

Thirteenth-Century Echoes Today: *Le Roman de Silence* and Queer Medieval Studies



Le *Roman de Silence* is a thirteenth-century French Romance written by Heldris de Cornuaille, which survives today in a single manuscript. The text follows the life of a disinherited child named Silence and explores tensions between Nature and Nurture through their unstable gender.

Ebain, the King of England, forbids women to inherit, prompting two members of his court to raise their child as a boy regardless of the sex at birth. Silence is raised in the woods until they are old enough to understand their situation, later running off with a pair of minstrels, and eventually becoming a celebrated knight.

This success is undercut when Queen Eufeme, Ebain's wife, reacts poorly to her romantic advances being rejected by Silence and has them sent on the 'impossible' quest of catching Merlin. They are victorious but upon their return to court Merlin reveals Silence to have been created as female at birth and exposes the Queen's infidelity with a lover disguised as a nun. Eufeme is executed, Nature re-feminizes Silence, and they are married to King Ebain after he lifts the inheritance ban.

I examined this story for its Queer representations which directly counter the idea that the Middle Ages were entirely straight or cisgender and open opportunities for Queer scholars to recontextualize our own histories.

Finding Yourself in the Past

Some scholars choose to interpret this story as one of imposed cross-dressing, through which a woman proves she can not only equal men but surpass them (Stock 1997, 23-4 and Gilmore 1997, 118). I do not see Silence as an inevitable woman, but rather a reflection of many of my own experiences being trans.



When Silence turns twelve, Nature and Nurture fight over their gender, in the midst of which Nature snaps that: "[t]here are those who love you now who would hate you with all their hearts if they knew what you really are!" (lines 2518-20). This exact line is repeated now, almost a thousand years later, to trans people implying we are deceptive and at fault for others' assumptions about our bodies.

Silence's transition in gender is explained as a product of their circumstances, a play for future financial gain, but they continually find reasons to not present as a woman. Further, when they are exiled into woods (the realm of magic and adventure beyond society) to catch Merlin, they still choose to present as male.

Intentions for that Present

Heldris writes that this story is simply a translation, absconding responsibility for its contents, potentially allowing for greater creative freedom if he did indeed write it. His epilogue declares that women have significantly fewer reasons to be 'good' given their circumstances, which could be read as a rather poignant acknowledgment of sexism.

In the text, Nature is personified as a ceramicist, crafting Silence from the finest clay into the most beautiful creature there will ever be. This frames both sex and gender as neither inherent nor binary but created, first by Nature then later by Nurture.

The defining features of masculinity in the story include having short hair, sun-tanned skin, muscular arms, wearing breeches, and wielding weapons (usually in a forest). The only difference noted for Silence is found in the innuendos regarding genitalia, as they appear male to any observer.



Neither Silence nor the previous stories that informed it are unique in their Queer characters or discussions of gender. The Byzantine Empire has stories of trans

masculine Saints who used the known ambiguous form of the eunuch to explain their appearance and voice (Ringrose 2003, 80-1). Earlier professional handbooks note possible punishments for sodomy (McCann 2010, 37), and illuminated Bibles depicted same-sex couples, albeit through a disapproving Christian lens.

Echoing Loud in the Future

It is a deeply homophobic and transphobic notion that Queer people are a recent invention. Academia as an institution has played a role in this erasure by remaining largely inaccessible to diverse voices while constructing the white, well off, male scholar as the voice of authority.

Further, biases in translation choices and narrative interpretations influenced by a hetero/cisnormative worldview have led to Queer possibilities being ignored. Much of the ambiguity or nuances in pronouns of the original French are absent in translations of *Silence*.

The anxieties around unstable genders and how class dynamics, race, and patriarchal power structures interact are not specific to thirteenth-century France. They are very relevant today as we see anti-trans bills put forward, protests against teaching children that Queer people exist, and extremely violent rhetoric both online and off which nearly paraphrases the arguments Nature makes against Silence's masculinity.



The *Roman de Silence* presents a very overtly Queer narrative, but it also provides a foundation for continued research examining, or re-examining, other Medieval texts through an explicitly Queer lens. There is a need for marginalized communities to have agency, not simply 'allowed' space, but supported in being the authorities on our own histories. The lack of a socially constructed Queer identity in the Middle Ages doesn't mean a lack of Queer or trans people. While we can speculate on an author's intentions, this is a story that still resonates with audiences today, bridging a gap of several thousand years through shared Queer experiences.

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