Sacred Romance: *Silence* and the Hagiographical Tradition

LYNNE DAHMEN

The tradition of *vitae,* specifically of crossdressing female saints, serves as an important source and point of reference for this didactic romance.(LD)

In his recent book, *Sacred Biography,* Thomas Heffernan dispenses with the term 'hagiography,' which he claims has come to signify 'a pious fiction or an exercise in panegyric' (16). Implicit in his criticism of what the term has come to mean is a warning that generic distinctions, when overused, can become a hindrance to evaluation. Thus, by altering the term used to describe the saints' lives he evaluates, he hopes to deflect some of the negative stereotypes associated with these works. The generic term 'romance,' though perhaps not as negatively charged as 'hagiography,' can also lead to pigeonholing texts into limiting generic categorizations, thereby discouraging readings from various other perspectives which could enrich our appreciation of them.

Central to Heffernan's analysis of the narrative lives of saints is a discussion of the common literary tradition that these texts shared with romance narratives. Likewise, many medieval romances derive elements from the hagiographical tradition. I will examine how the *Roman de Silence* draws from this tradition of sacred biographies. The text, though containing many formal and thematic aspects associated with romance, manipulates the modern reader's horizon of expectations for medieval romance by incorporating narrative and stylistic elements associated with saints' lives or *vitae,* while it lacks elements central to typical romance.[1] I contend that an awareness of the ways in which Heldris of Cornwall utilizes the literary tradition of sacred biography can allow modern readers to understand his atypical romance better. I believe that the poet consciously creates a hybrid text by combining contemporary narrative traditions associated with both romance and *vitae.*

GENERIC ASPECTS OF ROMANCE AND SACRED BIOGRAPHY

The form and content of the medieval romance have been explored throughout the twentieth century, and scholars continue to investigate the usefulness and limitations of 'romance' as a generic designation.[2] As with most such labels, the term 'romance,' used to designate a generic reference, implies an evaluation of both form and content. Scholars of the Old French romance often focus on the narrative forms associated with the romance genre, such as octosyllabic rhyming couplets, use of the vernacular, and length. In opposition to formal aspects, scholars also explore the themes or style found in many romances.

Silence can easily be identified as a traditional romance from the point of view of form. The Old French text's c. 6500 lines of octosyllabic rhyming couplets match the standard form for not only twelfth-century verse romances, but also many hagiographical *vitae*. In terms of content, *Silence* may be placed in the middle category of Jean Bodel's thirteenth-century division of poetry into *matières*. Its setting in Britain and the large role given to Merlin at the end of the work associate the romance with the 'matter of Britain.' However, noticeably absent are King Arthur himself, the Round Table, extended chivalric adventures, and most important, a male knight who serves various ladies. Indeed, the work seems set in an indefinite time after the reign of Arthur, close enough to allow for the inclusion of Merlin (106–109).

Silence also satisfies another common definition of romance as it relates to the process of *mettre en roman*. *Translatio studii*, the idea of translation from Latin into a Romance language, can be read as a rhetorical trope as well as identifying the process of translation. Though no one Latin text can be identified as the source for Heldris's work, one quarter into the work he tells his audience:

> De Cador, de s'engendreüre,
> Comence chi tels aventure
> C'ainques n'oïstes tele en livre.
> Si com l'estorie le nos livre,
> Qu'en latin escrite lizons,
> En romans si le vos disons. (1657–62)
>
> [Of Cador and his offspring
> begins such a tale of adventure
> as you have never heard of in any book.
> Just as it was written
> in the Latin version we read,
> we will tell it to you in French].[3]

Though Heldris may have had no one work in front of him, his reference to a Latin original can be read as a typical motif to establish narrative authority. However, we cannot discount the possibility that he actually did work from Latin sources.

Though *Silence* can easily be placed in the tradition of romance, the fact that the hero is a heroine clearly violates the standards of the genre. Many women do, however, appear in the *vitae* of the period. Read in this latter tradition, *Silence* can be seen as both a fictional biography set in the distant and unreal world of romance and as a poem which praises the abilities and sanctity of a Christian model. The work thereby satisfies two social functions often assigned to literature: to instruct and to entertain.

Religious narratives placed in the vernacular often explicitly took on these two roles. As Heffernan suggests, hagiographical narratives were designed to 'teach (*docere*) the truth of the faith through the principle of individual example' (19). As Lynda Coon elaborates, the *vitae* enacted precepts of faith, thereby reinforcing the power of God's word 'made flesh' (10). The use of hagiographical narratives was even advocated by church fathers such as Gregory of Tours, who writes in his *Liber Vitae Patrum* that his own interest in writing down these lives was 'to build up the church...[because] the life of the saints not only opens up their intentions but also excites the minds of listeners to emulate them' (cited in Heffernan 4).

Church doctrine, often reflecting contemporary or earlier church decisions, appears explicitly in both secular and religious literature in the form of prayers, recitations, or even declarations of creed made by the characters. In the *vitae* a character turns away from the secular life, may perform miracles or die a martyr; these actions also appear in romances and *lais*.[4] Many of these elements, including the insertion of prayers, the illustration of sanctity and faith through the behavior of the protagonist, and a willingness to be martyred, appear in *Silence,* though the main character never seeks a religious life.[5] Though Silence does not perform explicit miracles, and never pursues a religious calling, her life can be associated with a specific tradition of crossdressing female saints, some of whom are known as *monachoparthenoi,* or virgin monks (Hotchkiss 22). The narrative pattern of her life also has much in common with the *vita* one of the most famous male saints of the period, St. Alexis.[6] It is perhaps not surprising that the character Silence can be linked to both male and female hagiographic tradition, as she participates in a split world, being female yet male.

SILENCE AND THE TRADITION OF CROSSDRESSING WOMEN

Though female transvestism is not a common motif in Old French romances, the themes of disguise and the assumption of new identities occur more frequently. The presence of female transvestism in earlier narratives may have been known to Heldris from both classical and religious Latin and vernacular sources. The driving force behind the plot, that a female child is dressed and raised as a male by a parent concerned about maintaining inheritance, also appears in the tale of Iphis and Ianthe in Book IX of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which circulated in both Latin and the vernacular in the later Middle Ages.[7] Likewise, it is not difficult to imagine that a poet so clearly familiar with Christian doctrine, and perhaps a cleric himself, was familiar with the popular tradition of crossdressing female saints. The tradition was so well established that Valerie Hotchkiss, in her study on female crossdressing in medieval Europe, identifies thirty-four such women (14).

A comparison between the life of Silence and the lives of nuns who choose to dress as monks reveals striking narrative similarities.[8] Like many of these figures, Silence has both a masculine and a feminine form of her name in Latin, Scilencius and Scilencia. Saints with two names include Anna/Euphemian, whose second name recalls two characters in *Silence*; Apollonaris/Dorotheus; Eugenia/Eugenius; Euphrosyne/Smaragdus; Euphrosyne/Johannes; and Hilaria/Hilarion, among others (Hotchkiss 131–41). The most significant *vita* for comparison is Rufinius' *Vita Sancta Eugeniae*.[9]

In many of these *vitae,* the disguised women are accused of some type of misconduct, often adultery.[10] Later, often after death, their sex is revealed and they are proven to be innocent. Men's clothing allows them to participate in a cloistered religious life, a realm inherently masculine. Likewise, in a secular sphere, Silence's garb allows her to maintain social privilege granted exclusively to men. The usurpation of a masculine identity also allows the disguised women to escape some of the demands and dangers of womanhood, such as unwanted sexual advances and the burdens of marriage and maternity. It is therefore ironic that the sexual advances many of these women sought to avoid return in the form of overtures from aggressive women who seek, like the Queen Eupheme, to seduce the attractive 'man.' Once rejected, the female suitor often makes the 'monk' a scapegoat for a subsequent pregnancy, accusing her of being the father of the child.

Silence's disguise, like those of the crossdressing saints, is not originally her own idea.[11] Also like these women, she chooses to continue the charade. At puberty, her father stresses that he has undertaken this deception in order

to ensure that his wealth goes to her (2453–54). Silence sees the worldly practicality of maintaining her disguise; her consciousness of the disparity between the two sexes is presented through an internal debate, where she exclaims that she wishes neither to lose her high position nor to dishonor her father (2650–55). Thus, the poet changes the goal of transvestism from moral calling to worldly and courtly practicality—it ensures her inheritance and satisfies courtly and feudal demands for utter loyalty.

Several other narrative elements associated with saintly crossdressing women, the accusation of misconduct, the revelation of true gender and the declaration of innocence, all occur to Silence. However, these events are again placed in a social and courtly context familiar to the readers of romance. The irony of the Queen's accusations of both homosexuality and of attempted sexual assault emerges when Silence's identity is revealed. Stripped naked before the entire court, her masculine self is 'laid to rest' with a transformation completed by Nature, who restores Silence's delicate feminine features which have been 'spoiled' by years of outdoor life as a man (6670–6). Subsequently, Merlin reveals another crossdresser in the court—a nun who is in fact a man, the queen's lover; ironically, the (male) nun sleeps with the queen while the (female) knight is accused of sexual misconduct. The reassertion of Silence's female identity can be read as a type of death; the permanent dissolution of her previous life as a male 'dies' so that she may continue life in the presumably socially preferable role as queen.

SILENCE AND ST. ALEXIS

As Silence is both female yet male, or male yet female, it is perhaps not surprising her life mimics not only a tradition associated with female saints, but also the specific life of a male saint, St. Alexis (Roche-Mahdi xvi, Bloch 1986, 98). That this life was known to both poet and medieval audience is highly probable, as many versions of the life of St. Alexis, in Latin and Old French, in prose and in verse, circulated from the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries; from the thirteenth century alone, two Latin and fourteen French versions survive (Bansen-Harp, Appendix A, 22).

Similarities between the two texts include the circumstances surrounding the births of the protagonists, their later flights from home, and their subsequent returns without (initial) recognition. As Alexis's father wishes a child 'a son talen,' 'according to his desire' (23), so Cador wishes that his child grow 'Si com par lui vint a semence,' (1675)[as if it came from His seed](translation mine). The sincerity of this prayer is undermined by Cador's later qualification, about which the narrator tells us, 'Mais voluntiers, se

Deu pleüst,/ Presist le fil se il l'eüst,' (1981–82)[But he would gladly, if it pleased God,/ have taken a son if given one]. Like the patrician family of St. Alexis, Cador suggests that he would be *more* satisfied with God's gift of a child if it coincided with his own needs regarding social status and issues of inheritance.

In adolescence, Silence temporarily avoids all questions of marriage and sexual reproduction in order to pursue 'alternative' educational and spiritual experiences by running away from home. For Silence, however, no religious calling prompts her departure; rather, she wants to learn to be a *jongleur*, to make up for the fact that she does not know how to embroider (2867–69). Silence's disappearance, like that of Alexis, causes long and loud professions of grief from her parents and the other citizens of Cornwall, who lament as if she is most surely dead, pulling and tearing their hair, beating their breasts and wringing their hands (2997–3001). The poet suggests that he cannot describe the hundredth part of the parents' grief (3017), adding that both were on the point of death and that all the servants kept silent, as the smallest noise could kill the parents (3045–48). The elaborate sorrow and extreme reactions of both parents can be seen as an allusion to the extensive laments which mark the hagiographical *vita* of Alexis.

Though Silence does not flee on her wedding night, like Alexis and many other saints, she does flee as she reaches the age of both sexual maturity and imminent marriage. In fact, it is Nature who reminds Silence that by maintaining her deception she commits crimes against nature. Many women in Cornwall have fallen in love with Silence, thinking that she has 'Tel cose qu'en toi nen a mie,' something that in fact she has not at all, that is, male genitalia (2517). Silence's self-imposed celibacy is thus 'unnatural' and confounds Nature.[12] When Silence later returns to Cornwall, like Alexis, she is not recognized by her own father; however, a mysterious old man knows the truth of her identity and subsequently grants her a type of absolution for her treachery (3589–92). If Nature condemns her deception, this potentially religious figure grants forgiveness. A religious interpretation of this episode is further reinforced by the revelation of a cross–shaped mark on Silence's shoulder which proves her identity to her disbelieving father (3647). At this point in the narrative the similarities with the life of St. Alexis disappear and we must look to the other generic aspects of hagiography that provide a subtext for the romance.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND SILENCE

Two elements remain to be discussed—the explicit insertion of church doctrine into the text, and moments in which God's favor of Silence is clearly

indicated. Both are central to illustrating how the poet adopts elements that reinforce a Christian didactic purpose. As Lewis Thorpe notes, the poet demonstrates a fair knowledge of Christian doctrine (12–13). As an example, Thorpe cites the prayer made by Silence's father, Cador, before he fights the dragon (427–72). In this prayer, Cador recounts the Fall and man's subsequent rebirth through Christ. Although Thorpe does not note it, Cador also turns to theology to convince his wife that, as it says in the New Testament, man and wife become one flesh and blood through marriage; thus, they should be of one mind, his mind. With this argument, he urges her to agree to disguise the sex of their child, should it be born a girl (1695–1725). Later in the text, before Silence's initial confrontation with the queen, the narrator refers to both the Bible and the legend of Tristan (3705–08). The poet decidedly sides with Christian notions of love and marriage by associating the queen with the suffering of both Tristan and Isolde for their (adulterous) love for one another, while likening Silence to Joseph who suffers the unwanted advances of Potiphar's wife.

The most extensive discussion of religious belief occurs in a debate between Nature and Noreture regarding who must claim responsibility for Adam's original sin. In this debate, Nature is associated with the purity of man before the Fall, and Noreture is linked to the corruption of mankind through bad advice. Nature's arguments are summed up in her declaration:

> 'Noreture, car te repoze?
> Quanques Adans fist de rancure,
> Fu par toi, certes, Noreture.
> Car li diäbles le norri
> Par son malvais consel porri.' (6066–70)
>
> ['Nurture, why don't you give up?
> Whatever evil Adam did
> was due to you, Nurture, without a doubt,
> for the Devil fed him
> evil, rotten advice.']

It is notable that there is no mention of Eve, who is implicitly related to both Nurture and Satan, as it was she who gave Adam the 'malvais consel porri'—just as the king's wife has repeatedly given the king bad counsel throughout the narrative.

Noreture is unable to defend herself, and thus relinquishes her grasp over Merlin, whom she has trained—like many a hermit—to live on a vegetarian diet of herbs and berries (6003–06). This episode mirrors the first extensive debate between Nature and Noreture which occurs when Silence is

considering which gender she should maintain. At that moment, it is Nature who is defeated (2597–2604); this first victory is overturned by Nature's ultimate triumph. By association, then, it seems logical that Silence's natural female gender must eventually win out over her masculine nurturing. The tale's end confirms Nature's superiority through the ultimate valorization of Silence as a female raised to the status of queen.[13]

The author also explicitly attributes many events in the narrative to the power of God. Though the names of God, Christ, and Mary are often used in formulaic expressions, I argue that the occurrence of these references goes beyond the casually formulaic and reflects a deliberately didactic aim. As I noted, Silence's birth is marked by prayers and entreaties to God. God answers Cador's prayers not by granting him a male heir, but by allowing the deception to continue for so long. When the two jongleurs plan to kill Silence, she is alerted to this plot by a dream which can be seen as an act of divine intervention—as the narrator subsequently adds, 'mais Dex ne le volt consentir' (3408)[But God won't allow it]. Silence is unafraid since 'Dex l'a bien guari, quil maintient' (3430)[God protected and watched over him].

Silence calls on God once again when trapped in the Queen's bedchamber (4181–2). After this episode the poet tells the audience several more times that Silence cannot be saved from the queen's designs unless God intervenes (4328, 4368–69, 4375–76, 5026–28). God will intervene again when Silence fights in battle for the king (5594–97) and Silence acknowledges that, though Nature has made her a weak female, with God's help none can harm her (5604–10). At the end of this episode, the narrator simply remarks that 'Savoir poés que Dex l'a cier,/ Silence ki le guerre fine' (5646–47)[God was on Silence's side, as you can plainly see,/ for he won the war].

The narrator must again ask for God's intervention when the queen later attacks Silence (5699–5701). In the final trial, in which Silence must capture Merlin, the narrator tells us that Silence will prevail if God is on her side (6106–08). Before going to the king, Silence makes a final prayer to God, asking for proper counsel and appropriate judgment for the queen (6461–70). When Silence is stripped naked, she finally tells all, and ends by telling the king, '"La vertés nel puet consentir/ Que jo vos puissce rien mentir,/ Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir./ Faites de moi vostre plaisir"' (6625–28)['Truth does not permit me/ to keep anything from you,/ nor do I care to keep silent any longer./ Do with me what you will']. She puts herself not at the mercy of God, but in the hands of the king. Once again, the poet inverts the expectations of hagiography and places the narrative into a courtly context.

The ending of the tale reaffirms the worldly and societal importance of the world of romance. King Ebain has the queen drawn and quartered and

has her lover—who is disguised as a nun—executed; he allows women to inherit once more and then makes Silence his queen (reintegrating the duchy of Cornwall into the king's already vast holdings). Ultimately, the narrative valorizes the triumph of Nature over Nurture in the reversion of Silence back into a sexually and socially unified female. Though Silence's deception is exposed, her life story illustrates that she is a woman to be admired and emulated for her patience, loyalty, beauty, talents, and ultimately, her ability to remain silent. Though Heldris clearly draws heavily from the familiar forms and themes of romance, he also adapts aspects of popular hagiography well–known to his Christian audience.

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Lynne Dahmen earned her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Indiana University in fall 2000. Her dissertation, 'The *Roman de Silence* and the Narrative Traditions of the Thirteenth Century,' focuses on the poet's rhetorical strategies and his use of both Latin and vernacular literary traditions.

NOTES

1 In using the term, 'horizon of expectations,' I refer to Jauss (88), who stresses the natural process of dynamic change and hybridity in medieval genres.

2 Particularly useful as an introduction to more contemporary debates concerning the genre of medieval romance are: Barron 1987; Doody 1996; Eisenberg 1982; Jauss 1982; Kelly 1993.

3 All subsequent quotations of the original as well as the English translations are from Roche-Mahdi's translation.

4 For example, many romance heroes and heroines either follow a religious life or, like *El Cid* in the Spanish tradition, endow churches and give money for the services of the clergy.

5 The 'goodness' of Silence's behavior, coupled with a general lack of chivalric adventures, may have contributed to its lack of wide circulation in the thirteenth century as well as its early scholarly neglect upon its discovery in the twentieth. *Silence* clearly presents a different image of the question of 'courtly love' and its relationship to adulterous love. It unambiguously condemns adulterous love, and glorifies conjugal love in the very 'successful' love match between Eufemie and Cador. Though clearly the poet is familiar with the rhetoric associated with love poetry and romance, this love is reconciled with prevailing Christian doctrine concerning the sanctity of marriage.

6 The life of St. Alexis has often been associated with the romance tradition, most recently by Robertson (1995) and Elliott (1987).

7 Though the essential kernel of the story, the transvestism of a female child for the maintenance of inheritance, remains the same, in Ovid the father orders the infanticide of the unborn child if it is a girl; the mother therefore conceals the child's female sex. In addition, while Silence is accused by Eufeme of being a homosexual male (3935–46; 3945–48), Ovid's Iphis is distraught at the thought

of having fallen in love with a woman (IX. 725–48).

8 Both Evelyne Patlagean in her article «Femme Deguisée» and Hotchkiss in *Clothes Make the Man* provide important critical analyses of the theme of crossdressing and sainthood in both Byzantine and Western Christian traditions. Hotchkiss also discusses *Silence* later in her work in relation to other romance heroines who crossdress (105–29).

9 I explore more fully in my dissertation the connection, first noted by Sharon Kinoshita, between Saint Eugenia and Silence.

10 See the stories of Apollonaris, Eugenia, Hilaria, Hildegard of Swabia, Margareta, Marina & Susanna. Hotchkiss, Appendix A, provides summaries.

11 See the stories of Anastasia Patricia, Antonina, Christina, Glaphyra and Marina.

12 In this light, Silence reproduces some of the same issues that will be greatly elaborated in Jean de Meun's portion of the *Roman de la Rose*, namely, the tension between natural reproductive drives and man's (in this case, woman's) ability to subvert Nature through Reason.

13 Nature's eventual success is also supported repeatedly through the poet's use of popular proverbs concerning Nature and Nurture. I would argue, as in chapter four of my dissertation, that the audience expects Nature to triumph from the very beginning.