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“He was the Mirror of the World”: Social Constructivist Reflections in *Le Roman de Silence*

Hillary O’Brien

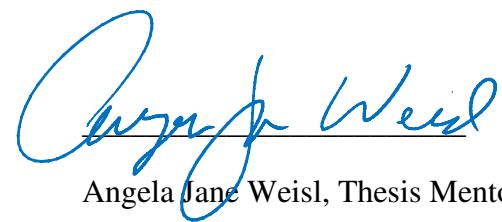
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Heldris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence* presents readers with a romance that problematizes gender, inheritance, knighthood, marriage, and nobility. The treatment of the hero/heroine and her interactions with the world around her form questions about the role of gender and chivalric determinacy within courtly society. Born into a society where women are not given landed inheritance, Silence is never able to attach herself physically to a defined space or social group. Because of her displacement, she fluctuates between spaces of ideal knight and problematic woman, constantly creating tension between these identities (and sometimes taking on others). By shaping the narrative around Silence's problematic and ambiguous performance, Heldris also creates tension between defined social roles and identities within the entirety of the text. The surrounding world is focused on defining her and her identity, but does so by placing her between the language of binary opposites (female/male, knight/woman, and nature/nurture). In this way, Silence's identity is an accumulation of the attributes attached to her by others and the reflections of values from her worldly experience. She, as a person, cannot self-identify, but rather takes on the identity of the world around her. Silence is, as Gloria Gilmore asserts, "a signified without a signifier" (114). As a "mirror of the world," her person holds meaning, but only as constituted by meaningful signifiers from the exterior (Heldris 3063). By examining episodes in which tension, ambiguity, and indeterminacy occur, this study will show how the narrative thereby places Silence at the center of binary conflicts as a "placeholder" or empty metaphor for the social, political, and economic forces that shape her figure of a self (Allen 105).

The problems of Silence's body and performance have challenged scholars to define what is undefinable, giving rise to a body of criticism that tries to locate the purpose of hybridity of gender, sociality, and language within the text. Many scholars have studied the gender ambiguities that exist in this narrative, notably Katherine Terrell, who has argued that the

problems with gendered language point to the text's overall self-awareness of limitations within language itself. In a similar vein, Gloria Thomas Gilmore's article, "Le *Roman de Silence*: Allegory in Ruin or Womb of Irony?," explores the uses of metaphor, allegory, and personification of Nature and Nurture to argue that the text is hyper-aware of linguistic ambiguity, adding that it is through the text's treatment of language that a reader can most closely connect to the pertinent thematic issues of the text (Gilmore 111). Both Gilmore and Terrell identify the Heldris's formal technique in layering his text with linguistic and narrative complexities, which ultimately shroud any definitive attitudes towards the gender-bending protagonist. In a definitive study on this text, Howard Bloch attempts to make more meaning of this text's narrative holes and complexities. His essay, "Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère," explores the sociocultural and historical significance of Silence's narrative, showing that it "constitutes a guide to the understanding of medieval culture and poetics, it also reads uncannily like a programme for the interpretation of modernism," which adds a larger understanding to what Heldris might be trying to create with *Silence*. Bloch's understanding of this narrative brings a cultural understanding to the critical discussion, moving past formal and gendered readings. Responding to Bloch, Jane Tolmie's article, "Silence in the Sewing Chamber: Le *Roman de Silence*," specifies the particular medieval cultural concepts that the romance forces its readers to consider. She argues that the poem is, "inviting critics to investigate the collapse of binary systems such as male/female, in/out, language/silence, learned/natural, reward/punishment, innocent/guilty" (14). Tolmie's focus on these particular binaries provides a more nuanced understanding of the text's concern with cultural learning within the Middle Ages. Common among this critical reception of *Silence* is the wish to

elucidate the ambiguous and conflicting narrative holes that exist, which is often solved through an exploration of gender acquisition in a cultural context.

Some scholars have also dealt more specifically with the concept of ambiguity itself and Heldris's construction of it. With an early reading of the linguistic ambiguities that surround *Silence*, Peter Allen states:

That so much ambiguity should accrete around this text is not, I believe, entirely coincidental. It seems rather that the circumstances under which we meet the poem actually reflect the fundamental cracks and strains present in the romance itself—cracks and strains that affect the very materials out of which this piece of literature constructed, namely words and gender (104).

He is quick to show that the treatment of ambiguous language and gender performance are reflexive between the narrative and world inside of it. Allen continues to show that the text situates itself in the kind of middle-ground that creates tensions, asserting, "Ambiguity promotes paradox, and it is within this gap, between language and meaning, between history and fiction, that this text exists" (104). In linguistic meaning and in genre, then, this text preplaces itself in an ambiguous space, making it even more difficult to isolate a concrete interpretation. Erika Hess sets out to answer these questions of ambiguity in her book *Literary Hybrids*, in which she states that "the prevalence of transvestite and other hybrid figures, coupled with the extensive linguistic and narrative ambiguities in these texts, highlights the constant tension at play in this literature, as well as in the larger culture, revealed in our simultaneous attraction and resistance to binary categorization" (44). Placing herself within the larger body of social constructivist theory, Hess argues for a third, hybrid space within the binary of gender, using *Silence* as an

example of a place where there is “continuous push and pull” between the polarized sides of the gender binary (44). This statement characterizes the exasperating strain inherent in a reading of *Silence*, which comes from the way in which Silence stands in an undefined third position, I would argue, between the sides of this binary.

Tension between the opposing sides of gender is equivalent to the tension raised by other binaries, particularly interiority and exteriority. In the narrative, this struggle comes in the form on Silence’s discussions with Nature, Nurture, and Reason. In a strange conversation about choosing gender identity, Silence finds herself caught between all three entities, constantly pushing and pulling between them all. Using a passage from Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* to make sense of this struggle, Hess states:

‘Inner’ and ‘outer’ makes sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability. And this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject. Hence, ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the ‘inner world’ no longer designates a *topos*, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity, becomes similarly suspect (qtd. in Hess 58).

Because Silence challenges her “coherent” self in this conversation with Nature, Nurture, and Reason, she shakes the stability of the inner/outer binary that holds the whole self together. Katherine Terrell contributes to this consideration of the inner/outer binary in a more material manner. She pulls the idea from Silence’s Nature argument that, “As a boy, she must conceal

her body and live without expressing her sexuality; as a girl, she must relinquish her voice and live without expressing her thoughts" (41). Physically then, Silence must deny either an internal or external truth of her genders, both of which—appearance and speech—are keys to defining her identity. In defining herself coherently, Silence is challenged to deny a physical part of herself and become half fragmented. I would argue then, that she is something even more fragmented and problematic than a hybrid character, because she is constantly denying half of herself. On the surface she does embody competing gender binaries as a hybrid sex, but she accumulates and loses various other half-formed identities throughout the course of her narrative. Silence is never whole enough to be a complete combination of two identities, nor does the text wish for her to be. As Howard Bloch claims in his study of the "art of trouvère" within *Silence*, "Silence represents the systematic refusal of univocal meaning," shortly after naming her a "multiform figure" (88). To consider her as a classic hybrid is to consider those portions of herself that are prescribed to her (by Nature, Nurture, Reason, and her family); however, the text does great work to make Silence wish to deny her embodiment of and identity. This denial pushes her past a tangible hybrid existence and, instead, constructs her as a more reflective space for collective ideas to pass through—a type of hybrid-mirror that reflects the imperfections in her surroundings. She is so full of paradox and contradiction, that she resists the kind of concrete hybridity that has been previously prescribed to her. Instead, she is an empty space that collects pieces of the constructive forces that press upon her constantly.

Not only does Silence act as a void, allegorizing a sense of lack and emptiness, but she also problematizes the very values that she lacks. Again using Judith Butler as a framework, Hess makes a historical analysis of the performative and constructed quality of her ambiguous gender, ultimately coming to the conclusion that "As the cross-dresser destabilizes the binary

gender system, he/she facilitates a critique of the structures that engender within a given culture—structures that, of course, develop variously in different historical contexts” (51). By structuring her analysis of Silence and the tensions between binary oppositions with an emphasis on the constructiveness of history and culture, Hess shows that the problem posed by a cross-dressing, gender-ambiguous person, like Silence, not only offend a people’s essential concerns with sex, but also any trust in the expected social order. Gloria Gilmore describes her as, “the allegory of woman’s exclusion from having (her inheritance, all that males inherit, all male privileges), and from being (the self-generation of self-expression and naming)” (113). Linguistically, she represents the absences of identity and power shaping forces, like inheritance and self-knowledge. By juxtaposing Hess and Gilmore’s assertion about the space that Silence occupies, the distinction between fullness and emptiness is further illustrated. Hess argues for a hybrid construction of gender and other binaries that are embodied with the body of Silence, whereas Gilmore represents the empty allegory that is created by Silence. On the one hand, she fully embodies social construction, on the other she is an empty reflection or symbol of these structures. Though Hess’s constructivist approach is attractive, Gilmore’s idea is more representative of the anxieties created by the empty ambiguity and uncertainty brought on by Silence.

To move beyond critical reception of Silence’s placement within the binary of gender and the complete construct of language, it is relevant to explore the ways in which her “placeholder” position transcends her sex and gender to allegorize the politics of femininity within the thirteenth-century setting. Sharon Kinoshita places her within the lineage of feudal politics in her essay, “Roman de Silence and the Feudal Politics of Lineage,” in which she posits that what the text deals with, more than gender, is the “euphemization of the feudal politics of lineage”

(400). That is to say, the text uses the overt struggle and perversion of gender to simultaneously shadow and symbolize the larger problems of feudal law and lineage within courtly society. Kinoshita sees the entire text as representative of this euphemism, including the narrator's speech:

From the beginning, *Le Roman de Silence* is haunted by the erosion of traditional hierarchical distinctions: money, rather than honor, complains Heldris in his prologue, has become the universal standard by which nobles and nonnobles alike regulate their actions (1-101). The political threat of such social leveling, muted during the first half of the text, resurfaces in the body of the romance...In all these episodes, the text's gender play both unsettles notions of feudal lordship and conceals the crises thus exposed...(403)

Throughout the episodes of the romance, the surface struggle for gender identity and acceptance mutes the real struggle for inheritance and lineage. Heldris's prologue directly addresses matters of wealth, honor, virtue, and quality of life. Beginning with a lament on the state of minstrels and the power of wealth in the world, Heldris complains that people only take pleasure in gaining material and pecuniary wealth, losing sight of the pleasures—especially of poetry—in life. Critiquing virtues that stingy people lack (Avarice, Honor, Generosity, etc.) he eventually comes to the conclusion that:

What good does it do one to pile up wealth
if no good or honor issues from it?

Assets are worth much less than manure:

At least dung enriches the soil,
But the wealth that is locked away
Is a disgrace to the man who hoards it. (46-51)

Throughout this diatribe against wealth, he constantly condemns any fascination with money, possessions, and hoarding. This stands out as paradoxical when comparing it to the romance that follows, in which wealth, inheritance, and class structure are what control the fates of all characters. As narrator, he is creating the infrastructure of the story that he tries to subvert through his perverse protagonist, Silence. Many of the values laid out by Heldris in this prologue are things that Silence makes a reader wary of throughout the narrative, as she adds them into her hybrid collection.

King Evan's decree to disinherit all women, as the most obvious example from the romance, stimulates the narrative's concern with a projection of inheritance and lineage that is un-fragmented and unfettered by female complications. Consequently, Silence even lacks a *geographic* space with which she can identify, since she has been displaced by the laws of inheritance, the travelling lifestyle of a minstrel, and many other travels. Being well traveled and many-faced—wearing different masks of identity throughout the narrative—Silence is able to experience a variety of class epistemologies, but continuously questions the viability of each. Again, she is trapped in an ambiguous space, performing, but not prescribing fully to the varying lifestyles. Because of her displacement and mobility, she is able to move freely between places, constantly being constructed by the cultural values that are impressed upon her. Considering Silence as an empty space upon which these epistemologies are pressing and reflecting, it can be said that she acts almost as a glass prism; she simultaneously absorbs and reflects—or at least

gives meaning to—cultural value. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen considers identity like this a “collective identity,” asserting that, “Forces beyond the control of any particular individual circumscribe the limits of collective identities, imbuing them with their relative cultural value and engendering a paradox. Identity, whether personal or collective, is at once solid and—especially over long periods of time—mutable” (11). He attributes a mutable quality to the communal body that characterizes Silence’s as well. Furthermore, he considers that, “collective identity tends to be embodied most spectacularly by those who do not choose it, by the excluded and the ostracized. It is produced through the disavowal of historical similarity and the denial of those difficult and difference-ridden middles out of which purified collectives actually emerge” (12). Here, again, Cohen perfectly characterizes Silence as hybrid-mirror, since she quite literally lives on the margins of society, but eventually becomes the ideal woman, the queen of Evan’s kingdom; the narrative uses her, again, as an allegorical figure, representing the prism through which culture refracts to synthesize the spectrum of values for a “purified collective.”

Cohen also adds, in the same vein as Butler, that identity is created through repetition. He states that, “Collective identity, like personhood and gender, is substantiated through repetition and citation. It is therefore best described as bodily praxis, as an interminable process of embodiment” (13). An identity of a community must be endlessly practiced on the body, which culminates in the practice of Silence’s narrative. Furthermore, Cohen adds that this practice can be experience nowhere else but on or in the physical body. Considering the etymology of words that represent collectives and communities (the Latin “*natio, gens, genus,*” etc.) he argues that “None are incorporeal” (13). Each word that represents a nation or population has its roots in the physical body or a type of physiology, which recalls the idea that community is interminably rooted in the body. Cohen even explains, “A medieval *natio* need be nothing more than a group

of people linked by their common descent...The word thereby carries implications that we would today describe as biological" (13). The nation, the community, or the collective identity of a population is always rooted, both biologically and linguistically, in the physical body. *Silence*, then, takes this idea one step further by locating collective identity in the body and lineage of a single individual and one who is located in a liminal position in her community. The beginning of the text seems to be aware of this representation of community through Silence's biology, as her construction is shown literally through the arguments between Nature and Nurture. These conversations highlight the cultural information inscribed within Silence's own body and her embodied identity.

As Silence approaches adolescence, the bind between interiority and exteriority creates more anxiety around Silence's identity and place within Evan's kingdom. Exhibiting that "push and pull" that Hess finds within the romance, the powers of Nature, Nurture, and Reason stretch Silence's confusions about her essential gender qualities and her external performance. From Nature's point of view, Silence is the perfect female:

There are a thousand people who think I'm *stingy*

Because of the beauty I stuffed you with,

For I extracted the beauty of a thousand

To create your lovely appearance!

And there are a thousand men in this world

Who are in *love* with you... (2509-2514 emphasis added)

Not only is Nature disgusted with Silence for denying her feminine beauty, but she also provides two cultural values that are important in the kingdom's discourse: wealth and love. Nature is strangely concerned about having a reputation of being stingy, reminiscent of the statements about stinginess in the prologue. In addition to stinginess, Nature also criticizes Silence for the amount of love she *could* have if she was to return to her female form. These two pieces of cultural discourse circulate around Silence as a sign of what even the most grounded entity, Nature, with which Nature concerns herself. These loaded statements give Silence space to consider the female performance, "to go and learn to sew/just as Nature demanded of her," which she ultimately denies, having been won over by Nurture's persuasions (2544-2545).

Nurture and Reason's discourse provides Silence with ideas about masculine power:

'Indeed,' he said, 'it would be too bad

To step down when I'm on top.

If I'm on top, why should I step down?

Now I am honored and valiant.

No I'm not, upon my word—I'm a disgrace

If I want to be one of the women.' (2639-2644)

As Silence weighs her options, she realizes that manhood holds the dominant position within the patriarchy. By continuing her masculine lifestyle, she will have more access to power and prestige. This conversation uses language and the allegories of Nature, Nurture, and Reason, to demonstrate the transmission of power discourse within Silence's interiority. She shapes her opinion about the ideal role in society, and by extension her own self, by surrounding herself

with pressure from each allegorical figure. These pressures impress upon her the ideas that form the roles of a “purified collective,” showing her the honorable way to continue her life, yet she still does not escape the indeterminacy that she begins with. Her mind is still conflicted and the narrator continues to describe her with conflicting gender characteristics: “lovely and noble/generous, courteous, beloved by everyone” (2685-2686). Although this conversation presents an apparent decision about the most correct path for Silence to take, it actually perpetuates the problems with the discourse of gendered power.

Beyond her conflict with gender, Silence also shows her indecision when choosing a path beyond childhood. At this turning point in her life, transitioning from child to adolescent, Heldris interjects to discuss her indecisive responses to the challenges of Nature and Nurture. He states:

... you never heard of such forbearance

As was to be found in Silence.

I'm not saying that he didn't

Go through periods of hesitation

And inner conflict,

As might be expected in a young person who came of such good stock,

But who was also a tender child

Who had to force herself to live that way. (2659-2666)

He remarks that she was patient in her decision to choose manhood, yet she still demonstrated some indecisiveness and hesitation. What is most peculiar about this statement is Heldris's appeal to her class. He qualifies his statement by adding, "As might be expected in a young person...of such good stock," appealing to her family name and status as an indicator of how she should act. He prescribes her with the traits of being conflicted and hesitant, simply because she is of "good stock"; her high status forces her to have a poor sense of determinacy, setting her up to be in need of fixing. Heldris shows that, either by her gender or class status, she needs to be refined and made better at making decisions. Here her identity is decided upon by a set of pre-determined standards, based on the author's anticipations of a high class woman, who is inherently wrong. The same struggle is repeated shortly after, as her heart also speaks to her, explaining the easily discerned discrepancy between her interiority and her appearance. The heart says:

Those clothes you're wearing and that sunburnt face

Make people believe that you're a boy.

But what that boy has under his clothes

Has nothing to do with being male! (2827-2830)

It tells Silence that she has the appearance of a male, but lacks substance under that appearance. The heart continues to tell her that, "You really need to learn something/that would serve you good stead/For all that might come to pass!" (2836-2838). In effect, the heart is telling Silence that she needs some knowledge to put herself in a good place. It advises her to go abroad, saying, "Why don't you at least go abroad/to gain some experience and acquire some expertise?" (2849-2850). Silence's heart wants her to experience more of the world, so she can be in "good

stead” for her future. Again, the text is interested in her cultural understanding more than her gender trouble. In this way, it seems that the text attempts to move past the essentialism that Heldris dwells upon for most of the narrative. Instead of being motivated by seeking what is best for her true gender, Silence is motivated by knowledge and learning; the text wishes for the individual to find a calling, an identity, by education and experience, rather than by a prescribed identity.

Reaching an age where she takes on more active duties, Silence begins to take part in activities and lifestyles that allow her to perform her identity, rather than having it prescribed by the author, Nature, and Nurture. Through the course of the narrative, she is minstrel, then knight, and finally queen, all the while occupying an ambiguous space. Since she has moved beyond the place where Nature and Nurture define her identity, she can allow her performance to speak for her identity. Judith Butler's notion of a performative sexual identity argues that it, “requires a certain performance and production of a ‘self’ which is the *constituted effect* of a discourse that nevertheless claims to ‘represent’ that self as a prior truth” (Butler 18). In other words, the concept of a cohesive identity, or self, is effected by a certain performance that claims to exact a prescriptive identity. Butler continues to discuss this production of identity, stating

...it is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the “I” is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian “I”; paradoxically, it is precisely the *repetition* of that play that establishes as well the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes. For if the “I” is a site of repetition, that is, if the “I” only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then the I is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it.

(18)

The production of the self relies on the repetition of the practices and discourse that consistently reinforce a cohesive identity. Butler also warns that the practice of repetition, as the site of an “I,” is also to blame for the slippage of identity, since a mistake in repetition could occur that deviates from the coherent self. Nevertheless, she concludes that, “the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of that ‘I’” (18). This self-production by repetition, and the complications it offers, parallels much of the ambiguity that surrounds Silence’s identity, as she puts on many performances that eventually prove problematic. With a failure in her identity’s production also comes the questioning from those around her; her fellow jongleurs, knights, and King Evan’s court often remark about the confusion and suspicion they feel in her presence. Silence’s gender and cultural identities are often indeterminate, because her character makes “mistakes” or perpetuates varying aspects of her performative identity, leaving holes and paradox within her self.

Silence’s next decision about identity further molds her into a communal body, placing her as a “placeholder” that highlights the distinction between high and low classes; her occupation as a jongleur allows her to transcend the occupation with gender. The life of a minstrel not only problematizes various cultural values, providing a place for Silence to experience and accumulate all of the positive and negative backlash from her encounters while in this occupation. Kinoshita argues that, “*Joglerie* itself seems to challenge the division between masculine and feminine; Silence sees the occupation as a fallback should she fail as a man or woman” (403). She moves beyond gender to add that, “the protagonist’s transgression of class lines is more threatening than her manipulation of gender” (403). Her original identity is first fragment by gender-bending, and then further fragmented with class-crossing. To the benefit of Silence, her new occupation allows her to travel and gain worldly experience. Travelling from

Tintagel, through Nantes, Brittany, Gascony, and so on, the troupe of minstrels come into contact with various ways of life that would not be known to Silence if she was tied to her father's land. Physical displacement and mobility within the narrative widen the range of possibilities for Silence to act as a communal metaphor, or hybrid mirror, further adding to the project of shedding light on cultural values, especially the wealth-driven values that Heldris lays out in the prologue. As Cador even observes, "The count knew that jongleurs/had taken the mirror of the world" (3115-3116). Cador is even aware of Silence's function as reflector of a collectivized cultural discourse.

The business of minstrelsy itself further frustrates the notion of a cohesive production of Silence's identity, since she is constantly in transit. Her life as a minstrel is spent on the move, travelling, coming into contact with a diverse population, and constantly gaining new and varied experiences. Since she is not landed, she cannot practice that same repetitive discourse of being a landed, courtly lady. As Butler asserts, what defines an identity is, "how and where I play at being one is the way in which that 'being' gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed" (18). By this logic, Silence's life as minstrel very clearly becomes ambiguous by the inconstant experience it brings about. She must be defined by her practice of being in a certain space and by performing certain tasks; her constant motion at this time allows for inconsistencies in identity. In fact, her "play" in different areas further demonstrates her ability to be a reflector of cultural difference. Furthermore, her job as a minstrel is to sing the songs of others, which, again, forces her to repeat the production of others' identities, but now in a deliberate performance. She sings the songs of others and in foreign lands, confirming herself as a point, or prism, through which cultural information is projected.

When Silence is a minstrel, most of her peers note that she is the *best* minstrel in the group. Her aptitude for this profession is what brings her back into the wealthy class, as King Evan contracts her as the court minstrel. Heldris explains her skills in performance in the following:

He was so handsome and accomplished,

And put much more effort into giving a fine performance,

Put much more of himself into his art

Than the others ever did. (3222-3226)

Even the narrator is aware of her deliberately perfect production of the performer identity, which shows through her attention to “performance” and “art.” These two productions of performance and art are also indicative of the potential awareness that Silence has for her identity’s material construction. She truly hits her stride with an identity that is maybe the most distant from “Nature” and wholly invested in cultural, material production. Silence’s performance as performer, however, is almost too well-done, which leads to her demise in this identity. Since she becomes the best minstrel in her group, her peers become jealous and even vicious with her. They plot against her with a plan to beat her and leave her behind as they travel on. Silence becomes aware of this and confronts them peacefully, asserting that she would stay where she was anyways. With this encounter, she gives up the life of the travelling minstrel; therefore, Silence consciously ends the dynamic production of her identity as travelling performer. It could be that this identity must be diminished, because it moves too far away from the frustrations of her embodied identity as a gender/class hybrid. Instead, her life as a jongleur is wholly concerned with what is not prescribed and embodied; it is concerned with the collection and

production of the “mirror” portion of the hybrid-mirror, which is the wholly performative identity.

Transcending femininity and her class, Silence brings ideas about travel and mobility themselves into conversation. Displaced from the space in which she first attempted to define her ambiguous self, Silence must find identity and meaning in her interactions with the places she visits. Sally Fisher’s study, “Landholding, Inheritance, and the Seasons: Reading Women and Space in Fourteenth-Century Manorial Court Rolls,” provides case studies of women as land-holders, and connects notions of gender to using and owning space in the late medieval context. In it she uses Roberta Gilchrist as a theoretical framework, using her idea that, “The landscape may be studied as a form of communal use of space. People invest their physical territory with social and symbolic meanings particular to the values of their own society” (qtd. in Fisher 141). In this way, Silence may be able to collect more ideas about varying cultures from travel. It improves her honor, making her a greater master of minstrelsy than her teachers. This increased greatness further allows her to gain contact with other courts, giving her space to play for the Duke of Burgundy. This space gives Silence more cultural contact and usefulness in occupation. While examining the records of one land-owning woman, Fisher finds that, “Fluidities of space in terms of manorial landholdings carried over into appearances at both manor courts, also suggesting fluidities of gendered roles of work and social interaction” (145). Fisher finds that land-owning for women in circumstances absent of men offers space for popular power and interaction that is predominantly male. They have more access to courtly society and affluence. An historical example like Fisher’s might represent the anxiety that Heldris’s text reacts against with its protagonist. Silence must be disinherited to avoid the risk of having a female heir that might disrupt Cador’s chain of lineage. Female inheritance intimidates male

succession, as, Kinoshita explains, “while male inheritance was governed by primogeniture, female inheritance was, by custom, partible” (400). Silence’s female inheritance might upset the holistic succession of Cador’s land, which, if parted, would become less valuable. If given the opportunities that are given to the land-owning woman in Fisher’s study, she might also disrupt the male-centered power of the court; however, being displaced and de-gendered does not stop Silence from gaining power. In a contrary manner to the woman studied by Fisher, Silence experiences more through being displaced. Lack of attachment makes her more able to identify with a range of places and people. Again, she is the “mirror of the world,” whose experiences, travels, and struggles are representative of the culture that creates her.

In returning to her identity as the strictly male Silence, son of Cador, she is given another chance at identifying with the ideal, noble class into which she was born. Kinoshita explains that, “she is allowed to reassume the prerogatives of her class provided she relinquish once and for all any challenge to the privilege of her borrowed gendered” (404). If she fully accepts her male identity, then she will be able to assume all of the benefits that male standing provides within this setting. This reconciliation again asserts the dominance of masculinity, but it also continues Heldris’s concern with wealth, class, and greediness. Upon examining Silence’s body, the old man practitioner is treated with disrespect. Cador refuses to believe that Silence is his son, calling the old man a liar. To this, the old man responds:

It’s a dreadful thing to be *poor*.

I would have done better to keep *silent*.

In every court, a wealthy ignoramus

Is listened to more

Than a poor but *learned* man. (3567-3572 emphasis added)

Three values are emphasized here: wealth (or lack thereof), learnedness, and silence (withholding information). He uses wealth and wisdom to differentiate between himself and the rest of the court. Possibly arguing that the life of a poor man makes him wiser than the wealthy, he seems to relate directly to Silence in this passage. Silence's travels as a minstrel have put her in the same place, being poor, yet wise and experienced in the world. In addition, the old man specifically mentions that it is better to remain silent than to offer one's knowledge to the world. His words to Cador give off information, but what is more important to observe is Cador's reaction. His demonizing of the old man shows his distrust for those of the lower class. In this way, Silence works as a light to shed on the reactions of others; it aids in learning about the actions of the surrounding world. As a blatant metaphor of this idea, Silence is the symbolic representation of knowing when to withhold information, saying more through the reactions to her own self than with her own thoughts. She even keeps silent in this moment:

Silence acted as if he hadn't understood a word

Of what he was telling him.

But the old man could see very well

That it was he, and he went to the count. (3594-3597)

Again, as Gilmore names Silence, "a signified without a signifier," it makes sense that Silence and the old man demonstrate how the surrounding people and circulations, as signifiers, define the signified; those who surround her and their form of "play" produce her identity.

As a knight of King Evan's court, Silence gains yet another set of experiences and travels. The court of a king is the most idealistic setting in which a fragmented entity, like Silence, could be placed. Her time staying in the court cracks and exposes the latent problems within Evan's court. Kinoshita claims that, "If in Silence's adventures as a minstrel the politics of gender are subtly overlaid by a preoccupation with class, the remainder of the romance underscores the interconnection between sexuality, dynastic legitimacy, and proper lordship" (404). A new set of concerns opens up in this setting. While at court, Silence gains the attention of Queen Eufeme. She becomes infatuated with the new knight, causing a rupture in the aesthetics of the ideal court. Silence's presence is a catalyst for larger social issues to come to the surface of the narrative in this setting. In her study, Kinoshita posits that, "In the romance's politics of lineage, Queen Eufeme's attempted seductions of the *valés mescine* escalate the stakes of Silence's gender bending by exposing the instability of a social order based on an equilibrium between feudal loyalty and genealogical continuity" (404 emphasis original). Inheritance and family lines come to the surface as the most pressing issues in the court. Eufeme is the immediate victim, as Kinoshita explains, "The queen remains childless, a circumstance that jeopardizes Evan's lineage as surely as the prospect of female heirs had jeopardized Renald's" (405). Her inability to produce an heir is the problem that gets overshadowed by the sexual advances she makes toward Silence. Sexuality and eroticism raise questions about Eufeme and her loyalty to King Evan and the court that she leads with him. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, it is apparent that there is something dysfunctional in the queen's sexual life, since she attempts to seduce an unattainable person. It is as if she lures Silence in as the son she needs to have to secure Evan's lineage.

Kinoshita said previously that this episode transcends the class discourse that was the focus of the narrative up until this point, and yet much of the language between Silence and Eufeme relates to wealth. For example, when Silence refuses her at one point, Eufeme reacts with:

'...Are you trying to jack up the price?

If you are such an expert at selling yourself dear,

You should go into the business.

You certainly do a very good imitation

Of a cheap, vulgar tradesmen.'(3884-3888)

Eufeme accuses Silence of acting stingy, just as Heldris warned the audience of women's stinginess in the prologue. Here, though, economics mix with sexuality to devalue Silence as a person. This occurs even once before in Silence's interiority:

Nor did the youth who is a girl

Wish to reveal her secret,

The truth about her nature,

Because he would lose his inheritance. (3871-3874)

Silence wrestles with ideas of wealth, inheritance, and sex in her mind. This moment is indicative of another place where Silence illustrates the transmission of cultural discourse that circulates around her, collecting and reflecting to fulfill her position as hybrid-mirror. She is

spoken at with loaded language that deals with sex, wealth, and feudal lineage. She then reflects these ideas back onto the surrounding people, forcing ruptures that reevaluate the cultural climate. Looking back to Kinoshita's claim that Eufeme is seeking Silence as a sort of replacement son, this scene becomes a point of irony; Silence is concerned with her economy and inheritance, where Eufeme is also possibly concerned with her economy as a reproductive wife. Although she is projecting this concern sexually, Eufeme is still connecting to Silence with ideas of inheritance and lineage in mind.

The repercussions of this exchange—King Evan's reprimands—bring light to the relationships between feudal lord and vassal. This relationship is another value that lies at the core of the feudal society. Concerns with feudal honor and loyalty first become apparent with Silence's external and internal reactions to Eufeme's advances. When Eufeme demands that Silence make love to her, Silence replies with the following:

My queen, I will do no such thing!

By the fidelity I owe you,

Your spouse will not be dishonored by me.

No! No! By God in heaven! (4064-4067)

Silence appeals to her sense of feudal fidelity to her lord, lady, and God in this moment. As Kinoshita explains, "In this first sequence of seduction, accusation, and punishment, it is the propriety of the reciprocal bond between lord and vassal that is called into question" (404). This first seduction scene brings to light the feudal relationship, as seen through the interactions between Silence, Eufeme, and Evan. Silence maintains her fidelity and honor in this instance.

Her interiority also continues to show the underlying concerns that have pervaded the entire text: gender, class, and lineage. Silence says the following to herself:

...there's no way he would believe me

Unless he knew my true nature.

And then I would lose my standing,

My father's honor and my inheritance. (4171-4173)

She wonders what route of action would be best in solving her problems with Eufeme, finding that revealing her gender would be the worst plan, since she would lose the most important possession, which is inheritance and security of her father's line. Choosing to remain silent and trusting in the feudal system, Silence passively allows the king to continue with action. Her actions have held up her feudal ties and are reciprocated by Evan's treatment of her. When he learns of their "tryst," Evan devises a plan to treat Silence fairly. His decision is to send Silence to serve under the French king, to whom Evan even upholds his feudal honor. The following ideas are meant to be sent to the French king:

My friend, write a letter for me at once.

First convey five hundred greetings

To my lord the king of France,

In whom I have the utmost confidence.

Tell him that I request and entreat of him,

As his vassal,

That Silence be welcomed at his court

And made a member of his household. (4301-4308)

Evan first appeals to his relationship with the king of France as his vassal, showing through this language that he is sending Silence as a favor. In effect, Evan uses his and Silence's feudal bond to improve upon his bond with the French king. Although Eufeme complicates the plot even further, by sending a false letter, Silence still manages to uphold the honor of feudal relationships. The French king sees how marvelous she is and knows her family line, so he has trouble following the false orders to kill her. He continues to consider his feudal bonds when contemplating his actions, noting:

...I am in a dreadful dilemma.

I don't know what in the world I can do,

For the man requesting my help in this message

Is my most faithful ally. (4459-4462)

He wishes to maintain his honorable bond with Evan, even though he does not want to carry out the actions that he requests. To push this issue even further, it is worth noting that Evan does not make any decision about Silence on his own, instead exploiting more of his most trusted feudal ties to advise him in his decision. He seeks the advice from the counts of Blois, Nevers, and Clermont in an attempt to widen the scope of justice in this situation. By reaching out to these farther ties to decide on matters on justice, the king of France is further drawing attention to the

“reciprocal bond” that is important in this episode. Even in his speech with these men, he continues to speak favorably of his bonds. He says the following to his counselors:

On the basis of the obligation I feel towards the king,

And the kiss I gave to the youth in good faith,

I want you to decide which course of action is better,

Or has less chance of going wrong. (4522-4525).

The language of feudal honor continues with the counts’ responses as well. Blois, the wisest of them, says the following about the relationship with King Evan:

A friend in need is a friend indeed.

He has done more for my lord

Than any other man alive.

You can catch more flies with honey

Than with vinegar. (4554-4558)

He clearly thinks highly of Evan and sees the good in helping his situation. The other counts, Nevers and Clermont, complicate his ideas, but their conversation never loses sight of the idea of feudal bonds. The reciprocal relationship between each party in the feudal engagement is another space in which Silence is placed in the middle, pushed and pulled between each side. On the surface, she is physically passed between Evan and France, and she is also passed back and forth in her worth to each king. The previous conversations about her fate pin her between the

opinions on feudal bonds held by King Evan, the king of France, and the counts. By constructing her as a placeholder for the two opposing ideas about feudal relationships, the narrative shows interest in dissecting the cultural stress on feudalism within the medieval court.

In this episode Silence is also given more time to travel and further displace herself from her original place. Unlike her experience as a jongleur, she is now a king's knight, travelling to France as an ambassador for Evan. Serving the king of France allows her to thrive as a knight, competing in tournaments and, on returning to England, fighting in battle for Evan. Finally, she is truly a man/woman of the world. She has experienced many binary battles of sex, class, honor, and feudal loyalty, constantly structuring herself or being structured by these values. Her travel allows her to collectivize these concepts around herself, keeping them on the exterior, so that the outer world is able to see and respond to the values that she reflects. As Silence is passed to and from Evan's court, she is taking part in another type of repetition of identity. She upholds her feudal ties to both Evan and the French King as she serves both at different times, so by extension she must distance herself from and return to each relationship throughout her travel. The distancing and returning act serves as another repetition of knightly virtue and honor, since she must be true to both kings. In addition, she must undergo a physical cyclical return to the geographic spaces where they exist. By repeating these patterns in travel and feudal loyalty, Silence further builds her identity as a type of feudal cycle, which is broken in places by the queen and gets set off-course. These feudal interactions are an ideal example of where her classic, embodied hybrid identity becomes problematic, since, rather than being concerned with the problem of her gender or class, the moment is concerned with throwing light back onto those around her. Silence's embodied hybridity is what, in some sense, motivates conflict, but her

mirror-like transference of conflict from herself to those around her takes precedence over her hybridity.

Having returned to Evan and having victories in battle, Silence is approached by Eufeme a second time, complicating feudal bonds again. Evan's punishment forces Silence to, once again, displace herself into the woods with the mission to find Merlin. The text clearly states that Merlin may only be caught by "a woman's trick," returning Silence to the problem of her gender again (5803). Her ambiguous gender connects to her Merlin's character, in that, both find themselves straddling a middle space; Silence is overall an ambiguous human, whereas Merlin lies somewhere between human and animal. The problems in this episode are, as Kinoshita explains, "the biological limitations and social practices and conventions" (405). Questions about humanity and culture itself are raised with the connection of Silence to Merlin. Nature's allegory returns to facilitate this interaction, ultimately leading Silence to complete her task. In the forest, surrounded by nature, Nature, and another indeterminate character, Silence returns to her essential self to complete a feudal task. She traps Merlin with honey, milk, meat, and wine, according to his orders. Kinoshita also comments on this moment in the text, remarking that, "Ironically, in enticing Merlin to move from the raw to the cooked, Nature unwittingly shows that humankind's 'natural' place is not in nature but in culture" (405). Kinoshita's point is parenthetical for her, but it actually solves the problematic ending that this episode makes possible.

Capturing Merlin is the key to Silence's fate as an honorable vassal to King Evan, so, by fulfilling her task, she completes the fragmented view of the court which she represents. As a collective body, representing feudal culture, she must complete the task and fully reciprocate the honor and mercy that Evan showed her. She does these things as a man, representing and

reflecting masculinized ideas. However, when Silence returns to the court, Merlin reveals her true sex to the king, returning to her true nature as a woman. After the confusion is cleared, all find out that she is a woman and that Eufeme lied many times to the king. Evan sends Eufeme to be executed, marries Silence (the female), and the narrative ends with Heldris's comment on the state of womanhood in the court. For a story filled with such anxiety, tension, and complication, this ending is abrupt and problematic. Thinking again about Kinoshita's point that, "Nature unwittingly shows that humankind's 'natural' place is not in nature but in culture," it is clear that the text is bringing "nature" to the court with Silence (405). The text brings Silence back to courtly society in her essential, female form, thereby bringing the "mirror of the world" to the center of courtly life, but as a woman. Throughout the entire narrative, she has been constructed fully by the impressions of cultural experience and contact, mirroring those values that are most pertinent to a certain place at a certain time. It was necessary for her to establish herself in this position as a man, so the world would allow her the opportunities and access that men have, since a woman did not have this kind of access. Her return to Nature then allows her to have access to power as a woman with her marriage to the king. She stands at the center of the kingdom as queen. It can be said, then, that the end of the narrative attempts to undo the complications that arose from Evan's affront to women in two ways: first with the removal of the actual problematic and fragmenting woman, Eufeme, and then by restoring unity to the court by placing Silence, as the reflector of courtly perfection, at the head of the court. With her return to womanhood at the head of the court, Silence then demonstrates how courtly culture is nature for humankind. Jane Tolmie argues that, "The action of the poem, and the characters within the poem, draw our attention to issues of gender performance in such a manner as to render it impossible for the poem's conservative ending to unsay or undo (to silence) the main body of the

romance" (14). Even though the ending seems to quickly, and sloppily, resolve the text's complications with a heavily conservative return to its original gender binaries, it cannot outdo what was already done for the majority of the romance. To further complicate the decisiveness of the end, Heldris also interjects with a speech on gender.

Considering Heldris's concluding remarks about women, it becomes clear that he is demonstrating the court's ability to construct people, male people, better than nature. He states the following about women:

A woman has less motivation,

Provided that she even has the choice,

To be good than to be bad.

Doing the right thing comes unnaturally to her. (6688-6691)

Heldris's opinion is that women are not naturally made to do the right thing. If one can look past the scathing attitude towards women here, what stands out is Heldris's awareness of the constructedness of an identity. He explains that things are "unnatural" for women, however, his poem has demonstrated that a women can *learn* to be good. For this text to teach this lesson, he needed to create a woman constructed by male, patriarchal ideology who is the most honorable man in the court. His then shows the reader how one acquires these ideologies through experience and contact, just like the "guide" that Howard Bloch envisions. He forgives Eufeme, because she could not know her faults as a woman. Restoring Silence to her female identity at the end, then, Heldris is able to create a unified, idealistic court, with an experienced and honorable woman at the head. Returning to the performative nature of an identity, it can be said

that Heldris's closing statement demonstrates a cultural need for opportunity and travel to be truly "good." As Silence was given the opportunity to travel the world as an ambiguous entity, she was able to consume and maintain the good qualities that a man of the world would have. In this way, her social identity was constructed as typically male, though her basic femininity shone through in her most natural moment with Merlin. Nonetheless, she acquired the correct amount of "unnatural" knowledge to lead her to do "the right thing" many times. Heldris's message highlights Butler's assertion that identity is wholly a production and adds that this production must be cultural; a person must have access to and pressure from culture and diversity to learn the "right thing." This text then shows, for one, that there is a certain awareness of the inauthenticity of courtly society, demonstrated through Heldris's awareness of the Nature/Nurture binary and how that can be perverted (with Silence); however, it does not seek to progress past this basic understanding. Yes, the text offers an entertaining take on what a woman's journey through male learning might be like, but it ultimately returns her to her original fate as a courtly woman. If nothing else, Silence's story offers a glimpse into a possible future of mobility for these courtly women, which, without the judgment of a male narrator, might be achievable with greater learning and experience.

Le Roman de Silence presents a problematic, indeterminate, and ambiguous protagonist who serves the function of cultural enlightener throughout the narrative. Silence is constructed by the cultural contact that she experiences, drawing peoples' attentions to the climate of their courts and the unifying power of an ideologically sound court. She is constantly pushed and pulled by binary forces to demonstrate the power that cultural ideas have on physically shaping a person, at once an embodied hybrid and also an empty mirror. On a larger scale, she becomes incorporated into the head of King Evan's court, disseminating the ideologies that shape her onto

the surrounding kingdom. As the “mirror of the world,” and an important communal body, Silence allows others to observe their cultural practices through her performance and reflects an ideal, naturalized form of culture. As a female character, she offers readers a peek into what female mobility and independence might look like if courtly society offered more opportunity.

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