Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*

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Abstract: The handling of gender in the Old French *Roman de Silence* has caused considerable scholarly conflict because the poem simultaneously endorses two competing and mutually irreconcilable gender ideologies. Asserting that gender is essential and its boundaries inviolate—even as its eponymous heroine freely crosses gender boundaries to become supremely successful in male roles—the poem creates a radically unstable conception of gender that has implications not only for its portrayal of social gender roles but also for its use of gendered language. The heroine's name, *Silence*, becomes emblematic of language's inability to fully represent its subject, as neither Latin nor the vernacular proves adequate to the task of depicting an ambiguously or multiply gendered character. Gendered language and gendered behavior emerge as mutually dependent sources of paradox that point to the limitations of both language and narrative.

Keywords: cross-dressing, gender, Old French, *Roman de Silence,* Silence

In the middle of the Old French *Roman de Silence*, the eponymous cross-dressing heroine is faced with a crisis. Her knightly disguise threatened by the sexual demands of the lustful Queen Eufeme, Silence struggles to successfully perform her masculine persona while concealing her female body.[1] As if to highlight this conflict between social and anatomical gender, throughout Silence's confrontations with Queen Eufeme the narrator refers to Silence as "li vallés qui est mescine" (l. 3785), "the boy who is a girl" (my translation).[2] Authenticating and even giving primacy to Silence's masculinity—she is, first of all, "the boy"—the poet immediately undermines this assurance by starkly

asserting that Silence "is a girl." Yet, this declaration of femaleness, subordinated in a relative clause, can only qualify Silence's masculinity without negating it: she remains "the boy," and readers, along with Silence herself, are left to question which—if either—of these identities is paramount.[3] Neatly expressing the heroine's plight through an oxymoron, the epithet exemplifies the way in which the poem interrogates both social gender and gendered language, as well as pointing to a fundamental dissonance in the poem's treatment of these categories. Simultaneously invested in affirming the inevitability of traditional gender roles and in challenging their boundaries, the poem struggles to reconcile these disparate ideologies, and in doing so engenders a series of paradoxes that ultimately reveal the limitations of language itself.

In tackling the issue of gender ideology in *Silence*, I return to a debate that has been at the center of *Silence* scholarship since the mid-1980s. Indeed, one of the most curious things about the scholarly response to the poem is the degree to which critics have disagreed in their interpretation of this central preoccupation of the text.[4] Regina Psaki closes her introduction to *Arthuriana*'s first special issue on the poem with these words: "our criticism unrelentingly returns to the same tangled passages and the same impossible question [. . .]: Is this romance ultimately misogynist or philogynous?" (6). Silence's success in traditionally male roles has led some readers to see this as a "proto-feminist" text (Psaki, "Introduction"), quite possibly written by a woman, that argues for women's potential when freed from debilitating social constraints.[5] On the other hand, the narrator's persistent antifeminism, the poem's conventional portrayal of other female characters, and the reestablishment of gender orthodoxy at the poem's end have led others to conclude that the poet is another eager participant in the longstanding tradition of medieval misogyny.[6]

In this article I will step back from the debate over authorial intention and, instead, investigate *why* the text lends itself to such widely divergent readings. I suggest that critics disagree so fundamentally about the poem's gender politics because gender itself is a radically unstable concept in *Silence*: not only is it possible within the text for at least one character to cross the boundary between masculine and feminine, but this very instability is itself unstable, as a competing ideology within the poem attempts to define gender as inherent and unalterable.[7] Ultimately, I would argue, it is impossible to pin down the text to any coherent notion of gender: its contradictions are irreconcilable.

In struggling to reconcile the disparate ideologies of gender, the poem raises questions both about the meaning of social gender roles and about essential properties of the languages it employs to depict gendered subjects. The showpiece debate of Nature versus Nurture regarding the child Silence is echoed by an implicit dispute over whether language falls under the provenance of nature or culture: are signifier and signified irrevocably and naturally linked, or can they be altered at will? Do the limitations of language reveal natural boundaries, or do they represent a failure of cultural imagination? While endorsing the twelfth-century precedent of Alan of Lille's *De Planctu Naturae* (*Plaint of Nature*), which

closely links sexual behavior with grammatical usage, the *Roman de Silence* also complicates Alan's alignment of linguistic and sexual practices by exploring the mutual dependencies of gendered behavior and gendered language.[8]

At different points the text both destabilizes and reinforces traditional notions of gender, lending support to arguments on both sides of the critical divide. Silence freely crosses certain gender boundaries, particularly those of dress, skill, and occupation, as well as certain boundaries of gendered language. As a child among male companions, "Quant il joent a le palaistre, / A bohorder, n'a l'escremir, / [Silence] seus fait tols ses pers fremir" ("When they practiced wrestling, / jousting, or skirmishing, / [Silence] alone made all his peers tremble," 2494–96). As a minstrel, her skill quickly surpasses that of her masters; she grows famous and receives great praise. Posing as a young man at the French court, Silence continues this string of accomplishments: "Si per ne valent a lui rien. / Ses los torne le lor a blasme" ("His peers were nothing compared to him. / The praise he won put theirs to shame," 5124–25). As for Silence's knighthood, the narrator, who calls himself Heldris of Cornwall, tells us that "Chevaliers est vallans et buens, / mellor n'engendra rois ne cuens" ("He was a valiant and noble knight, / no king or count was ever better," 5179–80).

But despite this extravagant praise of Silence's masculine virtues, Heldris also insists that Silence is, at best, only "un malvais home" ("a defective male," 2602), because she lacks the all-important anatomical equipment necessary to fulfill a man's role in society:

> Il a us d'ome tant usé
> Et cel de feme refusé
> Que poi en falt que il n'est malles:
> Quanque on en voit est trestolt malles.
> El a en tine que ferine:
> Il est desos les dras mescine. (2475–80)
>
> He was so used to men's usage
> and had so rejected women's ways
> that little was lacking for him to be a man.
> Whatever one could see was certainly male!
> But there's more to this than meets the eye—
> the he's a she beneath the clothes.

Similarly, Nature reminds Silence that the women who are in love with her are deceived: she asks, "Car puet scel estre eles i croient / Tel cose qu'en toi nen a mie?" ("You don't suppose they think something's there / that was never part of your equipment at all?" 2516–17). Indeed, Queen Eufeme's seduction attempts function primarily to demonstrate Silence's fundamental inadequacy in this regard, deriving their humor from the audience's knowledge that what the queen asks is impossible for Silence to give: as Heldris says, "Il n'a poöir de li rien faire" ("He couldn't do anything for her, " 3869). This is one boundary that would seem to be inviolate. Silence's body cannot change to make her more of a man—and Heldris's persistent return to the question of anatomy underscores his view, stated early on, that Silence's life as a man is "contre Nature" (2254). For

the narrator, anatomy is destiny, and Silence's female body will ultimately doom her life as a man to failure.

However, Heldris's rather facile equation of gender with biological sex is not the whole story; looking more closely at the text, it becomes increasingly difficult to see precisely where the border between masculinity and femininity lies. Even Heldris has a difficult time in making his case that the possession of a female body automatically confers other female qualities on Silence. Describing a tournament in which the newly knighted Silence competes, the narrator tells us that

> Tels chevaliers par li i vierse
> Que se il le tenist envierse
> Et il peüst la fin savoir
> Que grant honte et peüst avoir
> Que feme tendre, fainte et malle,
> Ki rien n'a d'ome fors le halle,
> Et fors les dras et contenance,
> L'eüst abatu de sa lance. (5157–64)
>
> Many a knight unhorsed by Silence,
> if he had known the truth
> at the time she knocked him down,
> would have been terribly ashamed
> that a tender, soft, fainthearted woman,
> who had only the complexion,
> clothing, and bearing of a man,
> could have struck him down with her lance.[9]

In the context of a passage describing Silence's courage and knightly superiority, Heldris's incongruous description of her as tender, soft, and fainthearted comes across as a blatant act of misreading the evidence, which serves rather to emphasize the extent of Silence's maleness than to reveal any genuine signs of lingering feminine weakness. If she is, somehow, inherently weak, this frailty is so well hidden that it has absolutely no impact on her conduct or mindset as she unhorses knights. Silence's hidden female anatomy begins to seem as irrelevant as the invisible weakness that supposedly accompanies it: true, she cannot father children; but in every way that shows, she is a man—and a superior one at that. Thus, Heldris's traditional conception of gender as linked innately to physical sex collides with the obvious counterexample of a woman who exemplifies masculine qualities. Binary categories of gender do not easily apply to Silence, and the difficulty of this application begins to draw into question the whole idea of "natural" gender. But, simultaneously, the text's insistence on associating feminine qualities with a female body—an insistence that, as we shall see, is not confined to the narrator—continues to question the tenability of Silence's masculinity. The very scenario of a woman masquerading as a successful knight puts pressure on traditional notions of gender, but at moments like this the conflict becomes strained to the breaking-point, as the narrative's two premises—that all women are feminine, and that Silence is superlatively masculine—are revealed to be fundamentally irreconcilable.

The relationship of gendered social roles to physical sex becomes even more muddled in the conflict between the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture. The two sides, although they initially appear to occupy clearly delineated spheres of action, increasingly overlap.[10] We see this most clearly when Silence reaches puberty, and Nature and Nurture both appear before her to argue their cases. Nature begins the argument by complaining to Silence that by "te deduis al fuer de malle, / Et vas si al vent et al halle" ("conducting yourself like a man, / running about in the wind and scorching sun," 2503–04), she is ruining her complexion. In modern terms, her environment is modifying her inherited characteristics, and Nature—who intended Silence to be her "ouvre forcible" (1807), her "masterpiece"—is quite displeased with the way her work has been altered. Ample literary precedent exists for her displeasure: the character of Nature derives from Alan of Lille's character Natura, who describes the process by which God appointed her "as his substitute, his vice-regent, the mistress of his mint," charged with "striking various coins of things according to the mould of the exemplar" and overseeing "the reproduction of the varied animal-life on earth" (146). Thus, Nature is well within her traditional provenance when she bemoans Silence's alteration of her physical appearance, as well as when she complains that Silence's deceit is leading women to fall unavailingly in love with her, thereby interfering with the normal processes of reproduction. Yet, Nature departs from tradition by claiming jurisdiction over social roles that have little to do with procreation:

> Ne dois pas en bos converser,
> Lancier, ne traire, ne berser.
> Tol toi de chi! [. . .]
> Va en la cambre a la costure,
> Cho violt de nature li us. (2525–29)
>
> You have no business going off into the forest,
> jousting, hunting, shooting off arrows.
> Desist from all of this! [. . .]
> Go to a chamber and learn to sew!
> That's what Nature's usage wants of you!

It was hardly unusual in the Middle Ages for social roles to be linked to sex; conceptions of women's natural bodily weakness and mental infirmity easily became a rationale for restricting their sphere of action. But here, Nature is supposedly contrasted with Nurture, who has already demonstrated her own jurisdiction over social roles by seeing to it that Silence's education and lifestyle have suited her for typically male pursuits. Nurture's presence in the text renders Nature's claim on social roles redundant, and through this redundancy their seemingly binary opposition breaks down into something much more complex. Nature, like Heldris, wishes to claim that gender roles are inherently linked to the sex of the body, whereas Nurture wishes to claim that gender is independent of sex. The trouble is that neither explanation can fully account for the facts of the narrative, and Silence, "li vallés qui est mescine" (3785), remains a paradox, the ultimately inexplicable center of a text that continually questions how she exists but that never provides a satisfactory answer.

The paradox of Silence's identity is reflected in the paradox of her name, which signifies the difficulties inherent in crossing the boundaries of gender. When Cador first thinks of a name for his daughter, he makes it clear that he intends the name to carry prescriptive force:

> Sel faisons apieler Scilense
> El non de Sainte Paciensce,
> Por cho que silensce tolt ance.
> Que Jhesus Cris par sa poissance
> Le nos doinst celer et taisir,
> Ensi com lui est a plaizir! (2067–72)
>
> We shall call her Silence,
> after Saint Patience,
> for Silence relieves anxiety.
> May Jesus Christ through his power
> keep her hidden and silent for us,
> according to his pleasure!

From the beginning, Silence is intended to remain silent. The child's name will be a continual reminder of the secret that she must keep at all costs, a secret that is designed to relieve the anxiety of her parents about this deception, even as the child herself relieves their anxiety about having an heir. No thought is given to any anxiety this constant need for deceit might produce in the child herself. Instead, Cador speaks as if changing the gender of a person were as simple a matter as changing the gender of a Latin noun:

> Mellor consel trover n'i puis.
> Il iert només Scilenscius;
> Et s'il avient par aventure
> Al descovrir de sa nature
> Nos muerons cest -us en -a,
> S'avra a non Scilencia. (2073–78)
>
> I can't think of a better plan.
> He will be called Silentius.
> And if by any chance
> his real nature is discovered,
> we shall change this -us to -a,
> and she'll be called Silentia.

Cador appears to believe that the consequences of his deception will not extend beyond the necessity of making a slight alteration to the name. But as Michèle Perret has pointed out, "ce changement de nom est un geste fondamental, dans une littérature où la dénomination touche toujours à l'essential de l'être" (332). A change in the gender of Silence's name thus necessitates an equal alteration in every aspect of her life.

In fact, the consequences of making the change turn out to be considerably greater, and the meaning of Silence's name considerably fuller, than Cador realizes. As she transforms from female to male and back again, the consequences are largely determined by gendered codes of speech and silence, which are a large part of what separates the male and female worlds in the poem. Throughout the

poem, women are valued for their silence and rebuked for their outspokenness. Silence's mother, Eufemie, is depicted as the text's feminine ideal. A respected physician before her marriage, she appears to lose her independence of thought and speech once wed. For example, she initially disagrees with Cador's plan to raise their daughter as a boy, but he gently rebukes her, insisting that "Le sanc avons [nos] als commun, / Or ains le voloir commun" ("Since our blood is one, / let us be of one mind," 1723–24). From this point on she speaks only briefly to announce her willingness to go along with whatever Cador thinks best. On the other hand, Queen Eufeme is described as a "Sathanas" (3698), a "female Satan," partially because of the freeness of her speech and her willingness to express and ruthlessly fight for her desires. Near the end of the poem, King Ebain firmly rebukes her, in the poem's most definitive linkage of women with silence:

> Sens de feme gist en taisir.
> Si m'ait Dex, si com jo pens,
> Uns muials puet conter lor sens.
> Car femes n'ont sens que mais un,
> C'est taisirs. Toltes l'ont commun,
> Se n'est par aventure alcune,
> Mais entre .m. nen a pas une
> Ki gregnor los n'eust de taire
> Que de parler. (6398–406)
>
> A woman's role is to keep silent.
> So help me God, I think
> a mute can tell what women are good for,
> for they're only good for one thing,
> and that is to keep silent. They are all alike,
> and it's hardly a coincidence
> that there isn't one in a thousand
> who wouldn't earn more praise by keeping silent
> than by speaking.

Raised as a boy, Silence gains a voice in the community and avoids having her worth judged by her silence, but only at the cost of being unable to fully reveal her identity. In this sense, Cador is right: the name *Silence* is appropriate for her either as a boy or a girl, because either way she will be forced to conceal a vital part of herself. As a boy, she must conceal her body and live without expressing her sexuality; as a girl, she must relinquish her voice and live without expressing her thoughts. This paradoxical social role is appropriately reflected in the paradox of her name: to speak the name *Silence* is to violate its meaning.

Thus, Silence is trapped in a lose/lose situation, a fact that the poet makes clear by recording the inner turmoil she experiences when deciding whether or not to keep up the charade. The narrator tells us that she was "forment s'enasprist, / Car ses corages li aprist / Ke si fesist par couverture" ("deeply disturbed about this, / for her conscience told her / that she was practicing deception," 2497–99). She also worries that she would be entirely unsuited to a woman's way of life: not only does she not know how to sew, but she also claims, "Trop dure boche ai por baisier, / Et trop rois bras por acoler" ("I have a mouth too hard for kisses, / and

arms too rough for embraces," 2646–47). The loss of social power that she would suffer by switching genders ultimately decides the question for her: "vallés sui et nient mescine" ("I'm a young man, not a girl"), she says; "Ne voel perdre ma grant honor, / Ne la voel cangier a menor" ("I don't want to lose my high position; / I don't want to exchange it for a lesser," 2650–52). Still, she retains some doubts, and the alias that she selects when she runs off with a band of minstrels suggests that she harbors resentment against her parents for forcing her into such a difficult position: she calls herself "Malduit" (3177), which translates as "badly instructed." It is not until Silence has been knighted and become famous for her bravery and wisdom that she finally comes to terms with her identity. By this time, "Silences ne se repent rien / De son usage, ains l'ainme bien" ("Silence had no regrets / about his upbringing; in fact, he loved it," 5177–78). But, her period of happiness is relatively short-lived: within a year, her secret is discovered. She is disrobed, and—while standing naked before the English court—must explain her conduct to King Ebain. She concludes with the lines,

> La vertés nel puet consentir
> Que jo vos puissce rien mentir,
> Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir.
> Faites de moi vostre plaisir. (6625–28)
>
> Truth does not permit me
> to keep anything from you,
> nor do I care to keep silent any longer.
> Do with me what you will.

In one sense, Silence's wish is fulfilled: standing naked before the court, she clearly no longer needs to keep silent about her sex. But in another light her words seem deeply ironic, for this speech is virtually the last we hear of Silence's voice. When King Ebain announces his intention to let women inherit again, she briefly thanks him. Then (after King Ebain orders the execution of the wicked Queen Eufeme), Silence is whisked away to complete her gender transformation:

> Silence atornent come feme.
> Segnor, que vos diroie plus?
> Ains ot a non Scilensius:
> Ostes est -us, mis i est -a
> Si est nomes Scilentia. (6664–68)
>
> They dressed Silence as a woman.
> Lords, what more can I say?
> Once he was called Silentius:
> they removed the -us, added an -a,
> and so he was called Silentia.

As her father had planned, changing Silence's gender appears to be as easy as changing her clothes, especially since Nature conveniently steps in to re-feminize her body. But the process takes three days, a length of time that suggests the transformation is not as easy as the name change would imply.[11] The refashioning of Silence's feminine beauty brings with it a complete alteration of her social role: no longer suited to serve as King Ebain's knight, henceforth she will serve as

his wife. As the antithesis of her outspoken and treacherous predecessor Queen Eufeme, Silence is exalted as a model of circumspection and loyalty.

Yet, particularly as the narrative has already revealed the turmoil and self-doubt that accompanied Silence's initial change of gender, the ending seems overly simplistic—an impression that is enhanced by the narrative's silence about Silence's thoughts. We are not told whether she is troubled or elated at this imposed gender-switch, or reluctant or eager to marry the king. After she is dressed as a woman she truly falls silent, as if her own worst fears about losing her voice in society have been confirmed; and yet, as England's new queen, she gains a high rank and a respected husband. Does this ending represent a happy restoration of Silence's original and natural state or a forced assumption of an alien identity? Given the text's fundamentally irreconcilable notions about gender roles—as the product of Nature, but also of Nurture; innate, but also learned; easily alterable, but only with profound consequences—it has to be both. For many readers, the specter of Silence's silence undermines the supposed happiness of the ending; yet, there is no way to allow her to speak without giving the lie to a portion of the preceding narrative. Her silence masks the instability of gender codes within the poem by refusing to stabilize gender in a way that would inevitably ring false. This refusal bears consequences for the arc of the poem's narrative as well: once it becomes impossible to sustain two competing gender ideologies, the poem quickly draws to a close, and within twenty-five lines of Silence's marriage the typically prolix Master Heldris has hurried off the stage.

The poem's inability to maintain a stable gender ideology throughout its narrative extends even to the linguistic level. Initially, the difference between masculine and feminine language seems deceptively simple. When Cador first discusses the implications of gender for Silence's name—that she will be "Silentius" if a boy, "Silentia" if a girl—he employs the Latin forms of her name, in which the cultural difference between boy and girl is reflected linguistically in the gendered endings of the masculine or feminine noun. Moreover, he clearly differentiates between the endings on epistemological and moral grounds:

> Se nos li tolons dont cest -us
> Nos li donrons natural us,
> Car cis -us est contre nature,
> Mais l'altres seroit par nature. (2079–82)
>
> If we deprive her of this -us,
> we'll be observing natural usage,
> for this -us is contrary to nature,
> but the other would be natural.

As Perret has observed, the masculine ending *-us* is associated with the noun *us,* meaning usage, or custom (in other words, nurture).[12] In suggesting that the masculine ending—and therefore Silence's upbringing—violates nature, Cador not only sides with Heldris in suggesting that Silence's masculinity masks an essential, unalterable femininity, he also establishes an intimate connection among nature, truth, and language. For Cador, language intimately corresponds with reality; he

anticipates no trouble in changing his daughter's name later on because, in his view, grammatical gender and social gender are one and the same: correcting the one will restore the other. Grammatical usage thus takes on the force of natural law. As Simon Gaunt has remarked, the play between the two Latin versions of the name "does not [. . .] highlight indeterminacy: it creates a rigid opposition between the masculine and the feminine, and therefore between two opposed and mutually exclusive meanings, suggesting that misnaming is a serious crime against nature" (206). Right and wrong, as well as masculine and feminine, would appear to be clearly encoded in the Latin versions of Silence's name.

However, once language is put into practice, this linguistic and moral clarity is revealed to be little more than an illusion. As if to highlight the degree to which their appropriateness is questionable, the Latin forms of Silence's name are only used at moments that highlight the instability of her gender: at her birth, baptism, adolescent identity crisis, and unmasking. She is baptized "Silentius" (2126) as a result of a ruse. Her parents trick the officiating priest into believing that she is very ill and could die if her wrap is removed for the ceremony: thus, the masculine version of the name is established as a lie that only purports to faithfully represent the child it supposedly signifies. But in another sense, the feminine version of the name is equally false: Silence herself argues, "sui jo Scilentius [. . .] o jo sui nus" ("I am Silentius [. . .] or I am no one," 2537–38). Clearly, neither version of the Latin name is fully satisfactory; Latin's seeming transparency fails to reveal any unambiguous truth.

Indeed, when it comes to gender, language in the poem more frequently conceals than reveals meaning. Rather than the masculine and feminine Latin variants of the heroine's name, the poet more often employs the ungendered Old French version: she is "Silence," a name that gives away nothing about the gender of its possessor. The apparent transparency of gender distinction in Latin disappears in the vernacular, not to be replaced by a liberating freedom but by an increased opacity of language. This opacity is facilitated by the poem's vernacular, a blending of the Picard and Francien dialects of Old French that generally employs the ungendered Picard forms of object pronouns. Whereas Francien (the precursor of modern French) distinguishes between the masculine direct object pronoun *le* ("him") and the feminine *la* ("her"), Picard uses *le* for both genders, a linguistic feature that frequently serves to increase the ambiguity of the poet's narration, because it allows for the possibility of indeterminacy even in the most unlikely places.[13] For example, at the end of the poem the narrator announces Silence's marriage to King Ebain by telling us that "Li rois le prist a feme puis" (6677). Although the context supports Roche-Mahdi's rendering of the line as "Then the king took *her* to wife" (my emphasis), the gendered pronoun is supplied only by the translation. Even while Silence performs the defining act of her newly feminine role, the poet's language gives nothing away.

Yet even the relative indeterminacy of the vernacular is insufficient to conceal entirely the degree to which language itself is inadequate to cope with Silence's paradoxical identity. Although the name "Silence" and even most of the direct

object pronouns are ungendered, the poet's Old French still requires gendered subject pronouns, adjectives, and participles. Modern English translators, in their own attempts to contend with the difficulties of writing Silence's gender, have sometimes employed fluctuating pronouns at critical junctures of the text. Roche-Mahdi's translation of Silence's adolescent response to Nature's bullying, for instance, reads, "*he* replied, 'I never heard that before! / [. . .] / But then *she* convinced *her*self / [. . .] / *her* name was not Silentius" (2531, 2539, 2542, my emphasis). However, this translation obscures the degree to which the narrator's grammatical usage follows Silence's public persona; employing feminine forms only when Silence is generally acknowledged as female, Heldris uses exclusively masculine grammar as long as Silence successfully passes as male.[14] Thus, in the Old French, the lines quoted above read, "Et *cil* respont: 'Tel n'oï onques! / [. . .] / Dont se porpense en *lui* meïsme / [. . .] / N'a pas a non Scilentius" (my emphasis).[15] In Old French as in English, the gender of certain pronouns—including *cil* and *lui*—is unambiguous; thus, the inscrutability of the Old French name *Silence,* like the clarity of the Latin names *Silentius* and *Silentia,* is lost once the heroine becomes an active subject of discourse.

This use of masculine grammar for Silence in her male persona reflects, on one level, the limitations of the poet's language: the linguistic requirement of grammatical gender necessitates a choice between privileging either Silence's anatomy or her social role. Yet, Heldris's application of masculine grammar to a character whom he insists is essentially feminine seems an incongruous solution—one that not only runs counter to his own gender ideology but also reveals both gender and language to be more complex than he would have us believe. Although his grammatical usage appears to divorce grammatical gender from biological sex, Heldris's own insistence on the significance of Silence's female anatomy repeatedly leads him into awkward locutions like "il est mescine" ("he is a girl," 2440). Juxtaposing a masculine pronoun with a feminine noun, this phrase—and others like it—violate grammatical propriety to achieve grammatical consistency while foregrounding the very indeterminateness that this consistency might otherwise stabilize. Any use of gendered language for Silence imposes a fixed meaning, stabilizing her as either masculine or feminine while denying other possibilities and omitting to address an invariable surplus of significance.

Still, the very awkwardness of Heldris's grammatical usage draws our attention to the shared paradox of gender and language in the *Roman de Silence*: neither can be fully explained by reference to either Nature or Nurture. Just as the very irreconcilability of the poem's competing gender ideologies demonstrates the complexities of gender, so the difficulty of speaking about Silence demonstrates the limitations of language. Unable to correspond precisely with Nature, language is also unsuited to follow Nurture's flexibility. One problem, of course, is that neither of the languages at the poet's disposal consistently offers the possibility of ungendered or multiply-gendered terminology—so the very act of speaking about Silence necessitates the opening of a rift between the signifier and the signified. This fundamental inadequacy results in language that either

deceives (as does either version of Silence's name in Latin), conceals (in the manner of Silence's vernacular name), or at best, is clearly inadequate to represent its subject (like the poem's application of gendered grammar to its ambiguously gendered heroine—an uneasy compromise that only draws attention to its own deficiency). The poem's elaborate pun on its heroine's name acquires additional layers of meaning as it becomes increasingly clear that language can no more represent Silence than *silence.*

This inability of language to fully or accurately represent its subject is perhaps the most fundamental indication of the destabilized and destabilizing nature of gender throughout the poem. In acknowledging that the borders that separate one gender from another can be crossed, while simultaneously maintaining that the borders are inviolate, the text endorses two competing ideologies of gender that are never reconciled. Instead, the conflict between the ideologies consistently points to the instability of gender boundaries. The relationships between masculine and feminine, nature and culture, the signifier and the signified are all called into question in ways that provoke debate without providing any definitive answers. And in the end, this questioning is more consequential and revealing than the poem's potential to endorse either an exclusively feminist or an exclusively misogynist ideology.

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NOTES

1. Although Silence's gender position is a complex one, for the sake of convenience I have chosen to refer to her with feminine pronouns throughout my article.
2. Other variations of this epithet occur at lines 3705, 3763, 3871, and 3954. Except where otherwise noted, all quotations and translations of the poem's lines are from Roche-Mahdi's edition.
3. Scholarly interpretations of this epithet have ranged from Bloch's assertion of "the very undetermined nature of Silence" (89) to Gaunt's rebuttal that the phrase "could equally well be read as highly determined, meaning 'the boy who is really a girl'" (208). Although I concur with Gaunt that this may well be the intent, in practice I find the phrase to be *overly* determined, simultaneously (and inconsistently) asserting Silence to be both male and female.
4. Some critics would disagree that gender is a central issue: notably Bloch, for whom the poem "is essentially about the writer's relation to writing" (93), and Clark, who sees the question of gender as "a sideshow, albeit a spectacular one" (62), in a poem whose real motivation is the naturalization of social hierarchy. Sturges agrees that the poem's cross-dressing primarily represents anxieties about class structure, not gender, whereas Callahan and Kinoshita both argue that feudal systems of marriage and inheritance are the poem's primary concerns.
5. See, for example, Akbari; Brahney; Labbie; Psaki; Roche-Mahdi; and Stock, who all find feminist impulses in the poem.
6. For example, Gallagher; Gaunt; Jewers; and Krueger all concur that at least the intention—if not always the result—of the text is to reinforce misogynist ideals.
7. Several scholars note the difficulty of locating a consistent message within the poem; Krueger, for example, finds that "even as [Heldris] reimposes stable categories of gender,

he opens a space for women's resistance to their cultural construction" (112). In addition, see Allen; Hess; Kocher; and Waters.

8. Bloch's is the most thorough discussion of the relation between the two texts; he finds that the "*Roman de Silence* reads in many places like a vernacular version of Alain's *De Planctus Naturae*" (84). Although I agree that the texts share certain concerns, I suggest the *Roman de Silence* is primarily interested in the relation of language with gender, whereas the *De Planctu Naturae* (*Plaint of Nature*) links language with sexuality. See Gaunt's note 8 (215) for a further elaboration of these differences.

9. It is important to note, here, that although Heldris does refer to Silence as a "feme," he nevertheless continues to use masculine grammar to describe her; the feminine pronouns exist only in Roche-Mahdi's translation.

10. Several critics have noted this overlap: see, esp., Gaunt 209 and Krueger 117.

11. McCracken observes that "it is pertinent to interrogate exactly what the king saw inscribed on Silence's body, since the 'truth' of Silence's anatomy does not appear to be self-evident at all" (532).

12. Perret takes this point even further, noting that "Si l'on bien repéré dans ces quatre vers que le suffixe -us représente l'usage, la culture (Noreture), on n'a pas toujours vu que-a, troisième personne du verbe avoir, représente ce que filletter possède réellement de par Nature: son identité sexuelle" (335).

13. Thorpe comments on the poem's Picard features in the introduction to his seminal edition of *Le Roman de Silence* (35–59); but see Lecoy's corrections to Thorpe's edition as well. For more in-depth information, Gossen's *Petite grammaire de l'ancien picard* provides a useful resource.

14. See Kocher 354 and Gaunt 207.

15. In fact, this is one of a relatively few instances in which the poet uses the clearly masculine pronoun *lui* for a direct object rather than the ambiguous *le*.

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