The Specular Image of the Gender-Neutral Name: Naming Silence in *Le Roman de Silence*

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The article analyzes the relationship between naming and identity by reading *Le Roman de Silence* in the context of feminist and psychoanalytic theories. Silence's subjectivity is constituted by, and challenges, notions of a stable signifier. (EFL)

Segnor, que vos diroie plus?
Ains ot a non Scilensiüs:
Ostés est -us, mis i est -a,
Si est només Scilentiä. [1]

[Lords, what more should I say?
Before, her name was Silenctius;
the *-us* was removed and *-a* put in its place,
and she was named Scilentia.][2]

Bodies only become whole, *i.e.*, totalities, by the idealizing and totalizing specular image which is situated through time by the sexually marked name.

Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (72)

Amid debates over sexual difference in feminist discourse,[3] medieval texts such as Heldris de Cornuälle's *Le Roman de Silence*, until recently excluded from the twentieth-century conception of the Middle Ages, pose a compelling and potent problem. Given our current awareness of the significance of the name in medieval poetry and the prevalence of social forces that subordinate women, what is the significance of a text that claims a male author, yet silently speaks a feminine voice, and is concerned with issues of female self-awareness, capabilities, and liberty within a patriarchal society? *Le Roman de Silence* challenges our understanding of medieval concepts of authorship and of gender constructs, and it provides a historical context for a discussion of current

feminist concerns with these issues. By relating the story of Silence, a woman raised as a man to circumvent a hasty and unjust patriarchal law preventing women from inheriting land, Heldris interrogates hierarchical structures and the paradoxical ability of Silence to communicate. I will examine these large issues through a discussion of the role of Silence's name in the poem.[4]

R. Howard Bloch's article 'Silence and Holes' (1985) read Silence as a metaphor for poetics, initiating discourse on *Le Roman de Silence* that explores and analyzes the sexuality and textuality of Heldris's language. The translations by Regina Psaki (1991) and Sarah Roche-Mahdi (1992) attempt to carve a place for the text within the medieval canon. In 1993 E. Jane Burns published her ground-breaking *Bodytalk*, in which she discusses *Le Roman de Silence* as one of many medieval texts in which a female voice tacitly speaks through the language of a male author. Aside from Burns, Psaki, and Roche-Mahdi, few scholars have argued in print that the romance is a feminist text. In fact, while admitting the presence of multiple layers of textual meaning, Peter Allen (1989) and Simon Gaunt (1990) both privilege the literal level of the text to argue that the romance is explicitly 'antifeminist.'

Silence's precariously 'sexually marked name' referred to in the epigraph to this article addresses psychoanalytic notions of the dynamic producing a name that is consituted by kinship laws. To be named, for Lacan, is to be forcefully interpellated by the law.[5] Against the stable dimension of lineage and kinship forwarded by Lacan, Silence's relationship to her own name illustrates a more complex relationship between name and bodily ego, providing early evidence of complex psychological processes in subjects of the Middle Ages. Silence's name 'works as a politically invested and investing performative' that 'sustains the integrity of the body,' even while it undermines and transgresses the very law that imposes its force through the name (Butler 72).

Portraying Silence as a woman caught between the forces of nature and nurture (who are, remarkably, personified in the poem), Heldris destabilizes the hierarchical categorization that associates women with nature and men with culture and contributes to twentieth-century contemporary feminist debates over essentialism and constructivism.[6] Read in this manner, Silence transcends personification as a 'pure biological entity' and assumes significance for any being involved in a process of self-creation. I agree with Burns's claim in *Bodytalk* that 'woman [is] a process "coming from the body," thereby taking into account the significance of the body in constructing female subjectivity without reducing it to anatomy' (244). Silence's identity, initially constructed by her masculinized Latinate name, is revealed throughout the romance to be not a state, but a complex process that enables female subjectivity to transcend purely anatomical 'nature' as well as constructed appearance or 'nurture.'

The concept of the name as an abstract label incorporates the stability of the Old French nominative 'Silence' and the flexible instability of the Latinate nominatives 'Silentius' and 'Silentia.' As Michèle Perret notes in her discussion of female transvestism in four Old French texts,

> The extreme instability of the sign, and especially the problematic relation of the sign to its referent, is revealed most particularly in this area of sexual difference. It is this problem of reference which brings into these narratives of sexual ambiguity a whole play of language. (In Psaki xxxiv)

Further, Regina Psaki juxtaposes these Old French texts with the later Italian epics *Orlando Furioso* and *Gerusalemme Liberata* to claim that this topos of the play of language 'results in the exposure of the instabilities which lie close beneath the surface of both language and sexual difference' (xxxiv). The initial naming ceremony, the acquisition of the name 'Malduit,' and the final moment when Silence resumes her feminine identity all playfully signify the arbitrary nature of the name as it relates to gender. The French name 'Silence' with its final -e includes both feminine and masculine attributes as 'natural' to Silence's identity. The genderless name enables Silence to maintain a sense of self regardless of the Latin nominative denoting her gender at a given moment:

> '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.
> Se nos li tolons dont cest -us
> Nos li donrons natural us,
> Car cis -us est contre nature,
> Mais l'altres seroit par nature.' (2074–82)
>
> ['He will be named Silentius,
> and if it happens by chance
> that his true nature is discovered,
> we will change the *-us* to *-a*,
> and she will be named Silentia.
> If we remove this *-us* from her
> we will give her more natural custom,
> for this *-us* is against nature,
> but the other would be according to nature.']

Focusing on the 'natural' relationship of the gendered self to the name, Cador and Eupheme perceive the application of a male suffix as 'unnatural;' yet the couple proceed to name their child in an 'artificial' manner when they publicly claim that Silence is male. Aside from the self-conscious textual

concern with the name, the couple seems quite satisfied with their decision to name their child publicly as a male. This play on the 'naturalness' of the name as it reflects gender identity reveals that for Heldris, 'natural' and 'anatomical' are not coterminous. Contrary to antifeminist clichés, anatomy is not destiny, or, as Cixous argues, 'Sexual difference is not determined merely by the fantasized relationship to anatomy, which is based, to a great extent, upon the point of view' (Marks 95). Naming Silence in an apparently 'artificial' manner ultimately enables her to evade the confining constructs of a sex and gender dichotomy that imposes a false sense of that which is 'natural' and that which is 'constructed.' Furthermore, by calling attention to the artifice of the name, gendered or gender-neutral, Heldris reveals that the name is always an imposed linguistic contruct and that subjectivity is only precariously bound to its apparently stable patrilineality.

The question of gender, though foregrounded in the public realm where liberty is based on categorical identity, is relatively unimportant in the ontological space which is situated between the public and private spheres. Thus, Silence exemplifies what the anthropologist Gilbert Herdt (1994) terms a 'third gender.' Significantly, this term does not merely replace the binary system with a tripartite one; rather, 'third' refers to possibilities for multiple subjectivities. For Herdt, third genders are discovered when the subject is enabled to place her/himself between and outside of the public and the private realms, as well as between and outside of nature and culture. The inner self does not merely signify the private space of 'identity,' which Lacan deconstructs; rather, it refers to the 'ontological space situated half-way between the private and the public, between the individual and the secret side of the social person' (Herdt 77). This ontological space liberates the being from the dictates of Nature and Nurture, enabling the self to be present as a being, and not a victim of reductive sex and gender categorization. Further, the subject that begins existence within this ontological space may ultimately affect the public and private categories preventing such freedom within nature and culture. Public and private expectations and regulation will then be altered by the forces that disrupt their power from within the confines of the law.

The ease with which the name can be changed reflects the paradoxical dynamic by which language is both integral to and arbitrarily associated with identity and gender. The self that lies between the public and private realms remains the same while the public relationship to the signified may change according to the signifier. When Silence's feminine identity is discovered, her name change takes places in four brief lines, revealing the relative unimportance of the name's relationship to identity:

Segnor, que vos diroie plus?
Ains ot a non Scilensius:
Ostés est -us, mis i est -a,
Si est nomes Scilentiä.(6665–68)

[Lords, what more shall I say?
Before, her name was Silentius;
the -us was removed and an -a put in its place.
and she was named Scilentia.]

Here Heldris exhibits a certain nonchalance about the drastic gender alteration that occurs with the change of the final syllable of the name. 'Que vos diroie plus?' [What more should I say?] suggests that, at this moment, words are almost unnecessary, superfluous. Silence's identity is not dependent upon the name; rather, the name changes in order to enable the public to categorize Silence 'properly' within its paradigmatic perception of sexual difference. This relatively stable self reconfigures Judith Butler's assertion that the cultural recognition of identity relies on the changeable name:

> Identity is secured precisely in and through the transfer of the name, the name as a site of transfer or substitution, the name, then, as precisely what is always impermanent, different from itself, more than itself, the non-self-identical. (153)

Silence's identity is secured both despite and because of the name change. The changeable name then becomes replaced in a positive context that perceives its liberatory potential, rather than its erasure of identity. Silence's identity does not rely on the name, and the name does not completely reflect her ontological subjectivity. While Silence may appear to be the victim of a changing signifier, it is the very flexibility of the signifier that enables her to adapt to and affect the patrilinear law. Since the Old French name does not confine Silence to sex or gender categories, it signifies her self, while the Latinate name merely enables the public to categorize her as male/female, masculine/feminine.

The process of naming—'the baptism' (2083–26)—inculcates the law while subverting it; by naming Silence according to a different sex category, and by giving her a genderless Old French name, Cador and Euphemie simultaneously reaffirm the strength of the law and defy its regulations. Therefore the law, as well as the name, becomes flexible due to Silence's empowered experiences within the public realm, and her evident self-conscious awareness within the private realm of personal reflection. The layers of irony surrounding the play on the signifier 'silence' are foregrounded as Silence is situated next to the king whose law was initially responsible for disinheriting women. Silence is

restored to her 'natural' public position, but what has become 'natural' to her—the masculine traits she has acquired and developed—cannot immediately be dissolved by the name. What is natural here bears little relationship to anatomy. Although Silence, while dressed as a man, demonstrates the ability to perform chivalric feats and intellectual achievements that are otherwise considered to be gendered male, her anatomy remains the same, suggesting that what is 'natural' to a being is not related exclusively to anatomy, but also to an external perception of gender and to an internalized conception of the self.

Readings of the text that find it transmitting anti-feminist ideas are largely based on evidence found in a literal interpretation of the final episode of the romance (*e.g.*, Allen). Since Queen Eufeme is executed for acting on her sexual desire and Silence replaces her, the poem might appear to present an 'extraordinary anti-feminism' that promotes an ideal of woman as silent and obedient. Indeed, Allen's argument relies heavily on King Ebain's misogynistic outburst: 'Sens de feme gist en taisir.' (6399) ['Woman's sense lies in silence.'][7] Allen—mistakenly, I suggest—reads the king's dictum as the poet's voice prescribing the moral of the tale. According to Allen, Heldris's text deliberately supports the conceptual and political paradigms that silence women, rather than representing a desire to alter the structures that subordinate them. We may, however, read the king's manifesto as conveying the notion that Silence herself, so long able to *taisir* [keep silent], houses 'women's sense.' By replacing the transgressive Queen Eufeme with Silence, a rational and honorable woman, who herself has been wounded by Queen Eufeme's slander, the text implies that Silence represents 'women's sense.' Heldris explicitly claims that Silence's goodness is superior to Queen Eufeme's evil:

> Se j'ai jehi blasmee Eufeme
> Ne s'en doit irier bone feme.
> Se j'ai Eufeme moult blasmee
> Jo ai Silence plus loëe. (6695–99)
>
> [If I have seemed to blame Eupheme,
> no good woman should be angry about it;
> if I have blamed Eupheme greatly,
> I have praised Silence more.]

Heldris conspicuously and sagaciously avoids discriminating against all women on the basis of sex and gender. Furthermore, since Silence lives a disintegration of gender boundaries, she demonstrates that 'women's sense' transcends gender categorization, and applies to concepts of reason and morality within the public realm of politics, as well as in the private, personal

sphere. If we read the romance as teaching morals by showing what is *clearly wrong*, the details and the multiple layers of voice in the story suggest that the text critiques the subordinate status of women in order to change it.

Just as King Ebain's claim that 'women's sense lies in Silence' is complicated by the possibility of multiple textual readings, the very name 'Silence' contributes further to the linguistic and psychological complexity of women in the tale. This psychological complexity is considered rare among medieval chivalric romances, and it is striking that Heldris would attribute overt psychological dimension to Silence. Imagining a time when women will not be marginalized and she will be able to express her 'masculine' traits without cross-dressing, that is, a time when identity will not rely on sex and gender categories, Silence considers her predicament in an internal dialogue that reveals the trauma associated with the imposition of sex and gender categories.

> ...poise dont en son corage
> Tot l'us de feme a son usage,
> Et voit que miols valt li us d'ome
> Que l'us de feme, c'est la some.
> 'Voire,' fait il, 'a la male eure
> Irai desos, quant sui deseure. [...]
> Por quanque puet faire Nature
> Ja n'en ferai descoverture.' (2635–40; 2655–56)
>
> [...he weighed in his heart
> the woman's role against his own,
> and saw that a man's life is better
> than a woman's, all things considered.
> 'Truly,' he said, 'in an evil hour
> will I go underneath, when I am on top. [...]
> No matter what Nature can do
> I will not reveal my secret.']

This internal dialogue exhibits Silence's desire to express herself yet preserve the liberties she enjoys as a man. Joined with her knightly valor, intellectual abilities, wit, and, success as a jongleur, this sympathetic representation of Silence suggests that contrary to King Ebain's belief, women are capable of a public function in society beyond the realm of domesticity. Perhaps more importantly, Silence's desire motivates her to remain stubborn in the face of warring 'natural' forces that would prefer she accept her traditionally feminine role. Heldris's own willingness to allow the gendered pronouns to remain flexible is further evidence of his approach to gender as constructed. Clearly, when Silence is dressed as a man, he is called 'he,' and when dressed as a woman, she is called 'she.' Gender is thus linguistically performed and narrated.

In a textual move that further foregrounds the performative nature of gender categories Heldris narrates Silence's decision to become a jongleur—literally making the self into a performing object, thereby mitigating the trauma associated with Silence's constant awareness of the performance of gendered identity. If she is always performing as a jongleur, then the feeling of loss and lack imposed by the difference between her sex and her gender might be lessened by calling attention to the process of constant performance in daily life. Disguised as a jongleur, her face stained with nettle juice, Silence dons an additional mask and enters an intermediate realm between the private, domestic 'feminine' space and the public, worldly 'masculine' space, while disavowing her noble status. Here she is able to express her complex self unrestricted by the cultural regulations of the public and private realms. Like her textual peers Tristan and Nicolete, Silence finds liberation in the open role of the traveling, apparently rootless jongleur.[8]

As a jongleur, Silence is able to enter the court to perform, but remains outside the court as she continues to travel and live beyond the reach of court law. Her father's decision to banish all jongleurs from Cornwall locates the jongleur in this intermediate realm between public and private spaces. Silence literally is exiled. However, Cador's self-conscious act that prevents jongleurs from seeking entrance into Cornwall paradoxically affirms their presence through the very assurance of their absence. Cador's mourning over the apparent loss of his child Silence ironically results in the potential prevention of her return, revealing a moment of textual mimesis where Silence's presence is affirmed in the court through the very words by which Cador laments his loss:

> Li cuens set que li jogleör
> ont pris del mont le mireör. (3115–16)
>
> [The count knew that the jongleurs
> had taken away the mirror of the world.]

By this banishment Cador unwittingly reinforces the king's law that he seeks to evade when he raises Silence as a boy. His own elimination of jongleurs from his court prevents Silence's participation in the public court processes and in the inheritance of land.

The double image of the 'mirror of the world,' superficially a claim of Silence's perfection, reveals the parallel between her intermediate position and the role of the poet, as well as the precisely performative nature of her presence as a jongleur and as a sexed being. If the poet's language holds this mirror then Silence as a jongleur also offers a representation of the world. Furthermore, between the courtly public realm and the domestic private realm,

she is able to reflect a purer sense of the self within the world as it is simultaneously free from and subject to the regulations of the law. According to the epithet 'mirror of the world' Silence represents a paradoxically stable part of the self in flux—that part of the self which exists within an ontological space within the world, also evident in Silence's relationship to her name. That is, the specular image of Silence as mimetic presence is the very image that reflects the process of her bodily formation signified by her sexually marked name.[9] However, the flexibility inscribed into her name is also the very function by which Silence creates her own subjectivity.

During her travels as a jongleur Silence assumes the name 'Malduit' or 'Malductus' in order to insure her disguise and render herself unrecognizable. The additional name change renders Silence's disguise double-layered, as her masculine jongleur attire is reinforced by her alias, which means 'ill-taught' or 'ill-guided.' Maintaining her disguise until she is certain of the Count's favorable reception, she denies her identity when confronted by a perceptive old man:

> Uns viellars l'a bien ravisé
> Et voit bien qu'il a devisé. (3559–60)
>
> [An old man had studied Silence closely
> and saw clearly what the boy had done.]

That the old man 'saw clearly what [Silence] had done,' attributes active agency to Silence's relation to her name and suggests that despite the concealing name Silence's 'identity' is evident to those who care to look closely. The name can neither contain nor conceal the inner self of the being. Butler asks, 'Are there occasions in which the fictive and unstable status of that bodily ego trouble the name, expose the name as a crisis in referentiality?' (139). Silence's bodily ego evident to the old man presents one possible response to this question. For Silence, the 'crisis in referentiality' inherent in the name signifies her ability to evade the law of the patronym and the regulatory law of the father.

Ironically, Silence's choice of alias reinforces the old man's belief that 'Malductus' is Silence. Responding to the man's inquiry, Silence gives her stage name:

> 'Je me fac Malduit apieler.—'
> Et li viellars dont li respont:
> 'Bien sai que vostres nons despont, '(3576–78)
>
> ['I call myself Malductus.'
> The old man answered him:
> 'I know well what your name signifies,']

Though Silence continues to deny her given name, she does reveal her identity by choosing a name that signifies her self on many levels. Unaware of her anatomical sex, the old man reads the name as a signifier conveying Silence's misuse of her talents since 'the boy' spent much time as a jongleur. Though Silence does not offer her name, she reveals her self to the old man, who immediately becomes 'quite sure' of her identity (3596–97). The ontological self tells the old man that Silence is present despite the jongleur disguise; however, Cador, not so perceptive as the old man, cannot recognize Silence's identity:

> Son fil demande et il le tient:
> Il le convoite et nel voit nient. (3619–20)
>
> [He asked for his son, and he was holding him;
> he longed for him, but did not see him at all.]

Even when she reveals her given name, Cador relies instead on the tacit sign of the birthmark on Silence's right shoulder to confirm her identity. For Cador, whose intuitive awareness of the other fails him, the body reveals more than the name (3647–50). In fact, this moment which might seem to designate an essentialist position on determining identity works to demonstrate the impossibility of pure recognition. Only by virtue of the physical mark of lineage can Cador confirm that his child is his own. Again, the name is insufficient in designating Silence's identity. It is possible that Cador fails to perceive Silence because she has discovered a place outside of the Law of the Father; in any case Cador's obstinacy suggests that names are changeable, while physical realities are static—supporting his decision to raise Silence as a boy by changing her name and appearance.

Despite his own desire to turn Silence into a male, Cador's myopia in the face of Silence's self may also be attributed to his inability to conceive of beings that do not conform to sex and gender categories. That he depends on the visual proof provided by Silence's birthmark in order to identify her positively implies his need to assure himself of her sex as well as her heritage. Butler demonstrates the difficulty associated with conceptualizing beings that evade sex and gender categorization: 'When beings do not appear properly gendered their very humanness comes into question'(8). Cador cannot identify Silence because she does not conform to his categorical expectations that would enable a definition of Silence to fall within 'masculinity' or 'femininity.' Further revealing the difficulty of thinking beyond the sex and gender dichotomy, Clifford Geertz critiques this binary system: 'What falls between male and female is a darkness, an offense against reason' (In Herdt 38). Silence, as the being who defies sex and gender categories, and who can only be clearly

identified by her birth mark, signifies the unnameable being. As such, Silence is temporarily 'inhuman.' Clearly, Heldris is presenting a case of an individual who is capable of creating a self which exists both inside and outside of gender constructs. The relative insignificance of the signifier reveals Silence's ability to maintain an inner, flexible and fluid ontological self, while superficially altering her place in the public realm.

Combined with her fluctuating name, Silence's ability to learn languages enables her to master the binary linguistic system that requires her categorization within the public realm. If, as Walter Ong argues, education in the classical languages is 'the crucial step in gender demarcation,' then Silence's skill at letters would seem to signify her acquisition of a male gender (In Gilbert and Gubar 528). Contrary to Nature's claim on Silence's female sex and gender, her appearance and abilities signify to the external realm that she is a man. The relationship between the common or 'mother tongue' and the learned or 'father tongue' depicts language as the source of gender difference: 'Our first tongue is called our "mother tongue" in English and in many other languages...the only "father speech" is a language such as, for example, Latin or Greek, inherited as land is, an external possession [which] refers to a [legalistic] line of conveyance, not to personal origins' (In Gilbert and Gubar 532). Heldris reveals an alternative to this categorical perception of language and identity when Silence ultimately influences the reversal of patriarchal laws. Linking the natural, mother tongue and a foreign patriarchal language by Silence's ability to learn that patriarchal language, Heldris suggests that a woman may catalyze the reversal of discriminatory laws that prevent her from inheriting land.

In addition to the effects of her subversive cross-dressing,[10] Silence proves her ability to affect the law and formulates a gender economy when, returning from her travels as a jongleur, she asks payment for playing for the court. Refusing to be classified as a commodity, Silence follows the precedent established by her mother's request to have her choice of a husband if she cures Cador, and forces the court to acknowledge her performance as a product. Silence sagaciously convinces Cador to retract the law prohibiting jongleurs from playing in Cornwall as an exchange for her work. By this economy of performance Silence moves closer to earning inheritance of the land that, aside from her female sex, would rightfully belong to her. In terms of Ebain's misogynist inheritance laws, Ong's land metaphor works in two ways: first, Silence is enabled to inherit land because she has proven her ability to 'inherit' a different type of regulated possession, knowledge of Greek and Latin; second, since the external inheritance refers to a 'legalistic line of conveyance' rather

than 'personal origins' Silence is liberated from an essentialized gender and becomes a representative of her own process of becoming, rather than a categorical group labeled by 'nature' or 'culture.'

Butler defines this place beyond essentialism and constructivism:

> Paradoxically, the inquiry into the kinds of erasures and exclusions by which the construction of the subject operates is no longer constructivism, but neither is it essentialism. For there is an 'outside' to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute 'outside,' an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse; as a constitutive 'outside,' it is that which can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders. (8)

In this complex analysis of the meeting place of essentialism and constructivism, we can perceive the way in which Silence, as 'outside' patriarchal norms, is able to affect those norms. Since Silence is only rendered 'outside' if we consider her female 'Nature,' as a man and as an educated person she remains within the public realm, representative of one aspect of patriarchal society. Her unique position as a female endowed with all of the liberties secured for men enables her to challenge the borders that structure her language, her self, and her possessions. Challenging the borders of gender categorization, Silence is ultimately able to undermine the laws that initially marginalized her; she defends the rights of women who perceive their identity not merely as essential or socially constructed, but as a process of liberation and becoming which then serves as a means both of accessing knowledge of patriarchal languages and of acquiring land.

Heldris's representation of Nature's role in creating, or writing, Silence exhibits the complexity of the relationship between gender, land, and language. When Nature is forming Silence's body, the act is rendered in terms of writing a text. As Kate Mason Cooper notes, 'Nature has literally written [Silence's] parts.'[11] Indeed, Nature certainly inscribes the masquerade of feminine ideals onto Silence's figure. However, this does not impose a necessarily essentialist view on the text. Rather, the very image of writing the body reveals the relationship between the body and the text which situates Silence between the essence and the construct as well as between Nature and Nurture. The scene recalls Cador's need to identify Silence physically by her birthmark—her nature—which is directly contrary to the old man's ability to identify Silence despite her 'nurtured' disguise. The significance of the birthmark, and the writing of Silence's features render Silence's body a text, written simultaneously by nature, and by Heldris.

Comparing the writing of Silence's features with her internal discussion provoked by Nature exposes the conflict between the self that is presented in the external realm, and the self that is known internally and essentially. In response to Nature's attempt to convince Silence to shed her male garb and live her life as a woman, Silence says:

> ... Tel n'oï onques!
> Silencius! qui sui jo donques?
> Silencius ai non, jo cui,
> U jo sui altres que ne fui.[...]
> ...Sui jo Scilentius,
> Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus. (2532–35; 2537–38)
>
> [Such a thing I have never heard!
> Silentius! Who am I then?
> My name is Silencius, I think,
> or I am some one else {other} than I was.[...]
> ...I *am* Scilentius,
> it seems to me, or I am nothing.]

The multiple spellings of Silence's name here may be read as reflecting the movement of the Latin nominative in terms of gender as well as in terms of specific definition of identity. Though Silence refers to herself as a man in this passage, it is not fair merely to say that 'she is a man or nothing.' Rather, we must consider the stability of the Old French name 'Silence' beneath the Latin name 'Silentius.' Silence refers to herself in Latin because that is what she has been taught. Her 'outside,' signified by the Latin name, is a means of referring to her 'inside,' signified by the Old French name, thus exhibiting a connection between patriarchal language, matriarchal language, and a language that incorporates and transcends gender-specific language and identification. Faced with Nature's threat to rob her of her identity, Silence reveals her determination to escape Nature's confines and maintain the identity signified by her genderless name. She does not submit to the physical constructs with which Nature endowed her; instead, she seeks her identity from within her own self-knowledge. The gender-neutral name 'Silence' ultimately reminds Silence of her identity. Due to her parents' decision to choose a name that remains the same regardless of gender application, Silence maintains a sense of self that evades gender categorization. Silence's inner self is privately signified by the genderless name, suggesting the stability of the self despite the changeable Latinate nominative.

The name acts as the signifier of the matter which is perceived, in Butler's terms, 'as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface' (9). When the name itself fluctuates, an

additional dimension is added to the impossibility of achieving a complete stability in a subject that already is admitted to be in a constant process of materialization. The insistent perpetuation of this flexibility renders the individual a being who is always in the process of becoming. In that process the self learns to incorporate, and possibly evade, culturally and linguistically produced sex and gender categories. If we juxtapose the play on Silence's name with Heldris de Cornuälle's name—which, significantly, is placed within a text that presents a name as both concealing and revealing—it becomes possible to read the poem as a comment upon the ambiguous nature of authorship. Ultimately the text, like the individual, must be read as a constant process of becoming.

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NOTES

1 I quote Thorpe's edition, 6665–68; further on line numbers are cited parenthetically in the text. Thorpe notes that Heldris, named twice in the poem, is mentioned in no other medieval documents. This fact leads Thorpe to asssume that Heldris was male, demonstrating the exclusionary trends that for years prevented *Silence* from being an object of attention, and preserving traditional notions that texts such as Heldris's are rare exceptions within medieval literature. In this issue Lorraine Stock considers the gender of the historical author.

2 Translations from the poem are by Regina Psaki unless otherwise noted.

3 Feminist discourse here refers to that criticism concerned with issues of women's writing, women's language, and the place of women within society. On the essentialist / constructivist (post-structuralist) debate, see especially Miller and Kamuf (1992).

4 Peggy McCracken's insightful article, '"The Boy who was a Girl": Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*,' appeared while my essay was being edited for this issue. McCracken's analysis of Silence's gender performativity and the role of naming in the romance clearly demonstrates the broad literary and social implications of Silence's subversion of gender categories.

5 For a fuller analysis of the name in relation to the subject and of the fragmentation of the self, see Jacques Lacan (1966).

6 See Cixous (1980), 90.

7 I quote Allen's translation here.
8 Tristan finds liberty in his disguise, enabling him to be cured of his poison wound. Nicolete, disguised as a jongleur in the forest, attracts her lover with her music.
9 See the epigraph to this article where I quote Butler, 72.
10 Butler explains the subversive effects of cross-dressing: 'drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality' (*Bodies That Matter* 125). See also her earlier book *Gender Trouble.*
11 Mason refers to lines 1917–20 in *Le Roman de Silence* to support her reading of Nature's writing Silence's body.