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Queer Not: Medieval Romance's Toll on Queerness

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ABSTRACT

How does a contemporary audience handle medieval queerness? What, exactly, constitutes medieval queerness, and how does the medieval literary genre of romance impact it? This thesis attempts to grapple with these questions, and many more, utilizing the 13th-century Old French romance *Le Roman de Silence* by Heldris de Cornuälle. Medieval romances are particularly fruitful for this analysis because, on one hand, the genre consistently re/turns to cisheteronormativity, and, on the other, because scholarship generally has not applied queer theory to the study of romance. *Silence* follows Silence, a young Englishwoman who is raised as a boy to protect her family's inheritance. As King Evan of England has outlawed women's abilities to inherit, Silence's parents raise Silence as a boy rather than a girl. What follows is that Silence embodies masculinity—performing as a better man than any of the other men in the poem—yet takes on multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities simultaneously. She eventually finds herself at King Evan's court, where Queen Eufeme accuses Silence of raping her. From there, King Evan commands Silence to strip naked—to find out which genitals she has. King Evan is surprised to see she is assigned female; realizing why Silence disguised herself for so long, he reverses his inheritance decree, executes Queen Eufeme, and marries Silence.

What is particularly stunning about Silence is the extent to which the genre constricts her trans/formation into a man. She cries out that "I am Scilentius, / As I view it, or I am nude," yet the end of the poem not only finds Silence back into compulsory heterosexuality, it also finds her completely silenced, unable to say anything more (2527-8). The romance seems to favor—and even necessitate—this trajectory for Silence: if King Evan allows women to inherit again, then there is no reason for Silence to continue embodying queerness. In effect, *Silence* silences Silence, offering little to no recourse for her ambitious genderplay. The genre of romance

appears to erase queerness because it is not equipped to handle such dis/configuration of the body. The implications of this practice not only reflect romance's aristocratic sympathies, but also parallel contemporary attacks against the LGBTQ+ community. This study cannot speak for non-Western bodies, but it nonetheless challenges one of the most popular medieval genres for how it handles marginalized bodies and marginalization.

Thus, this thesis will argue that gender—constrained by genre—becomes an irreconcilable category for medieval romance writers to negotiate through their works and words, suggesting that the rigidity of gender within romance is a chaotic force for both the story and genre. Hence, the poet confines gender into a strict system that, through the actions of each character, paradoxically risks slippage. As a result, queerness becomes a threatening force to the stability of the story. Erasing queerness and replacing it with cisheteronormativity illustrates romance's inability to handle queer bodies.

Keywords: gender, queer, romance, genre, heteronormativity, silence.

Discussing queerness in a medieval setting may invite debates about anachronism and presentism. Indeed, queerness as a concept has not been widely disseminated until the last few decades, when scholars began challenging the status of queerness as a derogatory term and began the work of reclaiming it.[1] Some individuals may still be uneasy with the inconsistency of the term; however, understood broadly, reading queerness invites readers to better understand, question, and challenge manifestations of gender/ed oppression in literature.[2] Indeed, as of this paper's writing, the LGBTQ+ community in the U.S. is facing unprecedented levels of discrimination and violence. With many states passing laws against hormonal replacement therapy, genital reassignment, queer literature, drag shows, and pronouns (including rhetoric that paints transgender individuals as "groomers"[3]), we must challenge such hateful and violent rhetoric at every turn.

Medieval literature can further enable us to fight against such hate, since many works detailing queerness invite us, in various ways, to question queer representation—many of our current situations have parallels in medieval literature. Further, using the term provides this analysis with a streamlined, uniform means of communicating what are otherwise complex ideas that may not be as easily condensed into other terms. In this paper's context, queerness functions in multiple ways: it is that which deviates from sexual and gender norms, it is that which challenges cisheteronormativity and cisheteropatriarchy, it is that which recontextualizes

[1] *Queer Nation*, in the 90s, used the term to represent LGBTQ+ individuals and fight against anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and legislation miring the AIDS epidemic. Further, Teresa de Lauretis, in her article "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Studies," used the term in an academic context. She sought to enter territories that gay and lesbian studies were struggling to address.

[2] I find it appropriate to clarify and say I apply the word "queer" in its Western context. Using it as a monolithic term presents its own problems and complications (not to mention that some people do not call themselves queer); however, for this paper's context, I believe it is appropriate to call Silence, the titular character of *Le Roman de Silence*, queer.

[3] See, for example, *Gays Against Groomers*. The founder, Jaimee Michell, was on *Fox News* calling gender-affirming care an "evil agenda."

inheritance, and it is that which, based on circumstance, transforms into another form (or, simultaneously, take on masculinity and femininity). By examining the 13th-century Old French romance *Le Roman de Silence* by Heldris de Cornuälle, I argue that gender—constrained by genre—becomes an irreconcilable category for medieval romance writers to negotiate through their works and words, suggesting that the rigidity of gender within romance is a chaotic force for both the story and genre. Hence, Heldris confines gender into a strict system that, through the actions of each character, paradoxically risks slippage. As a result, queerness becomes a threatening force to the stability of the story. As I have noticed in my research, queerness holds a binding grip on romances as a genre, forcing the writer to, in some ways, write out the queerness to keep the genre structured, and in other ways, to celebrate queerness, thus queering the genre entirely. Some of my guiding questions include: to what extent does Heldris accept queerness? How confined does he find himself to this genre? What is the function and place of queerness in this story? Can queerness talk back? What do these challenges to the story contribute to the strict adherence to genre? What does *Silence*'s ending do to the queer body? How, ultimately, does space, defined here as both literal page space and world-space, affect queerness? Can queerness fully exist and thrive in romance? What is the fate of queerness in medieval European culture?

My thesis stems from work that, in various ways, considers marginalized identities. This project questions the functions of bodies, gender, and how genre limits them in medieval European romances. In particular, this project considers *Silence*'s handling of gender as the writer navigates the constraints of his genre. Heldris grasps onto the queer body for as long as necessary. Then, once the story no longer requires said body, the poet provides the queer body no other way to communicate. He silences her. The paradox is that, rather than challenge

Silence's forced (re)assimilation to heteronormativity, the poet celebrates it. Roberta L. Krueger, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, notes how romances principally circulated among the aristocracy and reinforced aristocratic power and authority: "Romance's history is integrally bound up with the creation of elite lay culture in courts and wealthy households throughout the European Middle Ages" (1). She writes how "there emerged at royal and feudal courts a dynamic network of fictions, written first in verse and then in prose, that recounted the exploits of knights, ladies, and noble families seeking honor, love, and adventure" (1-2). More importantly, "romances were a vehicle for the construction of a social code—chivalry—and a mode of sentimental refinement … by which noble audiences defined their social identities and justified their privileges, thus reinforcing gender and class distinctions" (5). This paper's central issue is about how genre impacts queerness, a topic scholars have not generally considered. While those like Kreuger link romance and royalty together, one can apply similar readings to romance and queerness. This paper thus offers an entryway into the latter reading, of continuing the conversation on romance and its cultural and political contexts and legacies.

Broadly speaking, scholarship on *Silence* does not directly address the conflation of romance and queerness. Rather, articles touch on each of these factors separately. In "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the *Roman de Silence*," Robert L.A. Clark analyzes gender in *Silence* as ideology. Considering social standing alongside Silence's gender, Clark suggests that, as Silence changes gender, so, too, does she change estates. Helen Fulton's "Gender and Jealously in *Gereint uab Erbin* and *Le Roman de Silence*" analyzes the functions Nature and Nurture play in constructing and destructuring Silence's gender. John Lance Griffith, in "'What's the use? There's too much to say': A(na)tomizing Silence in Hedris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence*," considers the significance of silence in both the poem's world and as part of

the poem itself. Looking beyond Silence, Griffith analyzes silence's manifestations and argues how, as a political tool, the author supports it. In "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable': Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*," Lorraine Kochanske Stock questions power and authority allocation as it relates to gender. Offering a Sausserian analysis of crossdressing, Stock considers how the poem's representations of gender elude a "stable system of gender difference" (8). Katherine H. Terrell's "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*" proposes that gender in the poem is entirely "irreconcilable" (36). Because scholars do not agree on the poem's gender politics, alongside the poem's quest to define and constrict gender, Terrell argues that there is no way to reconcile gender in the poem. In "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*," Elizabeth A. Waters proposes a queer reading of *Silence*, going beyond debates between Nature and Nurture. Here, she questions whether *Silence* "supports or subverts the hierarchical gender structure with which it ends" (37).

Only a handful of articles arrive towards ideas or conclusions underlying this paper's focus. Jessica Barr, writing in "The Idea of the Wilderness: Gender and Resistance in *Le Roman de Silence*," considers the wilderness as a microcosm for gender liberation. It is in this space where no one can seemingly interrupt Silence's gender transformation. Emma Campbell, in "Translating Gender in Thirteenth-Century French Cross-Dressing Narratives," explores the function of language and translatability across romances and hagiographies. She contends that issues of translation create their own irreconcilability regarding representations of gender. In "Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the *Roman de Silence*," Sharon Kinoshita considers the political instability of inheritance during 13th-century France and reflects on similar anxieties in the poem. Among the closest works to mine, Kinoshita seems to

suggest that queerness cannot exist in the poem because it would make the throne illegitimate—in her words, there is a "genealogical imperative" enforcing the longevity of the throne (66). Peggy McCracken, in "'The Boy Who Was a Girl': Reading Gender in the *Roman de Silence*," questions how changing genders endangers heteronormative processes. Discussing gender's subversive possibilities, McCracken considers how Silence disrupts yet reinforces aristocratic tendencies: "The medieval transvestite romance presents a profoundly troubling spectacle to an aristocratic society founded and maintained by dynastic marriage and succession because ambiguous gender threatens the disruption of dynastic structures" (517). Together, each of these sources will inform my readings of Silence's gender. However, because none of them explicitly consider gender in relation to genre, I hope my analysis can offer a new avenue in which we can understand and interrogate representations of medieval gender in romances. Without considering space as a factor influencing gender, we risk overlooking narrative space that medieval authors negotiated when creating their works. Space, as defined earlier, is textual: it allows for opportunities for voyeurism that Heldris writes into the romance. Thus, my analysis will hopefully broaden our avenues in which we may consider medieval gender.

In analyzing *Silence*, I would first like to meditate on genre. Medieval romances are known for strictly adhering to their genre—a man (or woman disguised as a man) goes on a quest that irrevocably shapes him (or her, or *them*) into someone else. Angela Jane Weisl, in *Conquering the Reign of Femeny*, puts this idea of romance more theoretically by explaining that romances "requir[e] the reader to engage in both the hero's struggle and his or her own as both a participant in the hero's quest and a member of the external world which seeks to *define the hero through social expectations*" (7, my emphasis). Indeed, *Silence*—both consciously and unconsciously—forces the hero into a set of social norms and boundaries. Because the romance

hinges on the prospect that England can have an heir, Silence can only perform so long as a man before King Evan discovers her true identity. As Silence marries the king, England's monarchy will, readers assume, continue unabated.

Tzvetan Todorov, in *Genres in Discourse*, argues that "In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties" (17-8). In Todorov's view, genre is the culmination of practices that a society, through discourse, has institutionalized. Genre's function, then, may be best defined by the practices and, by extension, the *biases* inherent to a culture. Contemporary Western culture, living under the specter of capitalism, consistently churns out stories with happy endings to contrast capitalism's practice of denying happiness to the workers. Medieval Europe, no stranger to queerness and queer bodies, appears to demand heteronormativity through its institutionalized genres. Just as gender is, referencing Judith Butler, constantly in trouble, genre, too, enters into its own trouble. Its solution, then, is to write out queerness entirely. Much as medieval cartographers imagined their world by centering Christianity and pushing monstrous beings to the borders (thereby de-institutionalizing monstrosity)[4], so, too, does romance de-center the destabilized, noninstitutionalized queer body. Queer/ing narratives can only exist as far as medieval romances allow them to, which, through these examples, demonstrate that these authors struggle to reconcile the amount of space reserved for nonconformity. Audiences may receive the queer/ed body well because, on one hand, queerness was not particularly radical. Indeed, Campbell notes how many hagiographies involved stories of crossdressing, wherein the individual was found to be a different gender after

[4] See the *Psalter World Map*. Consider, too, Pope Urban II's call to the Crusades.

their death (236). However, these stories were rather androcentric in content because, as Valerie R. Hotchkiss notes in *Clothes Make the Man*, "To the medieval mind, it seems, man was indeed the measure of all things: women's activities in male spheres were invariably judged against the standard of the male" (3). To consider the intersection between gender and genre[5]—and the troubles they brew, on their own and together—is to meditate on the restrictions genre enforces on gender. Scholar Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner argues that "romance is the shape-shifter par excellence among medieval genres, a protean form that refuses to settle into neat boundaries prescribed by modern critics," which is true; however, in *Silence*'s case, genre-bending is not a priority for Heldris. Instead, it is tantamount to the destruction of the entire literary world he created. For queerness to exist is to accept that romance must, in some way, account for this genderplay—after all, Silence is both hero and heroine. But, she cannot continue her chivalric exploits because she is not a man. The problem is cyclical, and, it seems that, to Heldris, the only way out is to deinstitutionalize queerness. In place of it, he reinscribes aristocratic flourishing—in the poem's case, the return of inheritance laws. Woman leads like Silence, to Kreuger, "often play roles that challenge social conventions or disrupt traditional codes," yet it is through the destruction of the queer/ed body that Heldris finds an ending to the story.

This success in passing reflects, in various ways, the medieval world's gender essentialism. However, Michelle M. Sauer, in *Gender in Medieval Culture*, cautions us to consider gender as medieval individuals understood it. She argues that medieval understandings of gender can best be defined as "'performative essentialism,'" wherein "biology, social roles, and personal actions not only can determine gender, but also can change it" (12). Broadly

[5] The two words share a single etymology. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the entry for "genre" directs the reader to "see gender." According to the entry for "gender," they both come from the Old French "kind, sort," which has roots in the Latin "gener-." Both terms seem to be fixed yet, when paired with each other, are constantly breaking down.

speaking, Sauer's paradigm guides the presence and evolution of gender in romances; however, the romance surveyed here suggests that it cannot adapt to gender's ever-evolving nature. Rather, romance forces a heteronormative, patriarchal, patrilineal worldview. Karma Lochrie, in *Heterosyncrasies*, reinforces Sauer's outlook by explaining that "heterosexuality as a norm did not exist before the twentieth century" (xiii). However, I find it pertinent to address these issues in *Silence* using contemporary vocabulary because of how they both inform and can inform current and future social justice movements. Butler, through a psychoanalytic framework, writes that "To be called a gender is to be given an enigmatic and overwhelming signifier; it is also to be incited in ways that remain in part fully unconscious. To be called a gender is to be subject to a certain demand, a certain impingement and seduction, and not to know fully what the terms of that demand might be" (378). Although she speaks of infanthood, this same idea of the "introduction" of gender—which, in this paper's context, may be better understood as forced assimilation—plagues Silence and her adventures. Silence cannot live her experienced gender because her culture does not allow her to do that. More than that, were she to do so, the romance would be thrown into disarray: England would not have a male heir because King Evan already executed Queen Eufeme. More essentially, it is because Silence refused to accept her gender/ed designations that she is ultimately forced to follow something else. Arguably, Heldris may not have seen any alternative—romances may not allow the subaltern to speak. *Silence*, in fact, ends that way—Silence agrees to marry King Evan, fulfilling her gender role, and then she never talks again.

The romance's title, *Le Roman de Silence,* foregrounds the ways that genre silences gender. The manners through which Heldris's author-ity turn queerness into something irreconcilable with romance originates with Silence's naming, where she is simultaneously male,

female, and ineffable. The primary issue surrounding the poem's premise is that King Evan of England has prevented women from inheriting land from their family. This issue thus falls on landowning families, where estate becomes an immediate issue. The story then follows Cador and Eufemie as they eventually give birth to Silence. Because of the prevalence of heteronormativity in romance, queerness *cannot* exist—it allows queerness as an entity to exist and thrive—in a limited capacity—and then, once these queer bodies risk destroying the genre, the authors rid them from each story. What appears to matter most to Heldris is the fulfillment of the genre. When a factor as elusive, as incapable of categorization, and as antithetical to heteronormativity as queerness exists in the spaces of Heldris's pages, it becomes an issue that must be written beyond the margins. So unstable and, arguably, volatile, queerness cannot even *exist* in these stories. Whereas medieval cartographers concerned themselves with positionality—the Us versus Them—romance writers concerned themselves with how to deposition queerness. So long as it assists the movement of a story to its conclusion, it can stay. Once its purpose is fulfilled—or, once queerness challenges a story's finality—it is erased. Queerness is not allotted any positionality because, I would argue, its very position is instability. To these writers, it functions to sew chaos into order, to tip heteronormativity into a queer normativity. Romances, hence, spell the death and decay of queer bodies.

Silence's introduction to the story foregrounds the beginnings of her being trapped into heteronormativity. Before she is even born, Cador and Eufemie remain deeply unsettled by the prospect that Silence may be a girl—or, in this case, born with female genitalia. What follows is Cador's plan for his child:

> We will raise her as a boy,
>
> watch her closely and keep her covered up.

Thus we will be able to make her our heir;

no one will be able to challenge it. (1757-60)

In Cador's words, the plan to de/gender Silence into a man exists to keep their "'heir from losing her lands'" (2038). To accomplish this goal and prevent any slippage, they name her Silence:

We shall call her Silence,

after Saint Patience.

May Jesus Christ through his power

keep her hidden and silent for us,

according to his pleasure. (2067-72)

What is particularly striking about this passage is how silence functions here—Terrell contends that "From the beginning, Silence is intended to remain silent. The child's name will be a continual reminder of the secret that she must keep at all costs, a secret that is designed to relieve the anxiety of her parents about this deception, even as the child herself relieves their anxiety about having an heir" (40). In other words, Silence's function in the story is to exist on behalf of her family. As an infant, she cannot engage with gender relations on any scale. Because of that, because of her powerlessness, her parents find it both necessary (for their survival as a landowning entity in England, perhaps) and beneficial that Silence be silent. Depriving her of any ability to self-actualize, they box her into a predefined mold. Their actions also mirror and foreshadow the debate between Nature and Nurture, where Nature[6] tries to mold Silence into an ideal woman while Nurture fights for a practicality with Silence's gender—that, to stay a man is to stay in disguise.

[6] Heldris is quite enthusiastic to explain to the reader how Nature created Silence, writing at great length about it and exclaiming "you [the reader] ought to be well informed" (1802). His enthusiasm may well hint at his bias towards heteronormativity and at an eventual return to order.

Cador also devises a naming system for Silence, further emphasizing his patriarchal control over his daughter. On top of nurturing her into a man, Cador argues that

> He will be called Silentius.
>
> And if by any chance
>
> his real nature is discovered,
>
> we shall change this -us to -a,
>
> and she'll be called Silentia. (2074-77)

Cador's appeal to authority is that Silence is not Silence, but Silentius. Having the masculine form of the name ascribed to her, Silence not only inherits her family's land but also masculinity. Terrell explains that "A change in the gender of Silence's name thus necessitates an equal alteration in every aspect of her life," which cannot be overstated enough (40). Silence's supposed fluidity is ultimately a marker of her father's judgment. Of note is that Eufemie does not question Cador's logic and intuition, preferring minimal words and silence[7] instead. As a result, Cador freely controls Silence's gender before she can consciously perform any gender. Silence's introduction to the world thus ushers in the poem's gender instability, where both Silence and the poet struggle to reconcile her material conditions with her identity. Butler's idea that "Gender can denote a *unity* of experience" becomes an inherently unstable maxim because, at the poem's core, *who* controls Silence's experience (30)? If her family immediately resigns to confine her into a strict set of social expectations, based on politics, then what is the extent to which she can deviate from this norm forced upon her? The poem might provide a glimpse into

[7] Much more can be said about Eufemie's silence, for it may be, according to Griffith, political. Her inability to speak may, I might argue, favor the genre more than anything—rebelling against her husband's wishes might create intense clashes between the couple, potentially leaving Silence completely gender-*un*stable. Thus, her silence may be better read as aiding the story in inching closer and closer towards its finale and fulfillment of the genre's conventions.

that reality—as Silence ages, she may find ways to challenge her gender/ed conditions. What readers instead find is a queer/ed woman who anxiously balances her own self-actualization and the political stability of her family.

She is nonetheless a queer figure—insofar that her sex does not correspond with her assigned gender. Instead, her family raises her as a boy, cementing her role in the story as a queer figure. Much of the poem thus grapples with the fallout and consequences of Silence's conditions as a woman raised and socialized as a man. Bred out of selfish, self-sustaining reasons, Silence has no choice but to reconcile her paradoxical existence. McCracken notes that "The social prescription of gender identity, prompted by a reading of anatomical features, reshapes the body to heighten or even to create those features. The process of acculturation follows a binary organization of male/female which requires a coordination of genitalia and body," which Silence cannot adhere to because her genitalia does not match her gender assigned at birth (519). The diffuse understanding of gender and sex within the poem's society suggests McCracken's assertion is true, that anatomical sex and out-facing gender go hand-in-hand. Cador must, to some extent, be aware of this cultural norm; otherwise, how can one explain his methodical attitude towards shaping Silence into Silentius? Such prescriptiveness may, on the one hand, create a queer character and, on the other hand, reinforce queer qualities. Silence, I would argue, falls into both camps—her development into a person follows a complex understanding of gender relations and passing, and such fluidity and ease of slippage originates from her conception. She is queer both because her family shaped her into a queer person and because her family treats her body as a liminality—in a space between nature and nurture.

More can be said about her queerness in relation to both Heldris and *Silence* as a whole. Queerness was not a new concept to medieval individuals—researchers like Gabrielle

Bychowski, Roland Betancourt, David Lorenzo Boyd, and Ruth Mazo Karras[8] were quick to challenge the idea that queer people in the Middle Ages did not exist. Queer positionalities in the Middle Ages existed differently than in our contemporary moment, for they were not instant targets of discrimination and violence, legal and otherwise. Crossdressing narratives are quite common in romances, too, further signaling some sort of acceptance and, at minimum, inquisitiveness about gender non-conforming individuals. Heldris does not, at first, appear hostile in any way towards Silence and her queerness, for he, in keeping with his tangents throughout the romance, seems more concerned with continuing the narrative than meditating on Silence's gender nonconformity. What her queerness does for the narrative, however, is offer it movement—as long as she exists and thrives as a queer individual in a world that is completely unaware of her queerness, she is a threat to the heteronormative order. Thus, the romance can persist in its narrative. Her very existence works because it hinges on the intense binarism present in the poem. For Silence to both act and pass as a man is to lend credence to Sauer's idea of "'performative essentialism,'" where Silence succeeds at masculinity because she performs well enough to pass as a man. On the other hand, it suggests that Cador and Eufemie were successful in their plot to raise Silence as a boy. What this plan further suggests is that "Silence must be assigned to a stable, biologically supported gender in order for her reproductive potential—her most important asset in this system—to be fully exploited" (Barr 11). However, as a queer figure, the implication is that Silence has no "reproductive potential." Biologically female, she can give birth, but, socially a boy, she does not inherit her biological sex. Butler's

[8] Each of these figures attempted to map queer presence and positionality in the Middle Ages. Bychowski's article challenges heteronormative, white supremacist assumptions about queerness in medieval Europe by physically mapping queer presence. Betancourt revealed significant queer figures like Marinos the Monk, Roman Emperor Elagabalus, and Mary of Egypt. Boyd and Karras presented the trial of Englishperson John/Eleanor Rykener, which, as the transcription of the trial suggests, was highly problematic because the jury did not know how to refer to Rykener.

assertion, that "Those bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted," suggests Silence cannot fulfill this "potential" (142). The specter of estate thus looms large over Silence as she enters the world—before she can self-actualize, those around her constrict her into positions favorable to them.

This expertise in gender performativity becomes an intense battleground of representation and becoming for Silence—it essentially plagues her existence. As a girl being raised as a boy, Silence is going against cultural norms that dominate gender-body relationships and gender performativity. At the center of this gender conflict are the personifications of Nature and Nurture, both of whom appear to Silence like Lady Fortune appears to Boethius. Only, in this case, the stakes of Silence's gender-compliance is inheritance. However, before these personifications enter the poem, nature as a prospective liminal space takes hold. So that Silence is far away from civilization, Cador plots that "I will have [Renard] build a house / in the woods, isolated and solitary" (2151-2). The wilderness functions more as a *potentialized* liminal space rather than a truly realized liminal space. Silence is never truly separated from the constraints of heteronormativity—Renard may appear like a Merlin-esque figure, where Heldris writes that "He lived in a forest near the sea," but he has specific connections to Cador and Eufemie: "The count had taken a great liking to him, / for he had heard many good things about him, / and the man was very loyal" (2147-50). For Silence to escape the heteronormative world offers questions of the extent to which Silence can ever escape the bounds of this affair. Barr notes that "while passage through the wilderness enables escape from a restrictively patriarchal social world, it is not where that escape is sustained," ultimately because of Merlin's presence and influence in the wilderness (15). The wilderness immediately forfeits the potential to become a

liminal space for Silence and merely remains a potentialized one. Because of how Heldris sets up his narrative, Silence seemingly has no escape—material and otherwise—to self-actualize into a form free from cisheteronormative, patriarchal society.

The introduction of Nature and Nurture further sets up this inescapability of forced gender conformity, where Silence enters an extended dialogue between Nature and Nurture. Clark reminds us that "we see that in creating Silence, [Nature] imparts fineness of matter to the child before turning her attention to [her] sex. And since it is, after all, Heldris's hand which guides Nature's creative gesture, we see that for Heldris, Silence is noble in essence, female by accident" (61). Indeed, at the first sight of Silence, Nature is furious at what Cador and Eufemie did to her: "you can imagine how disturbed she was / and how much she wanted revenge upon them / for changing her daughter into a son" (2261-3). As Clark mentions, Heldris oversees this narrative, so his presence in the poem is one characterized by full immersion. He creates Nature as a dialectic of Nurture, challenging Nurture's authority:

> I put more beauty into her
> than could be found in a thousand.
> I wanted to prove my prowess with her.
> Now they have ruined that for me. …
> And now they have made a male heir of her, …
> If I don't unmask her in the long run,
> Nurture's power will be proven
> stronger than mine. (2276-9, 2289, 2292-4)

Nature, to "prove" her effectiveness, expended more effort on fashioning her into a woman than "a thousand" others; however, Cador and Eufemie—or, more elementally, Nurture—have

"ruined" her efforts to mold an ideal woman. Then plotting to "unmask," or de-gender Silence, she believes doing so will unseat Nurture as being the superior facet dictating human existence. The gendered language in this excerpt[9] implies that Nature is an oppositional force to King Evan's decree of inheritance. In other words, Nature argues that what is best for Silence is to exist as Nature made her—as a woman.

Doing so would spell immediate doom to Cador and Eufemie's plan to hide Silence's gender and, hence, keep her silent. This "ideological mapping of the body" is especially pertinent for medieval romances precisely because they are concerned with courtly ideology (Clark 61). Because the main situation driving forward the plot is an estate -based issue, *Silence* entangles various facets of human existence to support estate stratification. For the story to begin with an estate-based issue, followed by Cador and Eufemie gendering Silence as masculine to protect their property, only for Silence to uphold her estate, suggests that queerness becomes a means to regulate estate interests.

Weisl writes that romances are a limiting genre, partly in how they "limit its characters' gendered possibilities," but "gendered terms limit the genre itself" (3), suggesting an inherent paradox within the genre. He may be conservative in his views with the decree that "No man has the power, in the long run, / that he can vanquish and outwit / Nature, or betray heredity," but the genre still constricts him into crafting a story involving the readmittance of inheritance laws (2296-8). Put another way, genre precedes political views, especially apparent when he genders Silence with he/him pronouns (2359-2374).[10] Essentially, Heldris's construction of Silence

[9] Perhaps following in a long tradition of feminizing nature, Heldris's gendering of Nature creates another form of suppression and silence in the story. If a woman is telling another woman how to act, and what informs her is hegemonic discourses surrounding what an ideal woman is, then she risks suppressing any kind of gender creativity for the other woman. What appears to be happening here is exactly that—by gendering Nature with she/her pronouns, Heldris seems to set up yet another form of suppression keeping Silence silent from exposing herself.
[10] Pronouns become particularly important for the narrative because they both reinforce the story's amplification of estate stratification and denote Heldris's bias towards it.

predicts both the story's and Silence's ending, suggesting that queerness can only exist insofar that the genre allows it.

When Silence begins self-actualizing, her decision to remain a man suggests her self-interest to retain her power. In a conversation between Cador and Silence, Cador explains,

> Dear sweet precious son, we are not doing this
> for ourselves, but for you.
> Now, son, you know the whole situation.
> As you cherish honor,
> you will continue to conceal yourself from everyone. (2453-7)

And Silence replies with, "'Don't worry the least little bit. / So help me God, I will do it. / I will conceal myself from everyone'" (2460-2). Based on the analysis thus far, Cador's reasoning requires a suspicious reading. To what extent does he *not* benefit from Silence's queerness, especially materially? Even if the two of them die, Silence presenting as Silentius ensures the family's landholdings transfer to Silence. Another, albeit more psychological, benefit comes in the form of what Waters finds: "Here the emphasis on shame … is used not to shame Silence *away* from the unnatural act of cross-dressing, but to shame her *into* her transgendered performance, so that she will not embarrass the family" (40). Her response, additionally, may also reflect such performativity—as Heldris tells us that Silence "was more valiant and noble / than all the others put together," there is some hint that, as Barr notes, Silence is "the best possible knight, despite his biologically female body" (2398-9, 3). Indeed, the seneschal taking care of him quickly becomes irrelevant as Silence embodies manhood better than anyone else: "When they practiced wrestling, / jousting or skirmishing, / he alone made all his peers tremble" (2494-6). Silence's overall reply, in its confidence and brevity, must suggest, on one hand, that

she recognizes the benefits of performing as a man, so it is a choice made from self-interest. On the other hand, her gender performativity likely also guides her reply. Being raised as a boy must have instilled, at the very least, some tenets that characterize masculinity. Silence even goes as far to declare against Nature,

> But as I know well, from my right,
>
> that I cannot be someone else!
>
> Therefore, I am Silentius,
>
> as I view it, or I am nude. (2525-8)[11]

In this case, considering the original French reveals critical context with the word "nus":

> Mais cho sai jo bien, par ma destre,
>
> Que jo ne puis pas altres estre!
>
> Donques sui jo Scilentius,
>
> Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus.

Without masculinity, without manhood, then who—and what—is Silence besides "nus"? Nudity, in this context, is the most vulnerable state for the body to be in—without her masculinity, then she is susceptible to manipulation. There may be some desperation and self-actualization apparent in Silence's words; however, based on Silence's agreeing to hold onto masculinity, we must read her words suspiciously. Nature tries to box Silence into femininity, something Silence takes as an insult to her gender performativity. After all, if she is performing so well as a man, and the stakes of inheritance lie on her success, then why revert to an essentialized vision of herself? One may read Silence's remark as fully embodying masculinity,

[11] Using Roche-Madhi's translation, help from Dr. Angela Jane Weisl, and Old French dictionaries online, I attempted to translate this passage. The most significant change from Roche-Madhi's is that I translated "nus" as "naked," whereas her translation says "no one." For the purpose of reading Silence as coming into her queerness, I believe "naked" is most appropriate.

which I believe is true; however, her agreement to continue performing as masculine must raise questions about her motivations. She is, after all, working in service of her estate; so, no matter her status as a queer character, she is still in covenant with her family to uphold their possessions. Hence, her remark additionally holds the weight of estate consciousness, that to behave as a man is to behave in congruence with what is most beneficial for her estate standing. Kinoshita notes that "Silence, motivated by Ebain's prohibition on female inheritance, reverses generic expectations: she crossdresses not to escape her family's dynastic politics but to further them" (66). Thus, a queer reading of Silence that only considers gender nonconformity is insufficient because it must also recognize and establish estate alongside her gender. Silence's ambitions are ultimately her family's ambitions, that, to remain a boy is to keep their estate standing. Here, gender serves to uphold estate privilege. Extending that to queerness, the queer body becomes a tool to reinforce that same idea, that to act in a way that protects your material interests is to essentially support those interests.[12]

Important to note is a central feud between Nature and Nurture, where Nurture convinces Silence to keep her masculine gender performance. Nature had tried to convince Silence to give up her disguise, which she explains thus:

> Truly, no woman of my lineage
> ever behaved in such a way,
> nor will I do so any longer!
> I will keep to women's ways. (2555-8)

[12] This scene contradicts my thesis, but it is only temporary that Silence must transcend gender to protect her estate. As much as the romance plays with the queer body (and, here, seemingly supports it), it eventually erases it for the poem's return to cisheteronormativity.

Nurture then confronts Nature and insists that "I have completely *dis*-natured her" (2595, my emphasis). Nurture's idea of denaturing competes against both the idea of gender as inherently essentialist and the absence of a penis for Silence. Although she does not have a penis, she still performs better than any other man in the story. Terrell contends that "Binary categories of gender do not easily apply to Silence, and the difficulty of this application begins to draw into question the whole idea of 'natural gender'" (38), suggesting that gender is innately irreconcilable in the poem. For both Nature and Nurture to argue over Silence's appearance and biology is to present a disjunctive concept that seemingly has no irreconcilability. Even Silence's conscience bothers her about her anatomy, arguing that "what that boy has under his clothes / has nothing to do with being male!" (2829-30). If a penis is required to make a man a man, then Silence is not intrinsically a man. However, everyone she encounters thinks she is. With her declaration that "Donques sui jo Scilentius, / Cho m'est avis, u jo sui nus," it is both her disguise and her gender performativity that keeps others from realizing she is a woman. Essentially, her "'performative essentialism'" allows her to fulfill the role of Silentius. Otherwise, if she cannot, then she would be in her most vulnerable position, where others realize who she really is and can report her. Queerness, in this poem, is at its most visible when categorization breaks down and is inapplicable. Scenes like this, then, offer to us readers some of the most intense scenes of gender nonconformity and the limitations of Nature and Nurture. Fighting for her desired gender while two allegorical figures influence her direction, Silence demonstrates the disfiguration of gender.

Silence's escape from the seneschal and enlistment with the jongleurs might suggest an escape from both her gender troubles and traditional cisheteronormative society. Indeed, jongleurs themselves are endangered, for Heldris tells us that Cador

had all jongleurs

banished from his lands;

they were never to seek their fortune there again.

Any who were seized or captured

would be burned or hanged. (3118-3122)

Because the jongleurs do not fit into Cador's land, based on the "crime" that they stole Silence, they are relegated to the status of criminals and must escape to a place where civilization cannot persecute them (3118). Additionally, their occupation as performers—reminiscent of gender performativity—allows them to transcend societal stratification. Although not explicitly queer in terms of gender variance, their status as performers and, as figures elusive to Evan's rule, the Other, coupled with their escape to a liminal space, makes them a particularly strong fit for Silence to join. Indeed, the wilderness "is also invoked as a space of radical otherness, one that lies outside of organized human society" (Barr 5). It is even here where Silence can self-actualize—Heldris tells us that Silence "called himself Malduit" based on his upbringing and difficulty with making sense of his nature (3177). Renouncing both Silentius and silence—and becoming a jongleur—offers her the opportunity to re/claim herself and divorce herself from her aristocratic, cisheteronormative upbringing. What sets them apart from Silence, however, is their antagonism towards her. Their problem with her is that she played her instruments better than all of them, to the point where "they were silenced so people could hear him" (3158). In a literal sense, killing Silence would allow the jongleurs to play to audiences once more. In this way, Silence robs the jongleurs of their voices and silences them, and they realize what kind of threat it is to be silenced. Silence, unintentionally, does to the jongleurs what her family forced her to do throughout her life. When they finally speak—when they plot to kill Silence—she hears them

and escapes. The one time when the jongleurs are no longer silent is when they plot murder, which reinforces their otherness. More bluntly, it marks them as actual criminals. Problematically, too, is how they rob Silence of the wilderness, a temporary escape from cisheteronormativity. Although, as I stated before, the wilderness can never function as a true escape from the cisheteropatriarchal world surrounding it, it still functions as a refuge. Without the wilderness, she is in danger of returning to an oppressive atmosphere. Because of the jongleurs' plot, she risks returning to the world that silenced her—to the world that gendered her into Silentia.[13]

Of note, too, is that, by joining the jongleurs, Silence betrays her estate. As they are a persecuted group of individuals, with no land holdings and selling their talents for money, Silence queers her estate consciousness. Although she may not be conscious of her estate-queering, her joining the Other and identifying with the Other means that she, too, is the Other. She is not Cador and Eufemie's daughter—or *son*—instead, she is a jongleur. Distancing herself from her aristocratic upbringing, she does not need to worry about King Evan's law. At the very least, she needs to keep her disguise so that no one sends her back to Cador. More significant is that, by evading cisheteronormativity, she evades her estate. Without the worry of estate, Silence embodies another form of queerness, one where she embodies an absence of her original estate.

Fascinatingly, Silence keeps up her disguise when she encounters her father. Encountering her, Cador plans to have Silence killed. However, Silence begged for mercy, which left him with "such pangs of grief that he couldn't utter a word" (3550). Her disguise and performance as a man is so effective that she both stays undetected in front of her father and moves him to silence. Taking on the name Malduit, too, suggests that Silence as a name is a

[13] Silence, at least, stands up for herself against the jongleurs, contrasting herself from her feminine nature and, again, proving that she performs better as a man than any other man in the story.

liminality, a name no longer attached to anyone, and thus prone to reassignment. The one person who can see through her disguise, however, is Merlin. Appearing alongside Cador, he tells him the truth, but Cador is unconvinced and calls him a "traitor" and exclaims that he is "completely mad" (3564-5). Madness, here, may be read less as a mental illness and more as queerness. If Merlin can sense that Silence is disguised as a man, then that suggests Merlin inhabits his "own gender bivalence" (Barr 15). Important, too, is his status as a liminal figure who lives in the wilderness, itself a liminal space. Familiarity with life beyond cisheteronormativity gives Merlin the power to reveal Silence. It is problematic that Merlin exposes Silence at all, knowing the fatal cost of doing so. Silence, more aware of the stakes of revealing herself, continues her disguise in front of everyone: she introduces herself as Malduit, but Merlin pushes back by telling her that "'Malduit means 'badly brought up,' / and that suits you well'" (3579-80). Merlin, arguing that the name Malduit "'suits'" her, agrees with Silence's self-positionality—naming herself that demonstrates that she embodies that which turned her into a queer figure. Cador, meanwhile, is none the wiser, for he does not understand their exchange. His inability to do so reflects his deep positionality in cisheteronormativity—as he himself upholds it and shuns otherness, he does not have the exposure necessary to reveal queerness. Silence's gender mastery and physical disguise may speak for itself, but Cador's exposure (and lack thereof) to queerness prevents him from noticing what Merlin notices. Silence and Merlin, then, connect based on queerness. Merlin's status as a trickster, coupled with how he inhabits liminality (and, hence—irreconcilability), allows him the knowledge to detect gender-nonconformity in others. At the same time, it is Merlin who forces Silence back into cisheteronormativity, which calls into question the extent of his queerness. If he supports what Cador supports, then Merlin ultimately acts in the interests of compulsory heterosexuality and cisheteronormativity. Heldris tells us that

"Silence acted as if he hadn't understood a word / of what he was telling him," which suggests that Silence understood exactly what he was telling Cador (3593-4). The emphasis on "acted" plays into gender performativity as an act, a set of actions that constitute gender. Silence, having "acted" as a man for all her life, must know, to some extent, what Merlin is saying, but she has the sense to continue her disguise in front of her father. Her success in that further means the seneschal raised Silence as a man better than Cador could have imagined. Ultimately, this scene offers us the perspective of cisheteronormativity meeting queerness and the slipperiness of such an encounter.

After Silence reveals her true identity to Cador[14], the whole city celebrates; the news of Silence's return alerts King Evan, who requested Silence appear at his court. Queen Eufeme has a special, yet diabolical, affinity to Silence. Heldris, interestingly, spares no criticism of her before she does anything against Silence: he calls her a "female Satan," at once foreshadowing what she will do to Silence, but also misogynistically labels her with terms that attack her very nature. Such criticism for other people in the story is entirely absent, which reflects the kind of threat Eufeme is in the poem: Terrell contends that these descriptions of her exist "partially because of the freeness of her speech and her willingness to express and ruthlessly fight for her desires" (41). More elementally, it is her actions against the throne that led to King Evan's anti-inheritance decree ever passing. In a sense, then, Eufeme is the antithesis of Silence. Eufeme's presence also positions Silence into further gender trouble—

> Her heart and body were consumed with lust for him.
>
> He's supposed to soothe her by playing the harp,
>
> but he might get into trouble instead

[14] It is here that Cador lifts the ban on jongleurs, which may speak to his estate privilege—it is only when something personally affects him that he changes his decision.

for having changed his nature. (3716-9)

In this context, nature refers to genitals; Heldris biologizes gender into its elemental form, that categorization between males and females is based upon their genitals. Here, too, Heldris reveals Eufeme's fascination with Silence—"consumed with lust," she finds Silence to be the avenue through which she can relieve her sexual tensions. Heldris toys with the idea that, were she to have known Silence is a girl, she would not have advanced upon Silence; nonetheless, Eufeme uses her power as queen of England to make known her sexual desires: she sexually assaults Silence and makes her body available to him: "'Was any man of your lineage, / however exalted, ever offered such a glorious gift? / I'm offering you my body in complete surrender'" (3782-4). The focus of the body centrally contradicts Silence's very nature—compared to Eufeme, she cannot make her body available to her because she does not possess a penis. Sex, in a cisheteronormative context, is impossible because Silence does not have the parts that constitute maleness. She does her best to hide this fact, arguing that "If I commit an act of treachery here, / I will be so dishonored by it / that I will be one of the worst men in the world" (3802-4). Evoking romance's central theme of chivalry, Silence challenges Eufeme's advances by the very idea that Silence cannot break her duty. Kinoshita writes that "Eufeme's desire is the site where the protagonist's secret runs up against the limits of biological difference," implying the impossibility of heterosexual sex (66). Where language does not constrain Eufeme and Silence's relationship, biological sex does. For Eufeme to discover Silence's genitalia is to revoke her advances and further cement her authority as the penultimate gatekeeper of Silence's gender.

With her advances refused, Eufeme's monologue on destabilizing Silence reveals a highly essentialized view of Silence. She explains that

I will see him totally dishonored,

completely destroyed, if I can manage it …

I'm sure he's a queer,

since a woman doesn't arouse him at all. …

He likes young men a lot

and really enjoys their company.

He's a fag, I'd swear to it,

and my love threatens him. (3932-3, 3935-6, 3945-8)

Whereas Silence may be fulfilling his knightly duties—of remaining loyal to the retainer, thus staying true to the genre—Eufeme instead spots Silence's gender trouble. Calling him a "queer" and a "fag" reflects both gender violence against queer characters and, more pressingly, misrepresents Silence. Although Heldris, in this situation, attempts to hold the genre together, it implicitly risks bursting apart and rupturing because Silence cannot fulfill any knightly duty because she is, underneath her disguise, a woman. The romance has been consistently toying with the possibility of a woman knight, but it is here where that prospect begins falling apart. Perhaps to set up the ending where the genre restabilizes, Heldris fashions Eufeme into a figure both hostile to queerness and a protector of genre. Additionally, romancing a man who disguises himself as a nun further complicates her characterization: it reinforces what little respect she has for England's throne. Paradoxically, while she risks upending her marriage with Evan—thus throwing the throne into disarray—her presence in the story still functions to return order to the genre. Further, by juxtaposing the two women together, Heldris demonstrates to readers his own essentialist ideas of women—that they should be loyal and obedient to others. Eufeme, then, is multipurpose: a threat to her own rule, the catalyst for the genre's disorder (and the catalyst for

its return to order), and an antithesis to Silence. It is Eufeme who cannot conform to her queenly duties, whereas Silence can play a different gender better than Eufeme can play her own. Her adultery, however, has precedent in her positionality: Kinoshita notes that "Her marriage is part of the peace settlement of a senseless war that had begun 'over something trivial' … however, once narrative focus shifts to internal English politics … she loses whatever symbolic advantage she enjoyed as a high-ranking foreign bride" (65). In other words, the narrative dictates her gender performativity: she only *needs* to act in her position for as long as the story requires it; and, once her function is no longer tantamount to the narrative's continuation, her function can shift to something else. In this way, Eufeme queers gender categorization—she rejects the roles cisheteronormativity placed upon her. Like Silence, she risks destabilizing the genre into chaos, potentially leaving Heldris in trouble regarding how to reclaim the narrative. That Heldris molds her into such a hostile and violent woman may be so readers side against her, but her construction into such a figure illustrates the bounds the poem will go to dethrone a queer figure and, more broadly, delegitimize queerness.

Eufeme, then, becomes the first of a set of critical tests of Silence's gender performativity. Deciding how to bring about her downfall, Eufeme tests Silence's gullibility by declaring,

> The king, my lord, had been after me
> for a whole year to do it [have sex with Silence].
> He repeatedly asked me
> to test the most loyal youth
> and report back to him. (4002-6)

To “test” Silence has a double meaning—to test Silence’s loyalty to Evan, and to test Silence’s sexuality. Eufeme suspects that Silence is a “queer,” so her statement carries these two implications. Silence, however, does not realize the latter, so she is completely taken off guard when she invites her to her bedroom to, presumably, rape Silence. When Silence refuses to consent, Eufeme begins harming herself, claiming that, instead, Silence committed to raping her. When Evan arrives at the bedroom, Eufeme twists the event to argue that “He [Silence] thought that he had found a loose woman to suit him” (4123). It is critical to note that this event is what places Silence on trial, where the king of France de-clothes her, further implying a looseness of gender. One may additionally define the idea of looseness as the ease in which Silence’s disguise can fall—as she is at the mercy of Evan and Eufeme, there is only so much more she can do to defend herself and, hence, her masculinity. Evan knows Eufeme is lying—a pass for Silence more than it is a detriment—but Evan’s estate constricts him into reporting Silence:

> Even were I to tell the king the truth,
> there’s no way he would believe me
> unless he knew my real nature.
> And then I would lose my standing,
> my father’s honor and my inheritance.
> And I know for certain
> that the queen would be punished
> and deprived of her honor. (4168-76)

Estate is what ultimately motivates Evan to report Silence to the king of France—if he were to not do so, then he would “lose” his “standing” and his “inheritance”; however, estate is what also privileges Evan to spare Silence from death: he tells Eufeme that the king will obey his letter that

he will send along with Silence, but he only stands to protect her. Heldris, playing on Eufeme's wickedness, decides for her that "she herself will send a letter / that would cause the youth a great deal of trouble, / if she could see to it that hers was the one he carried to France" (4278-80). What pushes Eufeme to such extremes may be Silence's consistent refusals for sex, but there is still latent desire to de-clothe Silence. If Silence chooses not to have sex with Eufeme, then that implies the impossibility of heterosexual intercourse. Still, to Eufeme, it is a question of power.

Loyalty and estate function again as a means by which to handle Silence. Judging Silence to be a man, the king of France finds himself required to handle Silence's case with utmost care: he recognizes that executing Silence is a "terrible crime" (4482), but he also understands he cannot just disobey his vassal—otherwise, he would be "the most dishonorable man in the world" (4478). Loyalty functions as currency—as exchange—between the two kings, and Silence is caught in the middle of it. Another test emerges—the test of loyalty. In this case, however, Silence has little control over whether she passes—instead, she is powerless. Evan and the king of France, in a sense, begin her demasculinization, keeping her from deciding her fate while still treating her like a man.

Eufeme also contributes to his demasculinization when she convinces Evan to send Silence out for Merlin. Saying that only "'a woman's trick'" can capture Merlin, she convinces Evan to further test the bounds of Silence's gender (5803). To task Silence with capturing a gender-bivalent character in a liminal space is to re/enter a world of gender-ambiguity (Barr 15). What this quest further signifies is the out-of-boundness of the wilderness—it is "beyond the known world," beyond that which is governable, so sending Silence out to capture Merlin is both a test in Silence's gender and a bidding to extend aristocratic rule into the nonhuman world (18). By standing outside of Evan's court and the heteronormative world it represents, Merlin is the

text's most obvious Other. The conquest into the wilderness, in this context, is also a conquest against the Other, one where the king desires authority over this area but has none. Merlin casts himself as one with the wilderness: "He is a man all covered with hair, / as hairy as a bear" (5929-30). He additionally has advanced wilderness survival skills, all of which paint him as both among and between the borders of wilderness and civilization. In a sense, Merlin is the queer character of the wilderness—neither fully civil nor wild. In this way, Silence finds refuge and, even, comfort with Merlin, for he stands at the borders of England's rule—ungovernable and unobtainable. Silence finds herself in a similar position, where to be in Merlin's company is to also be in this ungovernable and unobtainable category. Still, Silence must fulfill her quest to capture Merlin, which she succeeds in doing. Such an accomplishment speaks, immediately, to the implications of doing so (that she is really a woman), but it also implies that Silence was the only person who could have done so.

What this accomplishment really does, however, is establish the context by which order to the land is restored. Paradoxically, Merlin, the chaotic and elusive Other, is the one who restores order to the throne. Merlin's presence brings unease for everyone, for Evan still thinks that Silence is a man:

> you said you would never be tricked
> or captured, except by a woman.
> By the loyalty I owe Eufeme,
> I am still disturbed by your lying,
> for your prophecy has turned out to be false. (6346-50)

Reflecting on Evan's understanding of this situation reveals that Merlin has succeeded—yet again—at his trickery. More telling is that everyone still believes that Silence is a man, so

Merlin must have lied about his prophecy. Nonetheless, he is the chaotic presence that closes the story on a seemingly orderly note. He reveals to everyone that

> this nun is Eufeme's lover;
>
> he is deceiving you in plain dress. …
>
> Silence, on the other hand, tricked me
>
> by dressing like a young man: in truth,
>
> he is a girl beneath his clothes.
>
> Only the clothes are masculine. (6531-2, 6534-7)

Hotchkiss argues that crossdressing "involves both societal misperception based on appearance and confused self-perception of the disguised character," and it is here where we understand how well the nun and Silence took advantage of such confusion (105). The limits of clothes as disguise, however, fall apart when they can no longer act as a barrier between the human wearing them and the outside world: Evan orders both the nun and Silence strip naked, and "he found everything in its proper place" (6574). Silence finally finds herself in the most vulnerable position of all—she is now "nus." The symbolism of disrobing—of making oneself naked—lies in its intimacy: there is a sense of voyeurism influencing the order for them to disrobe. The idea that genitals prescribe gender is the essentialist readings of sex and gender: that "everything in its proper place" is gender. Put another way, the distinction between sex and gender falls apart because there is no barrier constituting the nun and Silence's gender ambiguity. Waters summarizes Butler's idea of drag, that it "is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure that produces hegemonic gender itself, and thus disputes the claim of heterosexuality to naturalness and originality" (44). With their disguises, they challenge hegemonic discourses of gender and sex. Eufeme knows the nun was in disguise, implying her

own complicity in fooling hegemonic structures. By shedding their clothes, the court finds through them their most elemental characteristics that define their societal positionality: their penis and vulva, respectively.

The court's focus on genitalia as the foremost signifier of gender may ultimately be what proves Merlin correct, but it still offers the characters a way to re/theorize gender: Evan announces that "'Silence, you have been a very valiant, / courageous and worthy *knight*; / neither count nor king ever fathered better'" (6579-81, my emphasis). The fact that Evan uses the word "'knight'" to describe Silence suggests Evan has a queer/ed reading of Silence: knighthood, being reserved for men, does not have a gender distinction here. For Evan to recognize that Silence performed as a better man than all the other men in the story illustrates a way in which cisheteropatriarchy can bend its rudimentary binariness to account for queer bodies. Important to note, too, is that estate influences his response: Fulton mentions how "Silence was not merely born a woman, she was born a noblewoman and, the poem argues, it is her noble qualities, transcending her sex, which ensure her success as a knight" (61). Her estate may well have been the primary gateway through which Silence had the opportunity to study and perform as a man; her privileged position in society provides more opportunities for her to experiment than if she were, for example, born and raised in a peasant family.

Regardless, it is by recognizing the queer body yet stripping it down to its elemental form that the presence of queerness in this story breaks down. Evan rescinds his order that women can no longer inherit, and Silence's last words are "'This is a noble gift. May God reward you for it. / It is by his acts that one knows who is truly king'" (6645-6). After that, she is silent—she no longer talks. There is much truth in her statement that she is either "'Silentius'" or she is "'no one,'" for without her masculinity she is no longer whole. Indeed, Heldris tells us that "Once he

was called Silentius: / they removed the -us, added an -a, / and so he was called Silentia" (6666-8). If she is not Silentius, then who is she? In Silence's own words, "nus"—she loses her social and bodily autonomy. Further, the king had the nun and Eufeme executed, and he took Silence as his wife. These points are massively consequential to both Silence as her own person and to the place of queerness in romance. If Silence's last words in the story relate to why she disguised herself in the first place (and how she no longer needs to hide her gender), and that she rescinds the queerness implicit in her name, and that she marries into cisheteronormativity, then how can queerness fit in? How can it exist in romance?

The buildup to this climax—and the denouement here—suggest that queerness cannot fully exist in romance. Otherwise, what would Silence's function be to the cisheteronormative, patriarchal throne ruling England? Would she turn into the next Merlin? Telling from her exploits as a man, and her near-perfect ability to disguise herself, she is too useful to Evan to be discarded. But she cannot continue as a queer person because, in this poem, cisheteropatriarchy offers no space for queerness to exist and thrive. Merlin, after all, had to retreat to the forest, a space not even the throne ruled over. What, then, would be Silence's fate? The romance here seemingly offers no alternative—queerness must fall in line with the hegemonic discourses and society surrounding it. In this sense, queerness disintegrates—the genre no longer requires it, and keeping it for any longer threatens its stability. It has no other place to go except nowhere. The fate of queerness, Heldris suggests to us, is silence—much like Silence's name, queerness cannot talk back. Just as *Silence* silences Silence, *Silence* additionally silences queerness. Griffith explains that "A character born of (and limited by) the plot of the poem's narrative, Silence returns to being a girl because that is what the structure of such a tale requires: order must be—and so is—restored," further cementing this idea about queerness's fate (30). Griffith

does not frame this discussion in terms of Silence's queerness, but the message nevertheless applies here: the genre constricts gender. Heldris can only experiment with gender as long as the genre allows it. Once he can no longer experiment—it is either the gender or genre that goes—he must choose that which will close the story, neatly or not. It is unclear whether Heldris is satisfied with such a choice: he writes that "A good woman should neither take offense / nor blame herself for someone else's faults, / but simply strive all the harder to do what is right" (6699-6701). But what is "right" in this case? What is a "good woman"? Can we consider Silence to have done "right" in her choice to uphold her estate and inheritance? Is she a "good woman" because she is no longer queer? Heldris leaves these ideas unanswered, instead wishing to distance himself from the narrative: "God's blessings on the narrator, / God's blessing on the author" (6703-4). By this sentiment, Heldris suggests that he cannot distance himself from the genre—he cannot veer off course, else his story will fall apart. What this insight offers to genre is that it is the definitive limiter of characters—writers must, in their own ways, adhere to the structures of genre, or else their story is no longer what it is but something else. Heldris's hesitation there may reveal his discomfort with queering genre. Heldris's story works this way because he did not know another way to allow queerness's existence. Or, perhaps, he did not want queerness to exist. Regardless of how he felt, his story still implies a strictness of genre that writers may not be able to pass. What that says about queerness, then, is that chaos cannot overrule order—queerness cannot compromise genre. Romances, then, seem to celebrate and reinforce cisheteronormativity.

By reading *Silence* through a queer lens, I have tried to argue that queerness cannot ultimately thrive in this story's interpretation of romance. *Silence*'s premise invites—even necessitates—the introduction and thriving of the queer body. Cador and Eufemie, to protect

their land, enlist Silence to manhood—so long as they raise him as a boy, their inheritances will face no legal challenges. This situation causes a gender disruption in Silence, who feuds with Nature and Nurture over what path she should follow. Although she attempts to carve her own way—by joining the jongleurs and changing her name to Malduit—Evan eventually forces her back into heteronormativity, where she cannot experiment much further with gender. Her presence before the throne is what leads to her supposed downfall—forced to disrobe, she must let go of her masculinity. Evan, marrying Silence, reintroduces her into cisheteronormativity. With Silence's silence, the genre suggests that queerness has no place in romances the way masculinity and femininity do. Exploring this rhetoric at such elemental levels as genre may not be where we think to go, nor may we think it is a productive place to go. On the contrary, challenging something as elemental to literature as genre is challenging that which is elemental to Western society: cisheteronormative patriarchal white supremacy. By peeling back the layers that constitute such intolerance, we may be better equipped to undo hateful conditioning in others and, hopefully, offer everyday people ways to re-theorize their material realities.

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