman*

⁹ Rosenfeld, "Kaspar von der Rhön"; Classen, "The *Jüngeres Hildebrandslied* in Its Early Modern Printed Versions."

¹⁰ As to the reception of the *Tristan* material, for instance, see Stephany Cain Van d'Elden, *Tristan and Isolde*.

de Silence, however, it still seems as if the work did not find any approval among the public and quickly disappeared again, maybe because the theme of cross-dressing was too provocative, disturbing or even abhorrent.¹¹ To be sure, later poets did not refer to this work; there are no extra-literary reflections, and no other manuscript copy has ever surfaced. Would we thus have to admit that the *Roman de Silence* had been doomed to death already in the thirteenth century? The anonymous author of an online article on this text in the French version of *Wikipedia*, reiterating what many other scholars have already observed, simply states: “Le roman n'a jamais été copié au Moyen Age, et a donc eu peu d'influence.”¹²

Gender Identity in Medieval Literature

There could be many different factors and reasons why Heldris failed to appeal to his audience, whereas modern research has responded with great enthusiasm to this text, recognizing its considerable potentiality as a literary reflection of many significant topics and themes. After all, the female protagonist, operating most of the time as a male, triumphing regularly over all of her opponents or competitors, basically ridicules the entire class of knights through her display of bravery and skill in tournaments and military conflicts. Silence succeeds in defeating all of her enemies and can repeatedly rescue the king from dangerous situations.¹³ Male gender identity apparently meant little when the opposite was experimented with, so the masking of Silence actually unmasks the pretenses of medieval courtly literature. However, there is no indication anywhere that Silence cross-dresses for erotic reasons; instead, it proves to be a

11 Bozkaya, “Illuminiertes Schweigen.”

12 https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Roman_de_Silence (last accessed on July 26, 2022). Of course, there is still no agreement whether we can rely on such an open-access encyclopedia, and this article is certainly not a stellar contribution, apart from providing a plot summary and a good bibliography. For students, this is certainly a useful tool, but the danger is, of course, that they then will not read the original text.

13 Perret, “Travesties et transsexuelles”; Lloyd, “The Triumph of Pragmatism: Reward and Punishment in the *Roman de Silence*”; Allen, “The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing and *Le Roman de Silence*”; Gaunt, “The Significance of Silence”; White, “Women and Their Fathers in Three French Medieval Literary Works”; Burr, “A Question of Honor: Eufeme’s Transgressions in *Le Roman De Silence*.”

simple necessity for economic and political reasons and has nothing to do with her gender identity, as much as the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture debate the development with Silence throughout the romance. For instance, at the very end, when Merlin is about to reveal her true gender identity, Silence reflects with deep regret, “‘Dolans,’ fait il, ‘por que amenai / Merlin? com mar I assenai! . . . Don’t g’iere tols desiretez” (6442–47; “‘What a fool I was,’ he said, ‘why did I bring / Merlin here? What a catastrophe! . . . so that I will be disinherited”).

Moreover, Heldris addressed many critical issues of his time and might thus have irked his patrons too much. Those are, for instance, the political structure under an unreliable and untrustworthy king who arbitrarily sets up his rules regarding inheritance rights, banning women entirely from succeeding their fathers among the aristocratic class; the common problem with betrayal, disloyalty, and cheating; and finally, the horrible role which the queen plays, undermining the ethical and moral principles at court despite her exposed position. All of those issues, addressed within a courtly romance, could have easily turned the audience away from this text. The other examples of literary cross-dressing mentioned above did also not experience any significant success, although we regard them today with considerable respect and great interest particularly concerning the playful treatment of the gender roles.¹⁴ But even there, the cross-dressing never reveals any particular interest in gender-bending and cannot be associated with unusual erotic desires.

Survival of Medieval Texts

Considering the general situation with medieval texts and their fairly slim survival success,¹⁵ it does not come as a complete surprise that *Le Romance de Silence* exists only in one manuscript.

¹⁴ Labbie, “The Specular Image of the Gender-Neutral Name;” Jurney, “Secret Identities”; Terrell, “Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*.”

¹⁵ Recent calculations have revealed that a huge percentage of medieval literature, in Latin or in the various vernaculars, has simply been lost for us today. Cf. Haye, *Verlorenes Mittelalter*; see also Becht-Jürgens, “Die verlorene Handschrift.”

Nevertheless, this very poor evidence does not necessarily carry all that much weight because we just do not know enough about the actual reception on the ground, so to speak.

Several scenarios deserve to be imagined and explored to cast more light on this curious phenomenon. First, a specific text indeed might not have appealed to the audience and was hence not copied again by other scribes – the patrons then simply denied its further dissemination. After all, vellum or parchment was very expensive, and only special texts were deemed worthy enough to be recorded for posterity. Second, due to a massive loss of manuscripts as a result of external circumstances (fire, water damage, book worms, the consequences of war, deliberate destruction, etc.), a specific work might have disappeared from our view even though it might have enjoyed a noteworthy popularity at its time. Third, a literary work might not have been copied again after its first recording in a manuscript because it was quickly translated into an oral version, which might have been considered sufficient for the further transmission. Fourth, a romance might not have found many enthusiasts at its time but was later picked up again and then even copied down in a manuscript, possibly for historical reasons.

The last option is best illustrated by the so-called *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, copied down by the Innsbruck toll keeper Hans Ried on behalf of his patron, Emperor Maximilian I, between ca. 1504 and 1516 (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Ser. nova 2663). It consists of a large number of heroic epic poems, courtly romances, short verse narratives, and also a travelogue about Prester John in India – the term “Heldenbuch” hence means surprisingly little, being undermined by many of the included texts that belong to a really different genre.¹⁶ Some of the texts contained here have survived in no other medieval manuscript, but we do not know for sure whether the emperor just aimed at having available an idiosyncratic and

16 Kaiser Maximilian I. und das Ambraser Heldenbuch; for a complete facsimile with transcription and critical editions of the individual texts, see now the amazing online edition along with a transcription and the texts of the critical editions: *Ambraser Heldenbuch: Gesamttranskription mit Manuskriptbild*, ed. Mario Klarer. 11 Vols.

representative collection of high medieval poems for his own self-glorification as the ‘last knight,’ as he enjoyed presenting himself, or whether he pursued personal interests.¹⁷

Hartmann von Aue’s *Diu Klage*, for instance, is preserved only in this manuscript, although the poet had extensive success with his other works.¹⁸ Other major pieces that are contained in this early sixteenth-century manuscript and that date from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, for instance, are the anonymous “Mauritius von Craûn” and *Kudrun*.¹⁹ But the quantity of manuscript copies is not a reliable figure for us today to determine the specific literary quality of a medieval or early modern work.²⁰

From the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Century

In light of these observations, we are encouraged to question once again whether the *Roman de Silence* really did not meet much or any approval at its time or in subsequent centuries. The only available manuscript seems to indicate that this was, indeed, the case. However, completely unknown to French medieval scholarship, Heldris’s work appears to have attracted the attention by the sixteenth-century Venetian author Gian Francesco Straparola who included an almost perfect one-to-one translation of the Anglo-Norman/French romance into his Italian collection of prose tales, the *Piacevoli notti*. The first volume appeared in print in 1550, the second in 1553, and soon thereafter this anthology enjoyed a long-term and expansive popularity, far into the early nineteenth century, and was also translated into various European languages. Numerous further translations and new editions have appeared since then, documenting the enormous appeal of this significant collection

17 Müller, *Gedechnus*.

18 Hartmann von Aue, *Die Klage*.

19 *Kudrun. Mittelhochdeutsch / Neuhochdeutsch*.

20 Classen, “The Survival of Medieval Literature.” There I highlight the wider range of medieval sources used by Straparola, as Heldris’s romance proves to be only one of many in that context. In other words, further research will certainly recognize the great value of Straparola’s *Piacevoli notti* as a insightful ‘quarry’ of medieval sources.

throughout time and across many languages.²¹ In many ways, we might identify it as a major literary bridge between the Middle Ages and the modern age, with many different motives and themes in the various tales which the author had recovered from medieval sources but adapted to the stylistic and material taste of sixteenth-century Venetian society.

Heldris de Cornwall

One of the major themes in the late medieval French work by Heldris de Cornouaille is ultimately based on the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife who tries to seduce him to sleep with her (*Genesis 39:5–20*). Since he refuses out of his sense of loyalty and deference to his lord, Potiphar, she turns the argument around and charges him for having tried to rape her. This is exactly the same situation also in the late twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *lai*, “*Lanval*,” by Marie de France. Strikingly, we observe very similar cases both in the Old French *Roman de Silence* and in Straparola’s story (IV.1) in his collection, which might be coincidental, but which quickly proves to be intriguing evidence that the latter relied heavily on a source unknown to Italian Renaissance scholarship, Heldris’s work, either in the original or in a later version, perhaps already translated into Italian.²²

21 Straparola, *The Pleasant Nights*, ed. and trans. by Suzanne Magnanini; id., *Le Piacevoli Notti*, ed. Giuseppe Rua, 2 vols. Cf. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Godfather: Straparola; Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition*; Mazzacurati, “La narrativa di G. E. Straparola e l’ideologia del fiabesco”; Pirovando, “Nota biografica”; Rubini, “Straparola; Jan Ziolkowski, “Straparola and the Fairy Tale”; Zipes, *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*.

22 Tiemann, *Josef und die Frau Potifars im populärkulturellen*; Yohannan, *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife in World Literature*; Merzetti, *I volti della moglie di Putifarre nella letteratura francese*; most recently, Wouters, “Revisiting Potiphar’s Wife: A European Perspective on a Character in Early Modern Drama”; and Vine’s, “The Many Wives of Potiphar: Rape Culture in Medieval Romance.” She argues, in a rather extremist fashion, that in most literary cases of rape the actions of the male perpetrators are identified as acceptable. I am afraid, however, that she ignores much of the relevant narrative context and seems to follow, in an anachronistic fashion, the current battle-cry of the ‘Me-Too’ movement and thus subscribes to a slippery concept of the *histoire larmoyante*. As bad as the situation of women was in the Middle Ages regarding the danger of rape, we cannot ignore the many specific legal protections they enjoyed to fight against their perpetrators. And we can also not forget that many male (!) authors specifically condemned rape in very explicit terms (e.g., Wolfram von Eschenbach in his *Parzival*; here not consulted). Even the long narrative tradition of “Potiphar’s Wife” confirms this observation, against Vines’ claim.

Gian Francesco Straparola

Let us first get a better idea about Straparola and his *Piacevoli notti*, a major collection of entertaining and didactic narratives, first published in one volume in 1550, and then in 1553 in two volumes. We know almost nothing in biographical terms about the poet who only mentions in the title pages of his *Canzoniere* – a collection of sonnets and satirical songs – and the *Piacevoli notti* that he originated from Caravaggio, ca. 29 miles east of Milan, but there are numerous linguistic references in his work to confirm that he must have lived a long time until his death in Venice. The fact that he uses the Paduan dialect in one of his tales, refers to numerous locations in and around Padua, and calls that city a site of great learnedness, strongly suggests that he must have studied there, a little outside of Venice to the west.²³

Similar to his many predecessors within this genre, Straparola drew extensively from earlier sources, such as Girolamo Morlini's *Novellae, fabulae, comoedia*, which had appeared in Naples in 1520,²⁴ but he was also familiar with classical literature, with the tradition of the triumvirate of early Renaissance literature, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, and he culled much material from the anonymous *Gesta Romanorum*. Specific comparative analysis, however, has not yet been carried out. Here I will offer another valuable source that appears to have been available to Straparola through various possible channels and translations, that is, Heldris's *Roman de Silence*.²⁵ Defending himself against charges of plagiarism, however, the poet admitted in a seemingly open fashion in the prologue to the second volume that the stories were not his own creation, but those by the ladies or gentlemen who serve as storytellers, similarly as in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and later in Marguerite de Navarre's

23 Straparola, *Ergötzliche Nächte*, German trans. by Hanns Floerke.

24 Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, ed. and trans. Giovanni Villani.

25 Bottigheimer, *Fairy Godfather*, 82-87.

Heptaméron: “I have written them down quite faithfully according to the way they were recounted by ten young maidens at that gathering” (257). This is simply an expansion of what he had already indicated in the prologue to the first volume: “he did not write them as he wished to, but as he heard them from those women who recounted them, neither adding nor subtracting a thing” (45).

The *Piacevoli notti* proved to be a great success in the early modern book market. New editions appeared, for instance, in 1555, 1558, 1560, 1573, 1580, 1584, 1586, 1597, 1599, 1604, 1608, 1612, 1650, etc., a French translation in 1560, 1585, 1596, 1601, 1611, 1726, a Latin in 1634 (selection), an English translation in 1609 and 1729 (via a translation of one of Perrault’s fairy tales), a German translation in 1791 and 1799, and so forth.²⁶ As scholars have regularly emphasized, Straparola can be counted among the first inventors of fairy tales, as reflected especially in his second volume, which hence also explains the enormous range of modern translations of his collection of tales/fairy tales. The first story told in the eleventh night, for instance, became the basis for the famous “Il gatto con gli stivali” or “Der gestiefelte Kater” or “Puss in Boots.” The original source of this story can be found in the *Panchatantra*, first printed in Italian translation in 1540, but Straparola gave it the form through which it later influenced deeply famous authors of fairy tales such as Charles Perrault (1628–1703) with his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697), Ludwig Tieck (1797), and the Brothers Grimm (1812), and then the world of movies, dance, and music until the present.²⁷

One of the stories deserves our particular attention because it might have been based on the *Roman de Silence* or a later variant unknown to us today. For the purpose of the subsequent comparative analysis

26 I have culled those dates from a search in WorldCat and Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog, and the list is certainly not even close to be exhaustive; see also Pirovano, “Per l’edizione de *Le Piacevoli notti* di Giovan Francesco Straparola.”

27 For a good listing taking us from Tieck’s version in 1797 up to modern times, including movies, screenplays, mangas, novels, comic books, and video games, see online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adaptations_of_Puss_in_Boots (last accessed on July 25, 2022). Here we come across a good example that individual articles in this online encyclopedia can be of a high scholarly caliber.

and in light of the fact that Straparola's version might not be known much at all among current scholarship outside of Italian Studies or Folklore Studies (fairy tales), we need at first a brief plot summary with critical comments.

The Cross-Dressing Lady

In the first narrative told by the lady Fiordiana in the fourth evening, we hear about a king of Thebes in Egypt, Ricardo, who marries the noble lady Valeriana, the daughter of the king of Scotland, Marliano. The two have three worthy and beautiful daughters whom the parents later marry off splendidly to mighty rulers, handing over to them great dowries, whereas the couple keeps rather little for themselves. Years later, however, Ricardo's wife becomes pregnant again and delivers yet another daughter who is called Costanza.

Already in her young years, she learns quickly everything her teachers instruct her in both embroidery and singing, in playing music, dancing, and the like, probably quite typical for a female student. Moreover, Costanza dedicates herself to the intensive study of literature and then even to the "art of war, taming horses, wielding weapons, and jousting" (174), often defeating her male opponents as if she were a tom-boy. This proves to be already the first clue as to the direct relationship between this Italian story and the *Roman de Silence* because this young woman can take on the characteristics of either gender depending on the circumstances.

When the time has come for Costanza to get married, however, the parents are worried because they do not have enough property left to give their daughter a worthy dowry, but they hope that she would accept as a husband a worthy and noble man, irrespective of his social rank within the aristocracy. The young woman quickly decides to refuse this offer, insisting to her father that she would never marry anyone who would not fit her social status and that of her family. Thereupon she leaves the court, changes her name to Costanzo, and obviously cross-dresses so as not to be recognized as a woman. When she reaches the city Costanza, ruled by Cacco, king of Bettinia, she is immediately invited in by the king to join his service.

Again, as in the biblical account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, Cacco's wife then falls in love with this young 'man' and begins to woo him. However, Costanzo refuses, just as Joseph or later Lanval did, and the subsequent development then follows the same basic concept with only minor deviations from the source narratives, whatever they might have been. To be sure, the female protagonist emerges as triumphant, able to resist all seduction attempts, defeating the queen and proving her own character qualities.

However, in contrast to the biblical and medieval sources, the queen does not resort to the charge that Costanzo had tried to rape her, but her hatred of this 'man' proves to be equally burning and disastrous. She can only think of ways to get him killed, so she urges her husband to send the young man out to catch one of the horrifying satyrs, hybrid beings who attack villagers, farmers, causing much harm. The queen knows only too well that there is no one who would be able or willing to risk his own life trying to capture one of those mysterious creatures, although the king is most desirous to own one of them like an exotic animal in a zoo. For him, to hold a satyr as a creature for his entertainment would be a great delight, but up to that point, no one at his court had been able to fulfill his wish.

In short, the queen skillfully coaxes her husband to force Costanzo to risk his life in the attempt to overwhelm one of the satyrs and to bring it back with him to the court. She assumes that even that brave and strong man would not be able to carry out that task, so she expects Costanzo to meet his death in that adventure since no one else has yet accomplished it. The young man immediately declares his willingness to take on this challenge for the king although he knows only too well that the driving force behind this request was the queen, now his mortal enemy. However, instead of simply moving toward the satyrs, who would easily overwhelm and kill him, he requests several objects to be prepared with which he can set up a trap for the satyrs, using food and alcohol to make them all fall asleep. This facilitates it for him, indeed, to capture one of the satyrs and to transport him back to the court.

The most important aspects of the entire story emerge only then because the tied-up satyr responds to several events around them in a rather curious manner. Observing a peasant father following the funeral procession for his dead son, the satyr smiles, but does not reveal the reason for his behavior. Once Costanzo has arrived at the city market square, where an execution is about to happen, the satyr laughs out loudly, though it does not say anything to explain the cause of this laughter. At court, where the courtiers welcome Costanzo joyfully calling out his name, the satyr laughs even harder. But when the king and the queen are addressed by the young man, the satyr burst out in laughter more than ever before, yet it all remains a mystery.²⁸

The queen, still trying to torture the young knight, convinces her husband to force Costanzo once again to try the seemingly impossible, to make the satyr speak. When the former threatens him with death in the case of continued silence but promises him freedom otherwise, the truth is finally revealed. The satyr could see through the exterior illusion and recognize the truth behind things surrounding him, and since he understood in each situation how fake everything was, although those attending did not fully realize it, he burst out laughing. Most importantly then proves to be what he reveals about the court at large and Costanzo in particular: “everyone was yelling Costanzo, Costanzo!” and you are, however, Costanza” (180).

The protagonist realizes immediately that his disguise as a man is about to dawn upon the king, so he diverts the latter’s attention and inquires about the last scene, also at court when he and the satyr had stood in front of the royal couple. The truth then comes out, destroying the queen and her entire court: “the king, and even you,

28 For the history of laughter as an epistemological phenomenon, see the contributions to *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences*, ed. Albrecht Classen; cf. also Velten, *Scurrilitas: das Lachen, die Komik und der Körper in Literatur und Kultur des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*. This particular episode in Straparola’s tale or in the *Roman de Silence*, which I will discuss below, has not been addressed yet within that context.

still believe that the maidens who serve the queen are maidens; however, the majority of them are not maidens" (180).

Upon the king's investigation, everyone's true gender identity is then revealed, which elevates Costanzo's or rather Costanza's estimation due to his unswerving loyalty, bravery, and fidelity. Her cross-dressing appears as having been a simple strategy born out of external necessities and hence fully excusable. The queen and her fake maidens, by contrast, are quickly condemned to death and burnt in a huge fire. Subsequently, the king marries Costanza, and her entire family feels deeply happy about it, which thus concludes this account in a dignified and satisfying manner, as sentimental as it might sound: "And so Costanza, noble and magnanimous, became a queen as a reward for her good service and lived with King Cacco for a long time" (180).

Surprising Reception History

Suzanne Magnanini comments in a note accompanying this story in its English translation that the motif contained in this tale can be traced to the narrative archetype "A Young Woman Disguised as a Man Is Wooed by the Queen."²⁹ We can certainly agree with that, but this would only refer to the episode in which the queen tries to seduce Costanzo and would not explain further the wider context of this tale and its source. From here, we can step back and examine more in detail why and how Heldris's *Roman de Silence* might be the most likely source for Straparola, at least in this one case, despite the vast historical distance, the linguistic difference, and the geographical span from thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman England to sixteenth-century Venice.

Heldris's romance consists of 6706 verses and thus represents a complex, fully developed narrative about the life of the young woman Silence who has to be raised as a boy and then act as a man because King Evan had forbidden that women would be allowed to succeed to their father's thrones since two worthy counts had died in a duel fighting over their wives' inheritance, with both women

²⁹ Magnanini, trans., Giovan Francesco Straparola, *The Pleasant Nights*, 173, n. 86: ATU 514.

being sisters: “Ja feme n’ient mais iretere” (314; no woman shall ever inherit again). At the end of the romance, Evan lifts that ban again because he has witnessed Silence’s enormous bravery and loyalty, but the major thrust of the romance is driven by this legal condition which chagrins Silence’s parents so much that they raise their daughter as a boy.

In Straparola’s much shorter prose version, the parents of the fourth daughter simply cannot grant her sufficient dowry for a marriage with a worthy king, so the young woman decides on her own to cross-dress and to pretend to be a knight. Nevertheless, the outcome proves to be exactly the same in both texts, with the female protagonist demonstrating outstanding military prowess, knightly skill, and political circumspection. No one is able to recognize her true gender identity, except for the satyr (in Straparola’s version) who breaks out in loud laughter when he hears the members of the court calling out this woman’s male name. In Heldris’s romance, the female protagonist, in her male disguise, has to capture Merlin, the most powerful medieval magician, who does not allow anyone to achieve that goal except for a woman who could hunt him down and capture him, which is then actually the case.

In both works, the fe/male protagonist knows much about the customs and weaknesses of this mysterious being, Merlin and/or the satyr, which also entails that s/he is fully aware about the difficulty if not impossibility of accomplishing the task set to him/her unless s/he gets some mechanical, physical support to achieve that task. Smartness thus replaces physical prowess, or, rationality enters the literary stage, and this both in the thirteenth and in the sixteenth century.³⁰

For Straparola, a reference to Merlin, the ‘classical’ medieval magician and prophet, would have appeared to be out of place, whereas the inclusion of satyrs, certainly creatures from classical antiquity, proved to be a constructive alternative.³¹

30 Cf. my pertinent reflections on this topic in a different context: Classen, “Self-Control, Rationality, Ethics, and Mutual Respect.”

31 Riggs, “Faun and Satyr.” For an impressive overview from antiquity to the modern world up to the immediate present, with an extensive bibliography, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satyr#cite_note-FOOTNOTERoom1983270-110 (last accessed on July 27, 2022).

Merlin and the Satyr: The Truth Revealed

The most important feature shared by both texts consists of Merlin's or the satyr's laughter respectively. They both laugh about the same situations, and explain them, once they have started to talk, the same way. In detail, we notice a few differences as to what finally makes the mysterious figure talk, but they only support further the claim that Straparola had some kind of version of the *Roman de Silence* in front of him. In Heldris's work, the king threatens Merlin with death, whereas in the *Piacevoli Notti*, it is Costanzo who warns the satyr about the dire consequences of his silence. But both times, the queen emerges as the decisive factor threatening her enemy into accepting the challenge, not only to capture a satyr but then also to make him talk. When Merlin refers to the crowd of Christians visiting an abbot and his monks, he laughed because "Under their feet was a treasure, / huge quantities of gold and silver" (6335–36); in Straparola, the satyr comments that when the crowd watched the imminent execution, he laughed because "a thousand thieves, who have stolen thousands of florins from the public and deserve a thousand gallows, were there in the square to stare at a poor wretch who was led to the gallows and had only snatched ten florins to support perhaps himself and his family" (179).

Both here and there, the narrative highlights the discrepancy between illusion and reality, which only the satyr or Merlin respectively understands. Although both are then hesitant to reveal the truth, and although the Old French narrator invests much time and space for the elaboration of the thoughts going through the heads of the five involved persons (Silence, Merlin, the nun, the queen, and the king), the outcome is exactly the same. Silence's gender identity is revealed, along with the identity of the nun who is the queen's male lover. In Straparola's version, the queen is surrounded by an entire court of maids who all turn out to be men who served as the queen's lovers, or perhaps more like her gigolos.

Merlin laughs also because he himself was deceived by Silence, whereas the satyr then falls silent and leaves all matters to the king,

who has then the nun and his own wife investigated and quickly executed, him by hanging, her by drawing and quartering (6656), whereas Silence receives highest praise, of course. In the sixteenth-century version, the queen and her maids are all burned at the stake. The outcome of the story then runs further parallel, with the queen dead, Silence exposed as a maid, and the king happy to marry her “in the presence of all of the barons and knights” (Straparola, 180). In Heldris’s romance, the king at first expresses his admiration for the young woman: “Indeed, the price of your loyalty / is far above that of my royalty” (6633–34). Then he revokes his own rigid inheritance law, and finally marries her, after she has shed all of her external traces of manhood: “Tolt quanque or sor le cors de malle” (6673).

Both texts conclude with the same outcome, the marriage, and the parents both of Silence and Costanza (now with the real name in the feminine) arrive at court and join the celebrations, deeply happy about the development for their daughter. But there is also a significant difference because Heldris concludes his narrative account with final comments about the need to praise virtuous and noble ladies and to ignore the fact that there also evil women whose appearance should not cast a shadow on the good ones: “A good woman should neither take offense / nor blame herself for someone else’s faults” (6699–70). Straparola formulates more plainly: “And so Costanza, noble and magnanimous, became a queen as a reward for her good service and lived with King Cacco for a long time” (180). Structurally, however, we face exactly the same situation, and there is no doubt in my mind that Heldris’s romance obviously did not simply disappear in the dust of history and experienced, instead, although it is still impossible to confirm through what channels, a new reception in sixteenth-century Venetian literature.

Heldris has the parents of their single daughter raise her as a male, whereas Costanza in Straparola’s version decides on cross-dressing by herself out of the necessity to find her own way in life and to realize her own destiny in the role of a man. In the romance, legal

issues are of central concerns which make the parents decide on changing their daughter's gender at least externally. In Straparola's story, there are economic and social concerns because the parents have given away too much of their properties and can no longer marry off their daughter to a royal marriage partner. In Heldris's text, Queen Eufeme did not only try to seduce Silence but she also then made every possible effort to get him killed/executed because of his alleged rape attempt – the motif of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Straparola, by contrast, only presents the queen as attempting to convince Costanzo rhetorically to grant her his love, though without success. There is no charge of rape.

We could list more differences between both texts, but those could be easily overshadowed by many similarities, which ultimately strongly outweigh the former. Altogether, this allows us to conclude that the *Roman de Silence* appears to have survived beyond the thirteenth century somehow, that it was probably translated into an Italian version, and that it thus reached Straparola who recognized the high literary quality of this obscure narrative and utilized it for his own purposes. The difference in genre – courtly romance (if that is the correct term) versus prose short narrative – are obvious since Heldris elaborated the origin of his protagonist considerably, added many adventurous episodes and narrative layers, explained the reasons for the need to cross-dress in an alternative way, etc. But altogether, we can confirm that there are strong correlations between both texts in thematic, conceptual, and structural terms, not to mention the fundamental similarities in the shared motif.

Conclusion

If this argument can be upheld, a number of significant consequences emerge. First, we will have to revisit the entire question of whether the survival of a text in only one manuscript is really decisive enough to determine its actual reception history. Then, we can draw direct lines of literary influence across the centuries and languages, not to speak of the different social frameworks for the individual audiences. Third, even if we were to question the hypothesis that

Heldris's *Roman de Silence* continued to experience a much longer afterlife than the one manuscript seems to indicate, we can certainly confirm that the theme addressed by Heldris obviously appealed to Straparola as well. We cannot say anything about his actual use of sources since there are no explicit references in any of his tales or in the two prologues to volume one and volume two. Nevertheless, placing the thirteenth-century text next to the sixteenth-century story, we can plainly recognize very strong parallels and hence textual indications that the older one could have influenced the later one.

There are, of course, other options to explain the astounding similarities, but they seem to be rather far-fetched. Straparola could have enjoyed exploring this theme just on his own, without any knowledge of the Old French source, especially since he experimented with the idea of cross-dressing – which finds its expression only in this one story. He might have learned about it through some other narrative collections, but it remains very difficult to determine any specifics. Or, just like Heldris, he was fascinated by the motif of Joseph and Potiphar's wife and expanded on this by means of the cross-dressing theme.

None of those suggestions prove to be very convincing; instead, our best bet still seems to be to assume that the *Roman de Silence* was copied in more than one manuscript, or was translated into some other romance language and thus made its way to Italy in the sixteenth century, unless it survived through oral channels. We are facing a mysterious riddle, but it is a most exciting and important phenomenon which promises to shed new light both on Heldris's and on Straparola's work. If this connection holds, we could proceed more assuredly concerning manuscript transmissions, the global reception process, and the translation of literary texts into different languages, either in written or in oral form. We do not need to be concerned with some external variances between both works since they represent two individual genres and are aimed at very different audiences. For Heldris, for instance, the entire issue was predicated on the discussion between nature and nurture, and Silence herself

reflects deeply on her sexual identity (e.g., 2823–702), which is ultimately restored, allowing heterosexuality to return to that center. In the case of Straparola's narrative, the issue of gender matters less significantly, whereas the economic factors assume central importance.

However we might judge the direct connections between the thirteenth- and the sixteenth-century text, both authors certainly shared the same interest and were dedicated to operating playfully with the issue of cross-dressing and the allusion to gender-bending, although in both cases, ultimately sexual heteronormativity is reestablished and solidified because Silence and, respectively, Costanza are dismasked and return to their traditional gender role which they happily embrace. Nevertheless, in both cases, we clearly observe that the poets projected many possibilities for their female protagonists to function fully within a male-dominated society and to triumph over all their opponents.

We do not know at all to whom Heldris might have addressed his text – though we may assume that it was a courtly group predominantly of female listeners/readers – but we can be sure that Straparola composed his works particularly for a female audience within Venetian society. In either case, however, the narrative elements and structure of the tale clearly indicate that the female protagonist deserves greatest respect and admiration for her boldness, intelligence, bravery, and creativity in maneuvering through life, overcoming numerous barriers and severe challenges. It seems very understandable why Straparola ultimately decided to draw from the Old French/Anglo-Norman romance and to make its essential narrative motifs his own. Through our close analysis of the *Piacevoli notti* and its sources, we can now conclude that the tradition of medieval literature did not simply peter out by 1500 giving room for Reformation and Renaissance thought. On the contrary, the alleged paradigm shift did not fully occur, as dramatic the transformations of society, technology, medicine, and science certainly proved to be.

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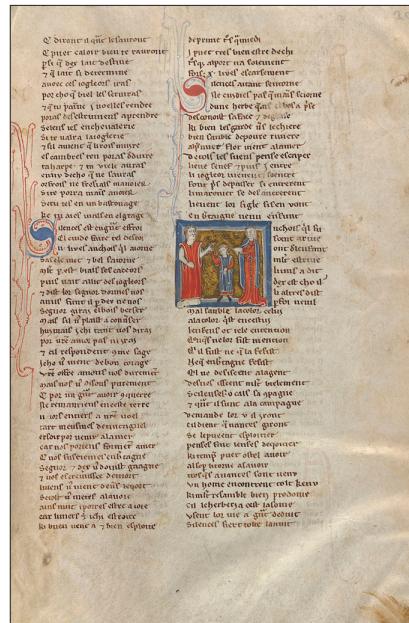
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