## Chapter 8

# Without Magic or Miracle

## *The "Romance of Silence" and the Prehistory of Genderqueerness*

Masha Raskolnikov

Medieval thought does assume that there's such a thing as a "woman" and a "man," but prior to the emergence and institutionalization of concepts like "the normal," distinctions between the two fail to map onto the gender binary as we experience it today. While history shows that people sometimes chose to live as a sex other than the one they were assigned at birth, most of the accounts that come down to us survive because their identities were challenged in court or examined in medical settings (often both). Imaginative literature, however, offers affordances to explore what the world *might be* rather than what it *is*, and can sometimes function as the space where the nature of sex and gender gets worked out in a relatively consequence-free way. There, an individual's choice to change the sex that they had been assigned at birth can be considered outside the juridical or medical frameworks that have shaped trans lives to this day. Sometimes medieval fictions conform to orthodox ideas; at other times, however, medieval works are actually able to complicate contemporary notions of gender. One such is the thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence*, a work that suggests a powerful counter-narrative about how sex and gender could be imagined otherwise.

The *Roman de Silence* has been edited twice: once by Lewis Thorpe and once by Sarah Roche-Mahdi, both from a single copy that appeared in an anthology discovered in 1911, now known as MS. Mi LM 6 in the University

of Nottingham library.[1] In the romance's first lines, a narrator / authorial stand-in who names himself "master Heldris of Cornwall" promises to tell a good story and complains about the stinginess of contemporary princes, implying that he hopes to receive great rewards for telling this tale.[2] He then narrates how Ebain, king of England, came to ban women from inheriting property, and how Ebain's subjects Cador and Eufemie chose, for reasons of property inheritance, to raise their only child as a boy despite the child's "natural" sex being assigned as that of a girl. That child, named Silence, grows up excelling at all the knightly arts but worrying that their original assignment as female will be discovered, undermining their parents' plans and Silence's own life as a knight. It does not help Silence's state of mind that they are occasionally witness to a debate between the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture, who argue whether Silence is "truly" male or "truly" female.

One key aspect of Silence's identity, then, is that they do not choose their gender; it was chosen for Silence by their parents for completely pragmatic reasons, although the romance traces the ways in which Silence reflects on and lives out this choice, at times asserting the truth of their maleness. Even so, this is not a story like so many modern stories with transgender protagonists, featuring a hero driven by inner forces to become their true self. Recognizing this can be frustrating, given that Silence is one of relatively few characters in medieval literature who *could* be understood as trans, and sometimes *is* understood that way.[3] Paying attention to ambivalences expressed both by the protagonist and by the text about what it means to "be a man" or "be a woman," however, requires reimagining them as someone whose story complicates this discourse. This article argues that the question of volition in matters of assigned versus chosen sex and gender that is raised by this romance constitutes a valuable part of what the *Roman de Silence* offers its readers.

Critics have occasionally had trouble figuring out which pronoun is the correct one to use for the character of Silence. I use "they" throughout, underlining the undecidable genderqueerness of the character rather than emphasizing their life as a male knight or their assignment as female at birth.[4] "Assignment" always manages to sound like "homework," and this valence of "gender assignment" makes it sound like being-gendered-and-sexed is a dogged, dutiful labor indeed. That useful phrase, drawn from the discourse of contemporary gender freedom activism, "assigned female at birth," becomes complicated in the case of Silence, whose body is understood to be female by their parents ("assigned" female), but has this very assignment immediately overwritten with masculinization in the name of securing a dynastic inheritance ("reassigned" as male). Silence is raised "as" a boy, in

a manner that highlights the distancing structure of such a simile—to be "like" a boy is *not* to be a "real" boy, in the logic of Heldris's romance. Heldris, however, is nothing if not contradictory: despite repeatedly referencing their assigned-at-birth sex as female, the romance evinces respect for the character's own self-identification by using male pronouns when Silence is "performing" as male, and switching to female pronouns only once Silence is "revealed" as a "woman," a process described in such a way that it is not entirely clear or self-evident.[5]

Historical sources about those who lived a transgendered life in the Middle Ages support an understanding that cross-dressing was sometimes useful to those who sought work or vocational paths (monastic life, etc.) that were simply unavailable to women. It may bear saying that, under patriarchy, occupying masculinity nearly always offers more opportunities and choices than does occupying femininity, but somehow only a very small percentage of the population takes the route of correcting their assigned sex, no matter the advantages.[6] Simply by setting up a romance's main protagonist to be raised to perform successfully as a man and (therefore) repeatedly doubting that they have the ability to succeed as a woman, Heldris of Cornwall denaturalizes "male" and "female." The romance demands that we notice this: Heldris renders both "male" and "female" as things that *have to be learned*, skill sets and sets of habits that, in turn, mark the body (as when living as male renders Silence's mouth "too hard"). Even though the romance ends with "Nature's" victory, with Silence stripped bare and their body "recognized" as female, the events preceding this conclusion would surprise those who expect the European Middle Ages to stand in for conservative gender politics. While the hidden truth about Silence is clearly established as their hidden femaleness (although never femininity), this hidden truth exerts less power over Silence than one might expect.

Never explicitly stating that they desire to become "truly" male, in the course of their story Silence agonizes over whether or not they would be capable of living successfully as a woman *if* their deception were ever to be unmasked, questioning, in effect, if their life as a man has nurtured anything that might be said to be "feminine" right out of them. Without having their body changed by magic or through divine intervention, but certain that what they "are" is female because this was their assignment at birth, Silence still manages to live a gender-crossing life as a man. The question of what constitutes the "truth" of sex and gender functions as the driving force for much of the narrative, which hinges strongly on the status of "the secret," a concept that very obviously gets coded within the romance as "silence," both as the protagonist's name and as an absence of sound.[7] My own modest proposal

is to consider whether the name might actually be a sort of imperative—"Be silent! That will relieve my anxiety!"[8] While Silence inhabits the role of "man" impeccably, and takes a great deal of joy in their masculine accomplishments, Silence is also shown having doubts about the path that their parents had chosen for them, and—this is crucial—seems to remain male partly as an act of filial obedience rather than out of their own desires.

Can we speak of Silence as a trans or even as a genderqueer subject who is, at the same time, a subject whose intention had not at the outset been to live as male? Kendall Gerdes, writing in the inaugural "Keywords" issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* on the keyword "performativity," states that "transgender studies is inextricably invested in the question of intentionality: is the subject of gender in charge or not?"[9] Silence is *not*, in fact, "in charge." Their king decides that only men may inherit. Their parents decide prior to their birth that they will live their life as a man no matter how they "see" or think they see their child's sex.

Despite the documented existence of genderqueer lives during the Middle Ages, might master Heldris of Cornwall have been afraid to create a character who simply chose to live as a sex different from the one they had been assigned at birth? In other words, in order to have been written, must the *Roman de Silence* have featured gender-crossing as something being forced upon the protagonist, and might the convoluted plot forcing Silence to live as they do exist for extra-textual reasons, like the author's fear of censorship? Obviously this is speculative, but can the way in which Silence becomes male be one of the only ways available to change assigned sex, without magic or miracle, in the Middle Ages, making it seem like something that just "happens to" the individual? In what follows, I consider two aspects of the immanent, if implicit, theory of sex and gender offered in the pages of the *Roman de Silence*, examining Silence's own gender and, perhaps surprisingly, examining the gender of Silence's parents.

## Defining Masculinity and Femininity

In trying to understand gender, whether in the Middle Ages or today, one usually finds oneself relying on the language of "male" and "female" (often referred to as "opposite" sexes, whatever that might mean) and their related qualities (often understood as if occupying opposing poles on a scale where each of us finds ourselves), referred to as "masculinity" and "femininity." It is notoriously impossible to define "masculinity" and "femininity": the title of this section opens itself up to your disappointment, Dear Reader. "Behaviour or qualities regarded as characteristic of a woman; feminine quality or

characteristics; womanliness" and "the state or fact of being masculine; the assemblage of qualities regarded as characteristic of men; maleness, manliness," says the otherwise useful *Oxford English Dictionary*. These definitions are tautological to the point of absurdity, and yet we do no better when we consult psychoanalytic, scientific, or historical sources except to add the dimension of cultural contingency and variation to what "female" and "feminine," "male" and "masculine" qualities or characteristics might be. It is among the pleasures of studying any foreign culture to witness the contingency of gender in the encounter with cultural difference; this is certainly among the pleasures of reading the *Roman de Silence*.

What do we learn about masculinity and femininity from the *Roman de Silence*? We read the romance knowing that those categories are fictional, in the sense that Silence, King Ebain, Queen Eufemie et al. do not actually exist, and that "recognizing" that someone is male or female in a work of fiction depends on taking an author's word for it, and on accepting the gender assignments offered inside a fictional world. Of course, gender norms in a fictional world perform some measure of mimesis: they reflect prevailing attitudes of their times, with inflections and quirks drawn from a given author's "commonsense" understanding and their own history. The author says that somebody is female, and we believe them (as, indeed, we generally believe things about the sex of our interlocutors in our everyday lives). Information about Silence's "true" sex is possessed by the romance's reader—but unavailable to any person who encounters Silence before the romance's end, except their parents. The romance is steeped in dramatic irony, and one of the pleasures for readers is that of knowing something that most of the romance's protagonists do not know.

What happens to Silence? In addition to their various knightly accomplishments, Silence also runs away from home and spends some time as the world's greatest troubadour.[10] Women, including King Ebain's wife, fall in love with them, but Silence is indifferent; instead, they are occasionally witness to a debate between the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture ("Nature" and "Noreture"), who argue whether Silence is "truly" male or "truly" female. In the end, Silence accomplishes a magical task that can be accomplished by "no man," tracking down Merlin and bringing him to court.[11] Without much discussion or Silence's consent, the king orders Silence to be stripped naked, and their identity as a "woman" is revealed through the assumption that whatever primary or secondary sex characteristics are visible to the naked eye are equivalent to the truth of this person's sex. Because King Ebain's wife had been plotting against Ebain (she has also, as it turns out, been unfaithful to him with a male knight who was

living disguised as a nun in their court), and this is coincidentally discovered through Merlin's presence at court, she is put to death.[12] As a consequence, Silence, who is not only now clothed as a woman but also re-feminized by three days of labor by the allegorical personification of Nature, is forced to marry King Ebain—the same king whose ban on women inheriting property had caused Silence's gender journey to begin with.

The fact that Silence *can* be stripped naked and revealed as "actually" *female* assumes an agreement about what that means exactly; the additional detail that Nature then has to labor upon Silence's body for three days to render it *feminine*, however, introduces a measure of doubt about the possibility that Silence's femaleness is a self-evident fact.[13] This process, in the romance, occurs either passively ("Silence atornent come feme": "They dressed Silence as a woman," 6665) or with the agency of transformation attributed to Nature:

| | |
|---|---|
| D'illuec al tierc jor que Nature | After Nature |
| Ot recovree sa droiture | Had recovered her rights, |
| Si prist Nature a repolir | She spent the next three days refinishing |
| Par tolt le cors et a tolir | Silence's entire body, removing every trace |
| Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle. | Of anything that being a man had left there. |
| Ainc n'i lassa nes point de halle: | She removed all traces of sunburn: |
| Remariä lués en son vis | Rose and lily were once again |
| Assisement le roze al lis. | Joined in conjugal harmony on her face. |

(6669–77, Roche-Mahdi)

It is hard not to marvel at the initial tail rhyme, "Nature/droiture": Nature rhymed with the law (presumably, the Law of Nature), translated by Roche-Mahdi as "rights" in this passage. That first couplet naturalizes (in a word) the victory of Nature over Nurture. And yet the work of "re-polishing" ("repolir") and the days that it requires demand acknowledgment as well; this is a work of naturalizing that, at the same time, requires some serious labor. This passage denies Silence any voice, any contribution to their own "feminization." The work is all accomplished by Nature, just as the work of "masculinization" was accomplished by Silence's father (and, to an extent, foster parents and teachers); in both cases, occupying a female or a male identity requires tutelage and hard work. The "remarriage" of "rose and lily," a symbolic wedding that immediately prefigures Silence's wedding to the king,

is a product of Nature's labor. Earlier in the romance, Silence had worried, repeatedly, that their skin was too rough; now a sort of divine intervention solves their worries all at once.

Nevertheless, not all is predictable or stable even at this late, ostensibly stabilizing moment in the romance. When King Ebain marries Silence, the phrase used is "Li rois le prist a feme puis" ("Then the king took him for his wife," 6677). On the one hand, this phrase resonates with particular strength when we note that in French, as in many languages, *femme* means both wife and woman, so King Ebain is actually taking (reading, interpreting) Silence as a woman in this moment. On the other hand, and this can be hard to notice in the midst of all the work of feminization going on, the poem describes this very activity of taking Silence as a wife through the male direct object pronoun ("le"): even as they are being made into a "feme," the king is taking "him" as wife/woman. What are we to do with this odd, rebellious text? How to get our heads around its beautiful contradictions?

In a post on her blog *Transliterature: Things Transform*, M. W. Bychowski makes a claim that the *Roman de Silence* enables "a transvestite metaphysics," a term that I find enormously illuminating. For Bychowski, this metaphysics connects with the possibility of thinking about medieval science and the theory of universals that so characterizes the philosophical debates of the late Middle Ages. While I look forward to the finished version of Bychowski's reading of *Silence* as "a science of the 'tolte,'" in the important book that she is writing, we are in agreement about how Nature's work to "refinish" ("repolit," 6679) Silence's body, with a focus on their skin and on the entirety of their flesh, implies that masculinity had left permanent markings on Silence's body that could be erased only through divine intervention. The romance draws a distinction between "being female" and "being feminine": on the one hand, when King Ebain is told by Merlin that no woman could have captured the wizard and that Silence had been "desos les dras meschine. / La vesteüre, ele est de malle" ("a girl beneath his clothes. / Only the clothing is masculine," 6536–37, Roche-Mahdi), we hear the assumption that whatever is "desos" (beneath) will turn out to be "truest." In order to verify this statement, King Ebain commits an act of scopophilic violence, a convention painfully familiar to any member of a contemporary film audience who has ever watched a "reveal"—the moment of a body being stripped bare of its coverings—because what nudity displays will putatively convey an inarguable, stable "truth" that undoes any work of self-fashioning accomplished by the trans person's choice of self-presentation.[14]

Silence worries about not having been trained to be a "successful" woman, but also about being an imperfect man; when they run away from home to be a troubadour, the assumed name they use is Malduit, or "Ill-Taught." Later, when returning from years away, Silence describes themself to their father as "an inferior piece of cloth / powdered with chalk, that looks good, but isn't" ("com li malvais dras encrées / Ki samble bons, et ne l'est pas," 3643–44, Roche Mahdi). Oddly, the "inferior" piece of cloth that Silence describes is one that seems like a "bad" fabric disguised as a "good" one: a deception based in the politics of money and social class is offered as an analogy to a deception based on hidden femaleness and visible masculinity. Is masculinity, then, the false "finish" on fabric meant to disguise the "bad" material of femininity? Can such analogies even be drawn? Silence is always noble, as male and as female, and therefore this comparison is a fairly distant one; the superiority of the cloth from which they are made always seems to shine through, and, as many critics have argued, nobility "wins" over masculinity or femininity as Silence's dominant trait. But that's precisely it: this very odd romance that values social position over sex treats sex as a secondary characteristic, and therefore allows sex to be something that changes while the subject is shown to be grounded in a personhood that remains stable. Even if "Nature" and the "truth" of Silence's original female gender assignment triumph in the end, the romance expends tremendous energy in setting up a performative theory of sex that it proceeds to quash in its final lines.

Over the course of their story, Silence agonizes over whether or not they would be capable of living successfully as a woman if they ever have to revert to their assigned sex, because, in this romance's logic, life *as* a man fundamentally transforms one *into* a man: "trop dure boche ai por baisier, / Et trop rois bras por acoler. / . . . Car vallés sui et nient mescine" ("I have a mouth too hard for kisses, / and arms too rough for embraces / . . . for I'm a young man, not a girl," 2646–50, Roche-Mahdi). While this statement can seem like an avowal of authentic male identity, it doesn't quite function that way in the poem.[15] Immediately subsequent to these words, Silence states that the reason to prefer being male to being female has to do with the lower status of women (and the inheritance that they, Silence, would lose if declared female): "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," 2651–52). This sounds as though Silence's gender-crossing is ultimately somewhat pragmatic. If modern transgender identity is something assumed in the face of all disadvantages because it is urgently, psychically

necessary, Silence doesn't meet that criterion—but the romance suggests that their life is no less genderqueer for that, and the criteria we use to comprehend trans and genderqueer identities must be made to expand in order to accommodate them.

While the urgency of inner necessity has been an important force in the contemporary fight for trans liberation and self-determination, it has also demanded that trans people subject themselves to the rigors of the modern confessional—not just psychological evaluation but also a sort of standardized narrative of relentless lifelong dysphoria that has to be produced on demand for various audiences.[16] Even if every particular in that narrative is true, it is a coercive and inappropriate demand for others (usually institutions) to make of trans subjects. Here, queer theory, which has been quite correctly criticized by trans scholars for having benefited enormously from figuring transgender in its critique of normativity, can actually be helpful.[17] Queer theory, working in concert with trans theory, can envision an expansive notion of gender plurality where neither gender nor sex must always be linked to the notion of an inner truth (just as, in queer theory, sexual orientation need not be essential, unchanging, and justified through recourse to psychological truths in order to be understood to exist). The *Roman de Silence* offers something like a psychology-free, internality-free version of genderqueer existence. Silence wasn't "born in the wrong body." They also weren't able to move between sexes at will, and worried volubly about whether they would be able to live a successful life as either one. What does it mean to have a work available to readers in the Middle Ages that posits gender change as seamlessly becoming the sex one chooses, as well as something that helps a person achieve financial stability (meaning, remaining their parents' heir), and as something other than purely volitional? Here, the *medieval* text actually expands the plurality of gender and sex that certain psychologizing tendencies in the modern world tend to limit.

Silence lives their life as a man, feels themself to be male, and fears that they will not know *how* to be a woman if ever they have to return to their original assignment. And yet their genderqueer, gender-crossing life is very important insofar as it offers a way of dislodging historical gender normativity as in any way a "traditional" or "historical" condition of human existence.[18]

The work of fashioning masculinity and femininity in the *Roman de Silence* is shown to require careful and difficult labor. That sheer depiction of effortful fashioning, while largely centered on the body of Silence, permeates the romance as a whole, offering a kind of "metaphysics," per Bychowski's important intervention, as well as at least a theory of sex and gender that

might not fit with a routine understanding of a gender-normative Middle Ages but rather opens it up to its queer possibilities. What is femininity in this romance? It is something handmade, difficult, and so is whatever masculinity might be.

## The Self-Decoding Riddles of Cador and Eufemie

The *Roman de Silence* tells the story of Silence from birth, through a youth spent in knightly derring-do and troubadour accomplishment, up to the moment of being revealed as "truly" female for the king, without ever pausing for a love story. Silence's eventual marriage to King Ebain is not foreshadowed in any way: unlike the Shakespearean version of the cross-dressed hero, neither Silence's words nor their behavior suggests a romantic motive for their loyalty to their liege lord. When Ebain's wife, Eufemie, attempts to seduce the irresistibly handsome Silence, their argument of refusal is based on the relationship of "loialté" to King Ebain and the fact that they are Ebain's relative ("Car jo sui hom vostre segnor, / et ses parens ne sais con priés," "for I am your lord's vassal, / and his blood relation, I don't know to what degree," 3806–7). Indeed, the eventual marriage of Silence and Ebain is incestuous in nature, although this never gets mentioned in the text.[19] Although the romance ends in a marriage, the love story that it tells is not that of its protagonist.

Although it is established that Silence is not romantically or sexually interested in the queen, it is not clear whether, in this case, the "nature" being referenced is Silence's loyalty and piety or Silence's knowledge that their assigned sex isn't the one that the queen expects.[20] What we know about human sexual practices notwithstanding, other genderqueer narratives from the Middle Ages—ones that do feature sexuality as a problem for a love story—are written as if it were obvious that women simply cannot have sex with women.[21] Silence, assigned male by their father but *also* assigned female, does not simply seem to assume that they cannot satisfy the queen's desires. Heldris uses the language of the natural here, as "his nature," to foreclose the very possibility of an attempt. This problematic (for a modern reader) ideological detail notwithstanding, Silence may refuse Eufeme for other reasons, including loyalty to her own future husband, Eufeme's then-current husband, King Ebain. Or lack of attraction. Or even the detail that Eufeme and Silence's mother, Eufemie, have nearly the same name, potentially invoking the incest taboo.

The story of how Silence's parents come to be married takes up fully the first third of the total length of the romance. As I indicated at the outset, the

background against which Silence's gender emerges is not an entirely gender-normative one: the romance is touched throughout with genderqueerness. The extended delay involved in Silence's parents' love story is part of how Heldris of Cornwall, the poem's author, sets up a certain reading of his story as a whole. With the couple's slow courtship, the theorization of gender that governs the romance's logic is in evidence long before their future child comes into being. In that sense, the *Roman de Silence* is a self-decoding riddle where the "answer" to the questions about the subsequent events of the romance is hidden within its beginnings, and where the part clarifies the whole.

Silence is "disguised" as male though assigned female at birth in order to be able to inherit their parents' estate, a move that seems to set up a problem for the subsequent generation: if Silence is to remain male, they will presumably not be able to sire legitimate children who might in turn inherit the same estates, so the entire dynasty that their parents are trying to establish is being set up to end with Silence. Given that medieval romance is so often concerned with dynastic succession, this seems remarkably short-sighted thinking. There appears to be an implicit hope that King Ebain will either change his mind or die, permitting the law against female inheritance to change. Still, Silence's possible progeny are simply not taken into account in this plan, and the main protagonist of the *Roman de Silence* lacks a love story; this differs strikingly from how most medieval romances organize plot and action.

Cador appears in the poem as the nephew of King Ebain of England (the very king who eventually marries Silence) who becomes a hero by slaying a dragon, in some part in order to impress the daughter of the King of Cornwall, Eufemie, whom he loves. There is no doubt that Cador's and Eufemie's feelings for each other are mutual: the moment she is introduced, we immediately discover that Eufemie is in love with Cador, but well over a thousand lines are expended bringing them together. Moreover, even King Ebain wants the two to marry, and asks his counselor to help make this happen. Dilation is nothing new in romance, but the sheer length of Silence's parents' courtship is noteworthy for its level of detail, as well as for the ideas that it manages to develop over the course of its many lines. All of the symptoms of lovesickness, all of the misunderstanding between potential lovers, all of the sheer fuss that goes into the standard descriptions of medieval courtly love are present in this romance, but as the love of Silence's parents, never as Silence's own experience. In an odd way, the heterosexual love story of Silence's parents is the way in to understanding the queerness at the heart of Silence as a trans figure.

The love story of Cador and Eufemie is marked by themes that persist throughout the romance and affect their progeny. The protagonist's name, "Silence," is thought through by this romance in a complicated way, and one way it functions in the narrative is as a repeated invocation of secrecy as a driver of the romance plot (sometimes in place of love, sometimes alongside it).[22] The silence that plagues Silence's life is already present in the romance before Silence is born: the love story of Silence's parents is plagued by an unnecessary, if generically consistent, secrecy. The poem does not let readers miss this emphasis on secrecy, even as, in the context of a courtly love scenario, secrecy functions as a constitutive part of the conventional format. The literature of "fin' amors," or courtly love, requires delay before avowal, consummation, or marriage, and secrecy is a common form that delay assumes, along with misunderstanding and miscommunication. In *Silence*, Cador has "encloze" ("hid," 406, Roche-Mahdi) his love for Eufemie and suffers from all the classic symptoms of what courtly love calls "lovesickness."[23] Lovesickness thrives on secrecy, and the narrator digresses, explaining that his love is like a "fire without a flame" burning all the more brightly for being "covierte" ("covert," 411, Roche-Mahdi). Secrecy is the fuel that powers Cador, giving him the courage to defeat the dragon and sustaining him through a period of recovery from the wounds that fight causes, a period that seamlessly segues into a period of illness from wounds caused by lovesickness. The conspiracy of delay necessary to the conventions of romance is extensive and detailed, and the particular workings of that conspiracy in this poem have to do with the romance's gender politics.

Silence's genderqueer life complicates the orthodoxy that men are simply superior to women, and this is evident also in the surprising level of parity between Silence's parents. Each of them is established as having a right to ask to marry "*any* person in the land." The king grants Cador this privilege because he has killed a dragon who had menaced the king; Eufemie is granted this privilege for nursing Cador back to health after that same dragon injures him. In other words, both Eufemie and Cador are outside the typical economy of the traffic in women. Their choice of partner is a free one, and this is true of both of them. One might think that the absence of a power imbalance would simplify courtship; yet this absence, instead, silences both parties, rendering each unsure about how their intentions toward the other might be construed.

One of the major problems that prevents Cador and Eufemie from admitting their mutual love is Eufemie's excellent education, which also offers some foreshadowing about the eventual adventures of their child, Silence. Although she is introduced through Cador's love for her, and is described as

"the most beautiful in the world" ("Qu'el mont n'avoit plus bele mie," 401, Roche-Madhi) she is also described, almost immediately, as "well versed in the seven arts" ("Des .vii. ars ert moult bien aprise," 403, Roche-Mahdi).[24] Eufemie is the only daughter of the fictional Count of Cornwall (Cornwall being the supposed home of Heldris, who names himself as "de Cornuälle" in the romance's very first line). It is an understatement to say that to be versed in the seven liberal arts is not a common description for a female character; female education is not generally a priority in medieval romances, and when it is, it is more like Blanchefleur's education in *Floris et Blanchefleur*, a product of two children being educated together, rather than a solitary female accomplishment.

In fact, before Silence was ever a knight who could outfight those who had been assigned maleness at birth, Eufemie was the best doctor in England: "el païs n'a si sage mie" ("the wisest doctor in the land," 594, Roche-Mahdi). According to McCracken's broad introduction, "Women and Medicine in Medieval French Narrative," the etymology of "mie" is "the Latin *medicus*, in its common usage indicating a man who practices academic medicine." McCracken describes how Eufemie's "authority as a medical practitioner is compromised by the indirect way her skill is acknowledged in the text."[25] Eufemie is twice referred to as "mie" or "mire" in a sense that is likely to have meant "doctor," both times in a somewhat negative or reversed manner: first, as we just saw, in "there was no wiser doctor," and the second time, in line 734, Eufemie is referred to as "the girl who served as his physician"—"de la meschine vus voel dire. / Esté li ot en liu de mire" ("Now I want to tell you about the girl who served as his physician," 733–34, Roche-Mahdi)—a usage repeated a second time for emphasis by Eufemie as "qu'esté vos ai en liu de mie" ("I served as your physician," 938, Roche-Mahdi). Ultimately, Eufemie's medical education is used as a plot device to bring Eufemie and Cador closer together in the small space of the sickroom, when the king asks Eufemie to care for Cador through his recovery from the wounds inflicted by his battle with the dragon.

Eufemie's status as a doctor makes use of the specialized medical vocabulary of the time. McCracken notes that Eufemie is not referred to as "miresse," the female and (therefore) more negative version of "doctor." "Sick or wounded people are often visited by 'mires' in medieval stories, but they are also treated by women with healing skills who are not called 'miresses,'" she writes.[26] While in both cases being "in place of" a doctor, Eufemie herself is not a doctor, exactly, but she is also no worse than a doctor and can serve in a doctor's stead. This logic of being "like but not quite" a doctor bears, in

my estimation, a striking resemblance to the logic of how Eufemie's child, Silence, inhabits their sex, according to what they themselves say about it: they are not male, exactly, but are no worse than a man and can serve in place of a man in almost all capacities. It is almost as if Heldris of Cornwall offers us this figure, and the ultimately unnecessary detail of Eufemie's high-level doctoring skills, in order to help teach readers of the romance to understand this kind of simile-logic.

Although Eufemie essentially has no speaking role once her child is born, she seems to be an extraordinary woman. There were certainly important women physicians in the Middle Ages, including the famous Trota of Salerno and Hildegard of Bingen, who produced collections of medical writings. So is it at all strange for someone assigned female at birth to be a doctor? No more so than for someone assigned female to be a man, as Silence is repeatedly described. Both mother and child have abilities that exceed misogynist assumptions about the abilities of people who are assigned female at birth.

Silence's mother has an excellent education for yet another reason, I suspect. For Heldris, this character is also useful because it permits him to portray at least one of Silence's parents as privy to the debates in medieval medical theory about sex and gender. For medieval medical theory, "sex" (the so-called biological and physical basis of the difference between women and men) is more of a continuum than it became in later epochs. Galenic medicine relied on an index of heat: men's bodies produced more, which rendered them more intelligent, and resulted in inherent male superiority, but women's bodies produced *some*. The genitals of women were sort of the inverted-sock version of male genitalia. (Modern science, with an entirely different set of governing assumptions, sometimes seems closer to this model, given its observations of embryological development.) When male and female are understood as points on a spectrum, there is a certain amount of leeway for those who fall in the middle.[27] Later in the poem, Eufemie indicates that she knows a fair bit about pregnancy and what can and cannot be controlled about fetal sex; she seems to believe that she cannot cause the unborn fetus that will someday become her child, Silence, to be born with genitalia that conform with an assignment of maleness.[28] Eufemie's medical training plays no role in the romance's plot beyond forcing her proximity to Cador while she cares for his wounds, but it also evokes a set of discourses that, tantalizingly, we can't be *quite* sure that she or Heldris actually knew, but that *might* have made her a particularly suitable mother for a genderqueer child.

Silence's parents are brought together by Cador's injuries, by Eufemie's medical skills, and by their mutual love, and yet both still dither, each worried that they cannot know what is truly in the heart of their beloved. Eufemie is no one's reward, even though it would normally be her nature as a woman to function as an object of exchange in the consolidation of power between different houses, estates, or nations (as Eufemie's near-namesake "Eufeme," the wife of King Ebain, is used to weave peace between England and Norway in one of the romance's early passages). Cador needs to be given a free choice of wife, thinks Eufemie, pining for him. The veracity of their love demands the other's active agreement, and this seems particularly important insofar as the male character truly values his female beloved's freedom. Cador is afraid that any inquiry about Eufemie's feelings will represent undue pressure. (He fears that she will not be able to say no as a result of the king's gift to him.) In fact, in his own self-sabotaging, logic-of-romance way, Cador desires Eufemie's desire (and she his).

There are some complicated things to be said about the gender politics of such a desire. Is it "unmanly" for a medieval man to want to be a woman's free and unconstrained choice? Is it, possibly, "queer" for him to desire this? On the one hand, the characters in medieval romance (this or any other) didn't seem to be under the impression, popular in later centuries, that women were incapable of lust, so Cador must know that being desired by Eufemie is *possible*. On the other hand, relatively few of the knights of romance doubt that a woman who has been taking care of them and is of marriageable age is going to marry them, particularly when they have just done something as grand as killing a dragon. Cador's doubt about Eufemie, and Eufemie's public passivity in the face of her own narratively well-established private desire for Cador, drive the lovers' delay.

In a poem that might be about silence, one of the important silences is that of Cador and Eufemie in relation to each other. Cador's silence is clearly motivated by a fear that Eufemie might feel herself forced to love him: *He* is afraid that *she* might think that *he* might think (delightful!) that *he* is compelling *her* to love *him* back. How do these two ever escape from their quagmire of courtly uncertainty? The precipitating event that permits Silence to be engendered is actually a moment of mis-speaking.

One day, burning with a particularly unbearable desire, Eufemie speaks to Cador, and in doing so, she mis-speaks. Addressing herself to her patient, Eufemie says, "Amis, parlés, haymmi!" (883). Eufemie apparently thinks that she means to say "Speak to me, friend!" ("Dire li dut: parlés a mi," 884) but instead says something that might be translated as "Friend, speak, ah me!" or "Friend, speak [onomatopoetic representation of sigh]!" or

"Friend, speak, woe is me!"[29] The meaning of "haymmi" is intentionally and significantly unclear, and the narrator proceeds to spend more than thirty-five lines discussing what this exclamation can possibly mean. Critics have done the same (at quite a bit more length): Howard Bloch even translated the phrase as "Friend, hate me!" although many critics subsequently argued against this reading.[30] What is this "haymmi"? It seems to be parapraxis, a "Freudian slip," and encourages psychoanalytic critics to see it as a manifestation of Eufemie's unconscious. If "haymmi" is supposed to be "ami," what has been added are sounds: the breathy "h," the yelp of pain that is "i," the humming "m." The addressee himself, Cador, doesn't even know what Eufemie is saying. He is being called "amis," but being "amis" is ambiguous, and does not necessarily entail a romantic relationship. Somehow, Eufemie's exclamation has meaning precisely *because* it is nonsense; if she had simply said "speak to me, friend" (887), as Heldris tells us she had intended to do, Cador would not have taken this particular moment of speech to mean anything beyond a friendly greeting. Instead, Eufemie's "haymmi" is a mystery, a paroxysm, an emission of the body which Cador, as lovesick subject, is capable of comprehending as the injunction to speak his love.

It does not seem strange that Cador and Eufemie are ultimately brought together by parapraxis. A slip of the tongue can be full of erotic potential, and also the way that Eufemie's feelings are positioned as revealing something true underneath a false cover of silence is later echoed, in the romance's "main" narrative, by the way the "truth" of Silence's assigned sex is unwrapped from their clothes in front of the assembled court at the romance's end.

The love story of Eufemie and Cador, desiring doctor and shy dragon killer, provides the genealogy that helps make sense of Silence's genderqueer complexity. The parents do not simply foreshadow their child, although that is also a part of what they do; in this essay's climax, they merge or commingle their very selves to *become* Silence. In that process, Eufemie herself is silenced. The passage I will discuss manifests a strange alchemy, one that has received far less attention than it deserves—the one moment in the romance when a character offers an explicit theory of sex and gender, one that is neither medical nor magical but is rather theological and philosophical in nature.[31]

Once Eufemie and Cador marry and Eufemie gets pregnant, Cador expresses great concern that the child might be born female and not be allowed to inherit their considerable property. Eufemie replies to Cador's worry about the unborn child with a reasonable statement that they would

love any child. Here is Cador's counterargument, with recourse to an odd attribution of the Creation to Jesus:

| | |
|---|---|
| "Ma dolce amie," dist li cuens, | "My sweet love," said the count, |
| "Jhesus li pius, li vrais, li buens, | "Jesus the pious, true and good |
| Il fist Adan, cho est la voire, | Created Adam, this we know to be true, |
| Et Evain de sa coste en oire. | And right away created Eve from his rib. |
| Es vos l'entensiön reposte | And here is the hidden reason |
| Por quoi il le fist de sa coste, | Why he made her from his rib: |
| Qu'ensi fuscent d'une *voellance* | So that they would be of one mind [*voellance* = will] |
| Com il sunt fait d'une sustance, | As they are made of one substance. |
| Andoi eüscent un *voloir*, | Both should be of one mind |
| A l'esjoïr, et al doloir. | United in joy and sorrow. |
| Entr'ome et feme a grant commune, | There is great unity between man and woman, |
| Car d'als .ii. est la sustance une, | Because the two are of one substance. |
| Et adonques meësmement | And it is the same, |
| Quant il i a esposement, | When they are married, |
| Car el saintisme sacrement | For, with the most holy sacrament |
| De nostre Noviel Testament | Of our New Testament, |
| Met on entr'als tele aliänce, | Such an alliance is made between them |
| Cho sachiés vos tolt a fïance, | That you should know for certain |
| C'uns sans et une cars devienent: | They become one flesh and blood. |
| Sor als est puis s'il ne se tienent. | It is upon their heads if they don't hold to this thereafter. |
| | Since, my sweet, our flesh is one, |
| Biele, quant nostre cars est une, | Let our will be one as well. |
| Soit nostre *volentés* commune. | Since our blood is one |
| Le sanc avons [nos] als commun, | Let us be of one mind" [*voloir* = to will]. |
| Or aiens le *voloir* commun." | (1700–1724, Roche-Mahdi, emphasis added) |

In his Letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul theorizes marriage as merging, setting an important precedent for Christian discourse about male-female relations. This is the passage where the analogy is drawn that husbands are the

head of their wives as Christ is the head of the church. What might be meant by "being the head of" someone or something else remains radically open to discussion, but Heldris of Cornwall understands it as a merging of the wills. In the context of this theory of sexual difference, Eve is drawn from Adam's rib so that this merging might be feasible, with the possible implication that a divine intervention was needed to reinforce the naturalness of male dominance. If gaining a male partner as one's "head" or "will" is the obligation of the woman, Silence ends up taking a long and roundabout route to this fulfillment. In context, Cador's speech is arguing that Eufemie should obey him, which, in this case, means that she needs to agree to raise Silence as a boy even if they are born with the genitals associated with women. Cador is calling upon the putative naturalness of male dominance in order to establish the condition of possibility for raising his child as a male, no matter how "un-natural" it might be to do so.[32]

The theory advanced here by Cador is that marriage creates a kind of joining of man and woman, where "the will" becomes both shared ("commune," a word repeated no fewer than four times in this relatively brief passage) and predominantly ruled by the male, turning the couple into a singular unit that combines "man" and "woman." Sarah Roche-Mahdi's translation of "voloir" as "mind," while strictly speaking inaccurate, is at the same time very helpful, because today's theories of the self are more likely to use the language of "mind" than they are of "will." Medieval theories of the will understand it to be a multiple (at least a double, often triple or more) set of forces that push against one another, demanding resolution before there can be action.[33] Cador offers Eufemie a theory of mind as well as a theory of marriage in his brief and repetitive speech. In context, this is akin to shooting pigeons with a cannon—far too much firepower deployed in order to win an argument. At the same time, in the context of the romance plot, Cador here is showing the radically different status of Eufemie as a person now that she has married him. A married couple, in this conceptualization, has a single will. Eufemie no longer has an independent will; rather, she has become a second, weaker will jostling with his stronger one inside the new person they have formed together. Do Cador and Eufemie retain their original selves in the process of commingling in this way? They might not; or, perhaps more accurately, Eufemie might not; the model of marriage that she is offered might, indeed, merit all the fears of avowal that she had expressed in earlier passages of the romance.

How does male join with female? One might imagine a literal joining, as in the ancient representations of the joining together of the nymph Salmacis with the beautiful boy whom she loved, Hermaphroditus. Here I am using

"Hermaphroditus" the character from Greek myth, to name the impossibly strange concept that Cador is expressing. The myth of Hermaphroditus participates in the intellectual history of a now obsolete and offensive term which ought not to be mistaken for the medical category of intersex. Possibly even the ancients acknowledged the offensiveness of the term: in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is how it came to be famous in the medieval world, the story of Hermaphroditus is an instance of sexual violence (the nymph Salmacis rapes Hermaphroditus), a terrible joining of female with male. And yet Cador seems to understand marriage in this way, as a (now loving?) joining of two into one, with only one (the man) becoming the governing principle.

How does female join with male? Must the woman (whatever this term might reference) disappear in merging with the man? This certainly seems to be the model being invoked by Cador. While this is a spectacularly conservative view of marriage (albeit one fully reinforced by the Pauline epistles and church doctrine), in the instantiation of this particular romance, this is also, surprisingly, a genderqueer view: a married man is not "only" a man; he also contains the will of the woman he has married. This joining of selves fundamentally affirms the possibility that what is assigned female *can* become a man, that what is assigned male at birth *can* grow up to be joined with a woman. This is a conservative radicalism, a radical conservatism: this is the strange, surprising heart of Heldris of Cornwall's one romance.

When married, a woman's will is merged with that of her husband. This explanation of the gendered order of things, coming relatively early in the text, can be used to comprehend the governing theory about sex and gender that this text works through, the contribution that Heldris of Cornwall is actually making here. Within the *Roman de Silence*, other marriages might not be quite the same sort of joining into one unified two-gendered being—although it should be noted that the most discussed marriage besides that of Cador and Eufemie is that of King Ebain and his adulterous wife, Eufeme, who is put to death for her sexual transgressions. (I would maintain that adultery is the only form of literarily represented free will available to married women, even in most contemporary novels.) Even there, in this extraordinarily odd romance, it might be noted that Eufeme desires Silence, whom she understands to be male; once Silence is understood as female, King Ebain marries Silence. Eufeme's extramarital desire is fulfilled, maritally, by her husband. The question of Silence's desire is left wide open at the romance's end. I cannot answer it; I can say only that Silence had never quite consented to living life as male, and doesn't seem to quite consent to living life as female. They are sexed by figures in power (the father, the king, the magician, the

husband) and live with the consequences. This is not genderqueerness as joyful play; this is, at heart, yet another tragic story (albeit about one who marries rather than one who dies at their story's end). This is also, however, a truly queer vision of gender, of love, and of language.

Silence maintains an inner monologue about their sex and gender. In the manner of a psychomachia, a dramatized allegorical conflict within a human soul, the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture externalize Silence's self-doubt. They return again and again to debate which of them is truly in charge of Silence's identity, and this too emphasizes Silence's competence as an assigned-female person living in disguise as a man. On the one hand, if "Nature" wins out, as indeed "she" does, Silence's successful life as a man affirms the competence of those assigned female at birth, even if it is only a secret competence. The message of "Nature's" victory seems to be that if a girl is taken young and taught the martial instead of the marital arts, she can do anything a boy can do, and probably better. On the other hand, if "Nurture" were to have won the debate and triumphed in the course of the narrative, which she comes quite close to doing, *that* victory would have affirmed the changeability of sex and gender by means of the human will—indeed, through the simple application of the human will to the human body. The possibility of Nurture's win hovers over the text, tantalizing readers with the thought that the poem could be (even more of a) genderqueer work than it is now.

The *Roman de Silence* is written as if there truly is a strong counterargument to Nature's claim that a person assigned female at birth is, therefore, "truly female." *Silence* is written as if there is a valid claim to be made that a "girl" raised "as a boy" might become a boy. This claim is supported by any number of mythological and miraculous sources, such as the story of Iphis and Ianthe, familiar from Ovid, or the story of Saints Marina, Eugenia, or even Pelagia.[34] Silence is written as if there's a danger that Nurture may win the argument, in which case medieval thinkers would have had to acknowledge that sex, at least in narrative contexts, is performative—made by discourse, out of the stuff of discourse, reinforced by discourse, and in desperate need of reassuring repetition in order to remain stable in discourse. In other words, the end of *Silence*, when Nature "wins," strikes its modern readers as a potential gender-essentialist retort to the Judith Butler of *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*. It is a retort, an argument against Butler, because its protagonist both fears and desires being unmasked as "actually" or "truly" female while, at the same time, continuing a successful career as a male knight and troubadour. In its final, silent scene when Silence is

"revealed" to have been assigned female, a scene where Silence falls silent and remains so, the argument for gender essentialism seems to "win." Yet it scores a narrow enough victory that, even as it negates the discourse of gender constructionism with its conclusion, Silence deserves to be read alongside recent feminist, queer, and trans theories. In the life of Silence and of their parents that precedes the finale when Nature wins, the performativity of gender and of sex affirmed by Nurture, and the hard work of making men and making women (in fiction and in life), are all very evident.

Because *Silence* is a fiction, it is also a possible space of experimentation. As Angela Jane Weisl put it in one of the first articles surveying representations of genderqueer persons in French literature, "what happens in these poems becomes a kind of examination of potential rather than pure fantasy."[35] I take that to mean: no real person can live Silence's life, but to describe Silence's life might open up possibilities of a real person living their own differently.

This essay is not by any means the first to think of *Silence* as a trans-affirming work, although the history of the romance's reception definitely includes a period of its being read as a narrative of *female* power, while more recent publications on *Silence* have taken up Silence's gender as a question lacking a clear answer. At times this has led to readings that affirm the text as a sort of carnival of sex and gender. Katherine Terrell offers an exemplary version of this latter-day model in a 2008 article, concluding that the poem portrays both language and gender as "destabilized and destabilizing" in a way that offers "no definitive answers."[36] Such readings are important and do justice to certain aspects of the romance. One thing that such readings of textual play as intimately tied to queerness do not take into account, however, is the grave seriousness, the life-and-death quality inherent in the demand to be recognized as the sex that one truly *is*, whatever one had been assigned. The hard work of affirming sexual ontology, a work that is, in some ways, fundamentally impossible to do once and for all, is part of the labor that many contemporary trans people perform in addressing themselves to figures of authority like those who issue identity cards or medical prescriptions, or who oversee surgical interventions. Some of the labor of identifying one's true self to figures of authority resembles the sacrament of confession for Catholic Christians. The *Roman de Silence* does not require its genderqueer subject to confess a desire for another (which might seem to stabilize their gender in a certain way) or to be either male or female in any definitive sense. In that it offers some ways out of the confessional.

*The Roman de Silence* puts enormous pressure on the nature of gender *not* in order to destabilize it but to stabilize it otherwise, to open up some of its

heretofore less livable possibilities. Instead of magic or miracle, instead of confession and being driven to realize one's destiny as the sex that one was not born as, the romance features a highly competent subject who lives life as male and as female, and excels at doing both, albeit with enormous effort. (The mechanisms of sex creak as Silence puts their shoulder to the wheel.) The possibility that this highly competent subject might exist is not simply foreshadowed; it is ontologically established by the material at the beginning of the romance, dealing with how Silence's parents come together as a couple that merges their manhood and womanhood into a single unit (to the detriment of the couple's female member, as always seems to happen). This is truly the alterity of medieval thinking about gender at work: conservative and radical, hopeful and hopeless all at once, it opens up onto a field of possibilities quite different from the ones that contemporary subjects might imagine or desire.

One of the things that is undecidable about the *Roman de Silence* is whether we should read it as resisting patriarchal assumptions about female incompetence, or if we should read it instead as resisting patriarchal assumptions about femaleness and maleness *as such*. I find this lack of clarity productive, perhaps even helpful to our own moment in the history of sex and gender. Another undecidable is if this romance might be asking its readers to consider whether expressed intentionality or the will to transition is or is not the sole most important component for understanding a historical person (or fiction) as part of trans history, whether or not they are recognizable to themself as trans. On the one hand, this seems like a reasonable criterion, since it resembles the psychological work required of trans subjects in the contemporary juridico-medical world. On the other hand, genderqueer persons in the past did not tend to leave us with clear confessions about their gender intentions and sometimes, like Silence, seemed to operate out of pragmatic necessity rather than psychological urgency. Perhaps the *Roman de Silence* can serve as a reminder that trans and genderqueer living constitutes a psychology-free, confession-free world of its own. However we read it, it's a text that we can understand as affirming the existence of alternatives to a monolithically patriarchal medieval England, even if these alternatives might be imaginary and secretive and, in the course of this narrative, ultimately undermined.

## Notes

This essay comes out of years of productive engagement with *Silence* in the classroom, and benefited enormously from conversations with graduate and undergraduate students alike, especially Shanna Carlson and Michaela Lee. I would like

to thank Kathleen Long for having organized the *Transforming Bodies* Conference at Cornell, where this was first given as a paper, and my co-editors, Greta LaFleur and Anna Kłosowska, for their incisive and helpful suggestions. I have also learned so much about writing by editing the other essays in this volume, and am grateful to my fellow contributors for their excellent work.

1. *Le Roman de Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse-Romance by Heldris de Cornuälle*, ed. L. Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1972); *"Silence": A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992). There is also another translation, *Le Roman de Silence*, Regina Psaki (New York: Garland, 1991). All quotations are from the Roche-Mahdi edition, and are cited by line number.

2. I refer to Heldris of Cornwall as "he" throughout because I am not entirely convinced by the argument (much as I would like to be) proposed by Lorraine Kochanske Stock that Heldris could be either male or female. Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable': Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 7.2 (Summer 1997): 28–29.

3. Caitlin Watt's article "'Car vallés sui et nient mescine': Trans Heroism and Literary Masculinity in *Le Roman de Silence*," published in "Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism," a special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* 55.1 (2019): 135–73, is an excellent example of reading for Silence as a heroic trans ancestor. Other important articles that work through this necessary trans reading of Silence include Karen Lurkhur, "Medieval Silence and Modern Transsexuality," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 11 (2010): 220–38; and Angela Jane Weisl, "'How to Be a Man, Though Female': Changing Sex in Medieval Romance," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45.1 (2009): 110–37.

4. This is in line with works like Erin Labbie's, which claim that Silence represents what the anthropologist Gilbert Herdt (and others) terms "a third gender," meaning, in this case, not a third category added to a binary but rather "possibilities for multiple subjectivities." Erin Labbie, "The Specular Image of the Gender-Neutral Name: Naming Silence in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 7.2 (Summer 1997): 63–77, quotation at 66. R. Howard Bloch agrees that "Silence represents the systematic refusal of univocal meaning." R. Howard Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986): 81–99, quotation at 88.

5. Even feminist critics sometimes forget that the point of "performative" theories of sex and gender is to break down the assumption that "sex" as biological stratum is somehow more "real" or more "inevitable" than is "gender." Heldris of Cornwall seems to be aware that, at least in this fiction, the "sex" of characters is entirely a verbal construction that, at the same time, requires labor *to construct* or *fabricate*, both verbs commonly used by Judith Butler in describing her version of what "sex" is and how it's made in discourse as well as in the material world. For example, "If the inner truth of gender is a *fabrication* and if a true gender is a fantasy *instituted* and *inscribed* on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only *produced* as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity." Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 136, emphasis added. See also "Language is said to *fabricate* or to figure the body, to *produce* or *construct* it, to *constitute* or to *make* it. Thus, language is said to act, which involved a tropological understanding of language as performing and performative." Judith Butler, "How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body

Are Mine?," in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 258, emphasis added. When Heldris belabors, as he does, phrases such as "little was wanting for him to be a man" ("que poi en falt que il n'est malles," line 2477), he nevertheless maintains the masculine pronoun *il* after all. The "poi" or "little thing" that Heldris mentions is discussed by Watt, "Car vallés sui et nient mescine," 155.

6. For two twentieth-century examples of persons assigned female at birth living as male at least in part according to a stated desire to do work not permitted women, see the life of Denis Smith as depicted in the autobiography by Dorothy Lawrence, *Sapper Dorothy: The Only English Woman Soldier in the Royal Engineers 51st Division, 79th Tunnelling Co. during the First World War* (London: J. Lane, 1919; repr., 2010); see also the life of Billy Tipton, the famous jazz trumpet player, named Dorothy Lucille Tipton at birth, who became the subject of multiple books including the acclaimed novel *Trumpet* by Jackie Kay (London: Picador, 1998).

7. As Weisl describes it, "within the poem, *gender is silence*; it is an empty space on which meaning can be written." Weisl, "How to Be a Man," 119.

8. A great deal of ink has been spilled about the signification of Silence's name, chosen by their father because "silence relieves anxiety." Simon Gaunt has argued that the name "derives its significance from its designation of an inability to signify." Simon Gaunt, "Significance of Silence," *Paragraph* 13.2, "Displacement and Recognition," special issue on medieval literature (July 1990): 202–16, quotation at 202. In "When Silence Plays Vielle: The Metaperformance Scenes of *Le Roman de Silence* in Performance," *Mosaic* 42.1 (March 2009): 99, Linda Marie Zaerr calls the name a homonym and relates it to the "hyammi" moment in the text: "They name their child Silence, pointing out that 'silence' can take both masculine and feminine endings, 'Scilenscius' and 'Scilencia' ([lines] 2075–82). His name is thus itself a homonym. The two endings, a and us, create a further homonymic contrast: a, the feminine ending, represents the form of the name that is 'par nature [natural]' (2082), and us, the masculine ending, represents 'us,' usage or nature, which is 'contre nature [contrary to nature]' (2081)." Cador's words in naming Silence are confusing: "sel faisons apieler Scilense / El non de Sainte Paciensce, / Pro cho que silensce tolt ance"; "we will call her Silence / In the name of Saint Patience / Because Silence takes away anxiety" (2066–69). What is this patience? Is it the patience to wait until one can cease living as a man and become a woman? There is no explanation inside the text. Caroline Jewers has argued that the meaning of "relieves care/anxiety" may stem from a moment of "legal casuistry" wherein, were Cador found out to have disguised "his daughter" as "his son," he would not have directly lied because the name was ambiguous. Caroline Jewers, "The Non-Existent Knight: Adventure in 'Le Roman de Silence,'" *Arthuriana* 7.2 (Summer 1997): 94–95. While I am not convinced that this is Cador's thinking, it is the only reasonable explanation for "relieves anxiety" that I have read in the course of this research. Sarah Roche Mahdi's translation highlights the way in which silence functions as an absence of sound at the poem's end (among other places) by translating Silence's last words in the text, "jo n'ai soig mais de taisir" (6627), as "I only care to be silent," which I think provokes critics to wonder about the nature of "mysterious" feminine silence and its symmetry with "noble" masculine silence, and Silence's career as a troubadour who does not talk about themselves much, and all the other valences of silence that the poem had experimented with to that point.

I will note that Jane Tolmie translates these same words as "I will not be silent," and uses this to underline the irony of the silence that follows Silence's utterance. Jane Tolmie, "Silence in the Sewing Chamber: *Le Roman de Silence*," *French Studies* 63.1 (January 2009): 24.

9. Kendall Gerdes, "Performativity," in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (2014): 148–50, quotation at 149.

10. More than one scholar has noted that running away to be a troubadour permits Silence to actively engage the tropes of performance by becoming a performer of musical compositions in addition to continuing to perform the maleness assigned by their parents. Interestingly, scholars have not examined the racial/social class crossing that is also required for Silence's troubadour performance: they "stain their face with nettle-juice" when they run away, which results in the other troubadours taking them for a lower-class "vilain" instead of recognizing the nobleman's son they had been playing for just hours earlier. The question of this potential combination of class-crossing with racial minstrelsy, the question of what's going on with Silence artificially darkening their skin and whether or not this needs to be considered in a racialized manner, has been remarkably underexamined by scholars of the *Roman de Silence* with the exception of Robert L. A. Clark's excellent "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12.1 (Spring 2002): 50–63. Labbie mentions this passage and the fact of performance in "Naming Silence," 70.

11. The romance has some Arthurian aspects in addition to the presence of Merlin as a key figure in its climax. One such is the name of Silence's father, Cador, which is the name of a minor character in Arthurian stories going all the way back to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. There, Cador is the name of the father of Constantine, to whom King Arthur hands his crown as he dies.

12. See Kathleen Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire in the Old French 'Roman de Silence,'" *Arthuriana* 7.2 (1997): 47–62, for a discussion of how this queen bears the burden of "aberrant sexuality" in the romance. For much of its plot, her attempts to seduce Silence drive Silence to greater and greater feats of knightly accomplishment. Like Potiphar's wife of biblical fame, when rejected, the queen escalates threats to Silence and accusations to the king that Silence has attempted to seduce *her*.

13. This has been pointed out by a number of critics. See Peggy McCracken, "'The Boy Who Was a Girl': Reading Gender in the 'Roman de Silence,'" *Romanic Review* 85.4 (1994): 517–36, who writes, "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), and also "ultimately Silence's body signifies 'female' because the king says it does, not because it demonstrates an inherent truth" (534).

14. See Danielle M. Seid's incisive article "Reveal," in the "Keywords" issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (2014): 176–77.

15. Here I am disagreeing with Caitlin Watt's excellent article "'Car vallés sui et nient mescine,'" in which she discusses how often Silence refers to themself or is referred to as a "mescine valet" or "valet mescine," and argues that if we consider Silence as trans-masculine, the reward will include a broader version of medieval masculinity.

16. See, for instance, Dean Spade's influential article "Mutilating Gender," which critiques the obligation for trans persons of constructing a narrative about a trans

childhood that contradicts certain lived realities of that childhood for purposes of receiving gender-confirming treatment from the hands of a medical establishment capable of accepting only certain kinds of stories as "valid." Dean Spade, "Mutilating Gender," *Transgender Studies Reader 1*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 315–32.

17. Jay Prosser's work really led the way to offering this critique; see Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Queer theory's critique of what I am calling "inner truth" is rooted in the work of Michel Foucault, and often relies on arguments made in his *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert J. Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); published in France as *La Volonté de Savoir* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976).

18. Scholarship about *Silence* is often concerned with the question of whether it is a "feminist" work or if it is a misogynist work, which medievalists tend to describe using the somewhat deceptive term "antifeminist," meaning here "anti-woman." Some of the debate about whether *Silence* is or is not *feminist*, however one might define that term, can be found in Sarah Roche-Mahdi's introduction to *Silence* (xi–xxiv). Arguments that the work is specifically antifeminist include articles by Peter Allen, "The Ambiguity of Silence: Gender, Writing, and *Le Roman de Silence*," in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 98–112; and Gaunt "Significance of Silence."

19. Sharon Kinoshita was the first, to my knowledge, to make the argument that it is scandalous when King Ebain marries his own great-niece. Sharon Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12.1 (2002): 64–75. It is established early in the romance that King Ebain is worrying about Cador; the poet tells us that Cador, to the king, is one "qu'il fist norir" ("whom he brought up," 516). In Kinoshita's argument, this scandal helps explain the strange silences of the romance's ending.

20. The romance phrases the reason for Silence's rejection of the queen in a complex way: "car nel consent pas sa nature." In Roche-Mahdi's translation, these words appear as "because his nature kept him from responding" (3824), but we might note that "sa" modifies "nature" and there is no pronoun "he" in the line. Silence's sex and/or gender are not specified at this particular juncture. See also Kathleen Blumreich in "Lesbian Desire in the Old French Roman de Silence," *Arthuriana* 7.2 (Summer 1997): 47–62, for a discussion of Eufeme and her repeated claims that Silence is a queer (the word Eufeme uses, "herites" [3947], is clear in context but has roots in the word for "heretic," according to Blumreich, citing Peter Allen, "Ambiguity of Silence"). Caitlin Watt does an excellent job of listing all the ways that Heldris coyly references Silence's genitalia in her article "'Car vallés sui et nient mescine.'"

21. For thoughtful consideration of and some challenges to this view of female sexuality in another genderqueer tale from the Middle Ages (where a "girl" becomes a "boy" in order to have sex with their beloved), see the Ovidian story of Iphis and Ianthe in its repeated retellings—discussed and analyzed in Patricia Badir, Peggy McCracken, and Valerie Traub, eds., *Ovidian Transversions: Iphis and Ianthe, 1350–1650* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2019).

22. Sharon Kinoshita has argued that *Silence* is actually a poem about the problems of succession rights in her article "Heldris de Cornualle's *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage," *PMLA* 110.3 (May 1995): 397–409.

23. For an extensive and magisterial discussion, see Mary F. Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

24. One of the odd things about this section of the poem, perhaps more so for the non-French reader, is the repetition of the rhyme "Eufemie" and "mie." "Mie" is used to mean two entirely different things when rhymed with Eufemie ("girl" and "doctor"), and while it's very clear in context which meaning seems to be intended, both words are significant ones for the poem's "plot," and the repetitiveness of the rhyme really emphasizes them both. Lewis Thorpe, the poem's first editor, notes this in an uncomplicated way: "Like all narrative poets, Heldris repeats some of his combinations too often, e.g. Eufemie: mie . . . , 401–2, 605–6, 879–80, Eufemie: mie . . . , 593–94, 937–38, enfert.: verte, 627–28, 715–16, 781–82, 949–50" (Thorpe, prefatory material, 18–33, 32).

25. Peggy McCracken, "Women and Medicine in Medieval French Narrative," *Exemplaria* 5.2 (1993): 239–62, 248, 249.

26. Ibid., 248.

27. For a venture into the fascinating subfield of medieval medical theories about sex via Ptolemy's theories of astral inclinations, which circulated widely in Latin and in translation, including one by Guillaume (or possibly Nicholas) Oresme that was dedicated to the future Charles V prior to his ascension to the throne of France, see Anna Kłosowska, "Premodern Trans and Queer in French Manuscripts and Early Printed Texts," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 9.3 (2018): 349–66. For the background of this discussion, which directly informs my own thinking, see Joan Cadden's magisterial study *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Although Katherine Park's article "Cadden, Laqueur, and the 'One-Sex Body,'" *Medieval Feminist Forum* 46.1 (2010): 96–100, makes it clear that Cadden's account is more authoritative and relevant to medieval medical thought than Laqueur's, his contribution to popularizing Galenic ideas of the one-sex body in his study of the history of sexuality cannot be ignored. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Arguing learnedly with Laqueur has been a significant pastime for those of us whose early academic lives were enormously influenced by this book; see Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence* (London: Routledge, 2013).

28. In fact, medieval medicine often attempted to meddle in the sex of the unborn, so Eufemie's refusal to intervene in the sex of Silence might indicate either that she belonged to a different school of medical thought or that she was choosing not to intervene in something that, after all, might need to be left up to God or chance. It is not an example of scientific neutrality that she is silent on this issue; it may in fact be an indicator of her relatively low prioritizing of male over female sex in her own child, or of some unusually poor training that she received (i.e., not being taught how to meddle in prenatal sex?), or it could mean superior "scientific" knowledge. It's hard to gauge from the little bit of information on the page.

29. "Although such translation choices are certainly justifiable, the most important feature of this term is its literal status as a signifier of disappointment or loss.

This is because the substitution of haymmi for the directive "a mi" is both a subtraction and an addition, the replacement of an intended meaning with another." Kate Cooper discusses this in "*Elle* and *L*: Sexualized Textuality in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Romance Notes* 25 (1985): 341–60. See also Linda Zaerr's succinct analysis of the role of the "haymmi": "Eufemie's ambiguous utterance leads ultimately to a kiss and then a wedding. The auditory effect of homonymy is thus the foundation of their marriage." Linda Marie Zaerr, "When Silence Plays Vielle: The Metaperformance Scenes of *Le Roman de Silence* in Performance," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 42.1 (March 2009): 99.

30. R. H. Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986): 81–99. See, for instance, Roger Pensom's review of Bloch's article as it was reprinted in an edited collection, *Images of Power: Medieval History/Discourse/Literature*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Stephen C. Nichols, Yale French Studies 70 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), reviewed in *French Studies* 42.2 (April 1, 1988): 198–200, where Pensom, who in this review seems quite vehement in his opposition to deconstructive readings in general and takes pleasure in finding errors in interpretations made by "deconstructive" critics, writes that "the text is ruthlessly abused in the interests of his *parti pris* . . . [and of a specific reading so that] whatever the textual problems here, this must be wrong" (199). It is also commonly noted that some critics took Bloch's reading as the correct one, for example: "line 886 as 'hate me' resurfacing in [Loren] Ringer, 'Exchange, Identity and Transvestism in *Le roman de Silence*,' *Dalhousie French Studies* 28 (1994): 3–13," as cited in Karen Pratt, "Humor in the *Roman de Silence*," in *Arthurian Literature* 19, *Comedy in Arthurian Literature*, eds. K. Busby and R. Dalrymple (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), 87–103, quotation at 97n34. "Hate me" as a reading of "haymmi!" did not, however, get much purchase beyond this second example.

31. M. W. Bychowski, "Transvestite Metaphysics" on the blog *Transliterature: Things Transform*, discusses this same passage as part of her consideration of "Nature's quantum approach to gender," reading this passage in the *Roman de Silence* as part of a philosophical/theological theory of substance being worked out in this romance. See http://www.thingstransform.com, blog post, April 4, 2015. The blog notes that this post is the transcription of a talk given by Bychowski titled "Transvestite Metaphysics: Quantum Entanglement and Natural Philosophy in 13th Century Literature," delivered at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in Orlando, March 18–22, 2015 (accessed April 18, 2018).

32. Lorraine Kochanske Stock uses this passage as an example of how Cador and Eufemie, who had started out as relative equals despite their sexed difference, experience a "redistribution of power and authority once married. "With her mother's complicity, Silence is consigned to a life of deceit, gender-impersonation and cross-dressing," writes Stock in "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable': Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 7.2 (Summer 1997): 7–34, quotations at 22, 23. This perhaps does not take into account the ways in which Silence enjoys his life as a man! In contrast, Heather Tanner argues, "Cador is clearly the decision maker or lord, but as a good husband and lord, he always seeks his wife's advice and consent. Her wisdom is now his, just as both are of one mind and body by marriage. Eufemie is subsumed into Cador's persona ("the countess, his wife"), and yet Cador never assumes her consent. He truthfully presents his ideas and plans and

seeks her agreement and counsel. By doing so, he preserves the honor of both, and the result is a productive and happy marriage as well as a peaceful county." Heather Tanner, "Lords, Wives and Vassals," *Journal of Women's History* 24.1 (Spring 2012): 150.

33. The notion of not one will but multiple wills at odds with one another is associated with Saint Augustine, who wrote of internal contradiction that "the mind orders itself to make an act of will, and it would not give this order unless it willed to do so; yet it does not carry out its own command. . . . For the will commands that an act of will should be made, and it gives this command to itself, not to some other will. The reason, then, why the command is not obeyed is that it is not given with the full will. . . . So there are two wills in us, because neither by itself is the whole will, and each possesses what the other lacks." Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961), bk. 8, chap. 9, 172.

34. In the "Hagiographic Appendix" to her study *Clothes Make the Man*, Valerie Hotchkiss lists no fewer than thirty-four so-called transvestite saints, including some who had only very briefly lived their lives as a sex other than the one they had been officially assigned. Her list comprises only persons assigned female at birth who live as men ("recognition of holiness is earned primarily through the denial of womanhood." Valerie Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland, 1996), 13.

35. Weisl, "How to Be a Man," 114.

36. In "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Romance Quarterly* 55.1 (2008): 35–48, Katherine H. Terrell wonders why "the text lends itself to such widely divergent readings" and takes it as her objective to answer this question of, in my own words, in-between-ness. She argues that "critics disagree so fundamentally about the poem's gender politics because gender itself is a radically unstable concept in *Silence*" (36).