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Complicating Courtly Love:
Queering Sex and Gender in High Medieval Literature (1000-1250)
By Chloe Shankland

Section One: Introduction, Background, and Questions

In studying the middle ages from a queer perspective, one of the first questions asked of scholars is inevitable. Did queer people exist in the middle ages? Upon a cursory exploration, this question avoids a straightforward answer, as medieval sense-building is obscured by a lack of informative and affirmative source material and modern sensibilities. Furthermore, the 'real life' sources that color social histories of the period rarely include queer folk, necessitating a turn to the murky waters of literature. What is clear is that studying queer history in the premodern past, or even "queering" the premodern past, renders many of the theoretical and methodological conventions of medievalists more complicated.¹ While factors like careful contextualization to avoid 'ahistorical equivalency' and reciprocal analysis that holds the past in conversation with the present are essential to 'doing good history' older scholars often assume that queer is anachronistic, leading to queer history that is timid at best but, demeaning and hostile at worst. Conversely, the scholarly discussion surrounding the thirteenth-century romance *Le Roman de Silence* by Heldris of Cornwall tends to avoid these issues because of questions regarding voice, gender, and society that are inherent in the source. These questions fit shockingly well within modernism at first glance.

The main protagonist, Silence, is assigned female at birth but raised to be a man by their parents in defiance of sexist inheritance laws. Despite excelling in masculine pursuits, they find themselves inescapably entangled in a dangerous courtly system as an object of desire and envy. Even a short summary of *Silence* is captivating, and upon further reading and research, this fascination holds up. As Sarah Roche-Mahd's 1992 translation advertises, the works' captivating

¹ These issues are central to understanding the historiography of women's and queer medieval history, which began in earnest in the 1990s and early 2000s ; Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996) ; Judith Bennet, "Lesbian-like" and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no.1 (April 2000) ; Robert Clark, "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12, no.1 (Spring 2002) ; Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ* 13, no. 2-3 (2007). More recent scholars tend to focus on transgender issues with the same attention to shifting hegemonic narratives, M. W. Bychowski, Howard Chiang, Jack Halberstam, Jacob Lau, Kathleen P. Long, Marcia Ochoa, C. Riley Snorton, Leah DeVun, Zeb Tortorici, "Trans*historicalities": A Roundtable Discussion," *TSQ* 5, no.4 (November 2018) ; Leah Devun and Zeb Tortorici, "Trans, Time, and History," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no.4 (November 2018) ; Laura Moncion, "Bodies that talk: Julian of Norwich and Judith Butler in conversation," *Postmedieval: A journal of medieval cultural studies* 9, no.2 (2019) ; Kadin Henningsen, "'Calling [herself] Eleanor': Gender Labor and Becoming a Woman in the Rykener Case," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 55, no.1 (2019) ; Caitlin Watt, "'Car vallés sui et nient mescine': Trans Heroism and Literary Masculinity in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 55, no.1 (2019) ; C. Libby, "The Historian and the Sexologist: Revisiting the 'Transvestite Saint'," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no.2 (May 2021).

characters, as well as the numerous relevant questions within the text, earn not only the interest of scholars and experts but "anyone who loves a first-rate love story."² The story of *Le Roman de Silence*, over 6700 lines of verse, follows Eufemie and Cador, who create an elaborate scheme to raise their daughter in masculine ways to protect her inheritance. Upon reaching adolescence, the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture appear before Silence, prompting a crisis of identity, in which he decides, influenced by reason and fondness for his childhood experiences, to continue his life as a man—first running away to learn the arts of minstrelsy and chivalry, where he finds immense success. Now grown, Silence returns to court and is unable to fulfill the desires of Eufeme, the king's highly-sexed wife, whose retaliation sends him down a path that destroys his presentation of gender. Ultimately, Silence's secret is revealed by Merlin's foresight and mocking laughter. Finally, a woman's right to inherit is restored by King Eban who then takes Silence as his wife, everything - seemingly - returned to its proper place.³ Nonetheless, Heldris' questions about voice and performance, power and gender, Nature and Nurture are left in a frustratingly inconsistent state.

These internal contradictions, which make *Silence* so compelling, and challenging, are evident upon any close reading of the text. In only nineteen lines, analyzed below where Silence competes in a tournament, show the romance's complexity. Most prominently, Heldris' misogyny and binary conception of gender conflicts with the world he has created in which Silence excels as a knight. The use of imagery and literary convention alongside gendered language is jarringly discordant in the following quote.

In the tilting-field, between the two rows,
Silence excelled at hitting the target.
There never was a woman less reluctant
to engage in armed combat.
Whoever saw him jousting, stripped of his mantle,
carrying his shield on his left arm.
charging in the tournament
with well-position lance,
might well say that Nurture

² Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, trans Sarah Roche-Mahdi, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999).

³ Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, x i - x x iv.

can do a great deal to overcome Nature,
if she can teach such behavior
to a soft and tender woman.
Many a knight unhorsed by Silence,
if he had known the truth
at the time she knocked him down
would have been terribly ashamed
that a tender, soft, faint-hearted woman,
who had only the complexion,
clothing and bearing of a man,
could have struck him down with her lance.⁴

Silence's knightly outfitting and jousting performance is a linguistically and logically awkward place to assert that he is, in fact, born a woman. Words like "tender, soft, faint-hearted," are distinctly out of place against literary and social conventions of masculinity. Within the setting of the joust, the lance's phallic irony brings Silence's prowess as a knight into direct conflict with his body.⁵ Heldris' inconsistent use of gender indicators in language further completes this uncertainty, making the audience ask, is Silence's masculinity tied exclusively to their ability to perform the masculine and reproductive role in sexual encounters? Or can it be won in battle? If so, what does that say about the system of masculinity and knighthood so important to the world of romance? Furthermore, by demeaning qualities of femininity, which are not consistent with Silence's actions, Heldris praises any distance gained from femininity. Upon closer readings, the text's definition of what is 'natural,' 'right,' or 'moral' loses clarity and Heldris' questions about his world come into focus.

These questions, which ring loudly throughout, point to societal discussions that are still salient today. Such as, how does anxiety regarding the sexual nature of bodies conflict with medieval theological conventions, especially those that undercut and challenge the mainstream? Do authors and theorists of the middle ages conceptualize gender as embodied and ontological or as influenced by ritualized and social aspects of society, including physical possessions? These questions are left unanswered in *Silence* and remain mostly so to this day. In fact, in much

⁴ Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 241-243, lines 5145-5164.

⁵ Watt, "Trans Heroism and Literary Masculinity in *Le Roman de Silence*," 156-160.

medieval source material it is difficult if not impossible to answer them definitively. Writers are not ideologically consistent, and their messages are clouded by hundreds of years of missing social context, as well as complex systems of metaphors. Still, the words on the page are often all that remains of these voices, so as scholars, we must find new ways to answer these questions by filling in the missing context and taking a broader approach. Ultimately, Heldris of Cornwall and other authors and theorists of the period were not particularly feminist, queer, or transgender-friendly, nor did they purposefully disrupt hegemonic thinking with rigor. However, like us, they questioned. Looking at these questions, we can gain a significant perspective into our modernism; through queering these social anxieties, we often find what is the most terrifying to transgress. Here we can hear the echoes of our queer ancestors.

It is not difficult to find these anxieties in medieval sources, and indeed they often overshadow voices of diversity. Due to this, an overview of 'queering' or 'queer theory' as an academic tool is necessary. Based initially on the work of Micheal Foucault and Judith Butler, queer theory aims to examine power structures and destabilize narratives of cisheteronormativity by exposing gender and sexuality as performed and constructed differently throughout time.⁶ Particularly relevant is Butler's concept of 'doing gender' and 'gender trouble,' which states that repeating gendered performances solidifies cultural discourses of gender but that within this reality, we can shift our repetitions and challenge norms.⁷ Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* has also been profoundly influential. While it is often the basis of the scholarship, medievalists question his earlier claims that sexuality as identity was created through and during bourgeois capitalism.⁸ Queering allows scholars to find new ways to read the source material, emphasizing moments where these texts disrupt normativity. It is also a helpful tool for medievalists who study a relatively small amount of source material.⁹ Furthermore, queering works that are not explicitly queer connects the medieval past and disrupts narratives of cisheteronormativity. It also allows scholars to contextualize their queer history rather than making it a singular exception or a subsection of broader material.

⁶ Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History* (London: Icon Books, 2016), 62.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) as summarized by Barker and Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 73-83, 141-142.

⁸ Micheal Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 19) as mentioned by Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 8-10 ; Conor McCarthy, *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook*, (New York: Routledge, 2004) and numerous other historians of medieval sexuality.

⁹ Barker and Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 102 ; Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 9-10.

As discussed above, issues of representation and identification for queer students of history have been controversial in the past. In a roundtable discussion printed in *transgender studies quarterly*, several transgender historians explore these methodological and theoretical challenges using trans-historicities to explore voice, subjectivity, and temporality issues. Transgender medievalist M.W. Bychowski challenges erasure amongst elite academic discourses citing the importance of adapting our storytelling tools for queer stories that rely on the ambiguity of language and translation. Bychowski argues for the importance of transgender history without forgetting the heart of historical study, which is that, "We may share experiences, relics, traditions, ideas, and stories with the past, but we do not occupy their skin, feel their pain, witness history as the witness."¹⁰ Another medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw occupies a similar space for queering scholarship, finding that "the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then," is a poignant way to utilize historical study for modern queer folk.¹¹ Thus, showing the thought put in by queer scholars who feel the weight of finding roots in history, particularly in the premodern past. This is especially true because this period is used to harm queer communities by those who see the medieval past as a monolith or as a 'pre-diverse' paradise.¹² As a queer historian, it feels tempting to try and impose queer identities on the past and find roots for those of us who are whose identities challenge what has been constructed as normal and given a place of moral neutrality, to prove the longevity of queer voices. Therefore, the debate between historicity and queer temporalities is resolved by some medievalists through terms like 'lesbian-like' or 'transgender-like.' Terms that seek to find likeness in experiences rather than individual identity; this seeks to find links to the premodern past that validate and ground queerness without the burden of "heteronormative blinders, sexist ideologies, or modernist assumptions."¹³ This framing is critical throughout this paper, helping to place the paper's view on *Silence* not only within its historical context but within a tradition of academic work that attends to methodological and historiographical issues with care.

¹⁰ Bychowski, Chiang, Halberstam, Lau, Long, Ochoa, Snorton, DeVun, Tortorici, "Trans*historicitites," 669-682.

¹¹ Dinshaw, Edelman, Ferguson, Freccero, Freeman, Halberstam, Jagose, Nealon, and Hoang, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 178.

¹² While this is an important consideration for many medievalists, it was first brought to my attention by Amy S. Kaufman, and Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval past*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020.)

¹³ Bennet, "'Lesbian-like'," 21-24.

Before starting analysis, this paper also looks critically at some common methodological strategies for studying queer history. In the study of the middle ages, unreliable authorship provides a hostile, dire, and often violent picture of the queer past, and limited source materials seriously complicates the historical process. This often results in scholarship that isolates explicitly queer sources, and renders them difficult to analyze and understand. More importantly, using this approach makes finding patterns, and underlying meaning very difficult. Consequently, using a wide variety of source material is critical, allowing analysis to piece together a more accurate understanding of the period, as well as the background assumptions and exposures of the authors and audiences. This paper will look firstly, at the work of theologians and canonists, which shows some fundamental opinions and places of anxiety of the celibate clergy, but whose place as experts in sexuality is fundamentally flawed.¹⁴ Then at court documents which punish but preserve queer experiences, although directly in the voice of the oppressor.¹⁵ Lastly, in romances, which represent a small class of elite writing during the period, we see authors play with a series of questions and ideals for courtly life.¹⁶ Although in this approach, however, there is a dangerous impulse to draw overly strict boundaries around different types of source materials so the paper will use the guiding questions already stated to queer medieval -- and modern-- social anxieties. The paper returns at the end to the spaces where medieval thinkers created disruptions in cisheteronormative constructions and where we can finish that process.

Section Two: Expanding Understandings and Looking Elsewhere

Before approaching queerness in the middle ages, it is essential to have a baseline understanding of their cultural context, the foundation of which must be respect and curiosity. The concept of sexuality in the middle ages has been challenged in the past, but today scholars have created a wide variety of handbooks, monographs, and primary source anthologies that tackle the subject with careful historicization.¹⁷ One such volume is Ruth Mazo Karras's,

¹⁴ Bullough and Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, 3-50.

¹⁵ Eugene Smelyansky, "Introduction," in *The Intolerant Middle Ages: A Reader*, ed. Eugene Smelyansky, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), x iii- x v iii.

¹⁶ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 12 ; Roberta L. Krueger, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-12.

¹⁷ For example; Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe* ; Bullough and Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* ; McCarthy, *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook* ; Eugene Smelyansky, *The Intolerant Middle Ages: A Reader*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others, which defends the duality of medieval attitudes about sex while highlighting its fundamental differences from modernity. Due to this duality and the resulting nuance, the following section will connect medieval writings and theory to the questions stated in the introduction. Underlying anxieties regarding embodied sexuality and the experience of gender, which are addressed in *Le Roman de Silence*, are found throughout the source material. As Karras explains, while medieval people lacked an explicit conception of sexuality, it is still a useful theoretical concept that illuminates strict adherence to binaries, not only about gender but to active and passive sexual roles. Creating an understanding where "Sexual intercourse was understood as something that one person did to another... [where] two partners were not understood to be doing the same thing or having the same experience. Mutuality was not important."¹⁸ Studying sexuality in the middle ages requires setting aside the binary conceptions of today for those of yesterday. It means trading homosexual or heterosexual for chaste or sexually active, for natural, meaning more or less reproductive, and unnatural, more or less the opposite. Furthermore, it means being careful not to impose heterosexist assumptions on primary sources.¹⁹ Careful understanding like those presented above is the foundation of queering scholarship that calls the audience to look for nuance in medieval perspectives and our own.

With this intention, in much of the source material about sexuality from the middle ages, unacceptable behavior is much clearer than acceptable behavior. The anxieties of medieval thinkers, or those whose voices survive today, are clear in their writings on the subject. Therefore looking at moments of disapproval -- and anxiety -- identifies important and unstable topics in the cultural discussion, such as the regulation of sexuality and bodies. One particularly salient anxiety in much of the material, including *Silence*, surrounds the physical body as sexual and gendered. This is particularly visible in theology and penitentials, which attempt to regulate sexuality and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the gender expression of medieval people. For example, Burkhard, Bishop of Worms, wrote extensively on theology and canon law in the early eleventh century in a collection called the *Decretum*. Part of this work, the penitential, provides instructions for priests conducting confession, suggesting both possible transgressive acts and

¹⁸ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 1-5.

¹⁹ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 5-10, 92-94.

prescribed punishments.²⁰ It is important to note that penitentials often operate with imperfect information and anxiety rather than common practice, making them challenging sources.²¹ However, it is still clear that anxiety present about the connection between lust and the physical body extended past adulterers and sodomites, as the sexual relations of married couples were also regulated.

One portion lists essential days for couples to abstain from sex, including Sundays, Lent, feast and fast days, and many other important days in the Christian calendar, stating penance for if "you have defiled yourself [by having intercourse]."²² The use of the word 'defiled' points to the implicit danger of ritual pollution and sin connected to the sexed body, even between married people. Another question in the penitential of Burkhard of Worms prompts priests to ask about particular deviant sex acts, as in the following quote,

107. Have you committed fornication, as sodomites do, that is in a man's behind and inserted the [male] member into the rear, and in such way mate in the manner of a sodomite? If you have a wife and have done it once or twice, you should do penance for ten years, one of them on bread and water. Yet if you have [done it] habitually, you should do penance for twelve years. If however, you have committed the same carnal crime with your brother, you should do penance for fifteen years."²³

This quote shows the harsh punishments for non-reproductive sex applied to all while still exemplifying what kinds of variable acceptability existed depending on positionality. The increasing nature of the punishments and the connection of married people to sodomites, or animals in other penitentials, reinforces the anxieties surrounding ritual pollution and lust. In these texts, there is a strict but incongruent binary between reproduction --which is seen as necessary and valued-- and sex --which is evil and reprehensible-- causing friction, further enforcing the importance of regulating embodied sexuality, particularly in non-reproductive contexts, for church officials. This anxiety about embodiment, lust, and the duality of bodies is also present in *Silence*, most saliently in the encounters between Queen Eufeme and Silence. In these moments, the lust and sexualized body of the queen is exaggerated and villainized,

²⁰ Burkhard of Worms, "Punishments for Illicit Sexuality from a Medieval Penitential," in *The Intolerant Middle Ages: A Reader*, ed. Eugene Smelyansky, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 250-252

²¹ Burkhard of Worms, "Punishments for Illicit Sexuality from a Medieval Penitential," 250-252 ; Pierre J. Payer, "Confession and the Study of Sex in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 3-17.

²² Burkhard of Worms, "Punishments for Illicit Sexuality from a Medieval Penitential," 250-251.

²³ Burkhard of Worms, "Punishments for Illicit Sexuality from a Medieval Penitential," 251.

described by Heldris between lines 3683-3970 as "evil deeds," "burning lust," and "female satan."²⁴ Being positioned next to descriptions of both Eufeme's physical body and Silence's inability to perform sexual acts as a man cements this connection.

Correspondingly, other works of theology look to the bible for justification, applying historical thought to more contemporary debates. Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, one of the most popular and influential works of canon law defining marriage in the twelfth century, explains that the connections between passion -- and pain -- and reproduction result from the original sin. Exploring the biblical explanation of lust, tied to the fall, stating that, "because of sin, the deadly law of concupiscence is inherent in our members, without which there is no carnal union. Their coitus is reprehensible and evil unless excused by the goods of marriage."²⁵ The word choice in the previous quote also represents the venom with which religious figures referenced the topic. A type of venom that shows the centrality, and potency of the issue, along with the importance of challenging long-standing cultural assumptions in the same vein. Similarly, this anxiety regarding sexual pleasure and lust was amplified outside of the religious context. Written in the twelfth century, the *Lais* of Marie de France explores the dangers and magnetism of passion, love, and in the story of *Equitan*, adultery in particular. In the poem, the brave and chivalrous Equitan falls for the wife of a close friend, convincing the young woman to save him from his lovesickness by starting an affair, which ends in death for both. In her exploration of adulterous love, the central theme is "he who plans evil for another / may have that evil rebound back on him." but the uneasy connection between courtly models of love and uncontrolled passions is present.²⁶ Furthermore, Heldris employs many of the same methods as Marie, which further complicates messages about gender. The unsympathetic characters of Queen Eufeme and King Ebain appear to uphold essentialist gender, but their hypocritical and amoral actions undercut ideas stated by the narrators, who makes moralistic and venomous assertions throughout.

Another question inherent in *Silence* concerns the connections between embodiment and gender, with medieval authors and theorists often proposing an ontological experience but supporting the ritualized and social aspects informally, often resulting in incongruent ideologies and uncertainty for those enforcing laws. This is particularly salient in them moments where

²⁴ Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 173-187.

²⁵ Peter Lombard, "Sentences," in *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Middle Ages: A Reader* ed. by Jacqueline Murry (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 170-172

²⁶ Marie de France "Adulterous Love: The Story of Equitan," in *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Middle Ages: A Reader* ed. by Jacqueline Murry (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 113-121.

queer folk appear in source material, most often in criminal records, which by nature focus on transgression. One example is Katherina Hetzeldorfer, who was put on trial in 1477, accused of being sexually active with several women in Speyer, and later convicted and drowned for 'female sodomy.'²⁷ In exploring this instance of non-normative sexuality, the inquisitorial authorities pay much attention to her ability to transgress gender boundaries. On more than one occasion, witnesses mention that Katherina used her "manly will" upon them and practiced her seduction "just like a man."²⁸ Although for her partners, this may be to position themselves in passive sexuality further minimizing their guilt, the language shines throughout the document. Furthermore, those recording the events readily attempt to place Katherina, however illfittingly, with the normative frameworks. These frameworks included the 'manly women' who moved away from qualities of femininity for various reasons and could be used to either celebrate or punish women who diverged from norms—owing partially to the marginalized and 'twice-invisible' status of lesbians, who went unrecorded at much higher rates than queer men.²⁹ The penitentials even liken, and punish identically, sex between women to masturbation, as it lacks reproductive danger.³⁰ Katherina's life and her eventual death find the heart of the question: while most carry an essentialist definition of gender, queer people transgress and destabilize this. In their punishments, we see the backing of religious officials and authors who deal with the same issues theoretically. Moreover, these themes are also present in *Silence*, as scholar Jane Tolmie describes, by returning to misogynistic frames, to a life *Silence* themselves calls "captivity," in terms of punishment.³¹ However heartbreaking, looking at these moments through the framework of punishment is often the middle ground between two dangerous extremes.

Additionally, below is another example of court documents that complement the ones discussed above. Furthermore, conceptions of gender in the middle ages are often portrayed within strict binaries imposed by both modern and premodern authors. The instability of these concepts can be seen in ideological inconsistencies, as well as non-normative source material.

²⁷ "The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer," in *The Intolerant Middle Ages: A Reader*, ed. Eugene Smelyansky, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 266-267.

²⁸ "The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer," 266-268.

²⁹ Bennet, "'Lesbian-like,'" 1-5 ; Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 191-223.

³⁰ "The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer," 266-267 ; Theodore of Tarsus, "The Penitential of Theodore," in *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook*, ed. Conor McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 45

³¹ Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 135 ; Jane Tolmie, "Silence in the Sewing Chamber: *Le Roman de Silence*," *French Studies* 63, no.1 (2009): 25-26.

Another compelling and well-studied example of this, which calls into question the mainstream discourses about gender, is the case of Eleanor/John Rykner, who shows up in court documents from London reportedly a born a man but working as a female prostitute in 1395.³² Although there are many relevant themes within the text, this paper will look at the ability to which Eleanor was able to socially transition, as explored by Kadin Henningsen in her article "'Calling [herself] Eleanor": Gender Labor and Becoming a Woman in the Rykner Case." Henningsen claims that scholars should shift their framework surrounding the source from that of male-male sexual relations, nonbinary gender identity, or transgender-like, to that of a transgender *woman*. They cited her employment as "sex-worker, embroidieress, or tapster," the gender labor of her male sexual partners, and the importance of her name and pronouns throughout the testimony as ways that Eleanor asserts her womanhood by medieval standards.³³ This case shows how embodied, ritual, and social experiences of gender coexisted in discourse --and lived-experience-- despite incongruent ideologies and danger of punishment. The two cases of Katherina Hetzeldorfer and Eleanor/John Rykner show that medieval conceptions and experiences of gender are deeply tied to sex and sexuality, which is not only an embodied experience but also operates through a system of social norms. Returning to the question, these examples show ways in which the ritualized and social aspects of gender is incredibly complicated. In *Silence*, we see these moments of social transition, grounded in his ability to perform gender, in Silence's success as knight and minstrel, with the attraction he gains of many court ladies, as well as the admiration of lords. It is important to study these examples together because, in court documents, social transition includes blatant reactionary violence, and queer history should not only come from moments of tragedy. First and foremost from *Le Roman de Silence*, where competing ideologies of gender are explored through social transition, however unsustainable, where actions seem to undercut the more overt messages present.

However, the potential for a queer perspective is not only present in *Le Roman de Silence*; romances, more broadly, explore complex societal themes in playful ways. Due to the setting and premises of many courtly or chivalric romances, questions of gender and sexuality are front and center. Issues and anxieties of importance to society, like those discussed above, are not only highlighted through violence but actively discussed by romances. Deliberation happens

³² "Testimony of Eleanor/John Rykner," in *The Intolerant Middle Ages: A Reader*, ed. Eugene Smelyansky, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 271-272.

³³ Henningsen, "'Calling [herself] Eleanor,'" 258-266.

in the heart of the genre, which necessitates an overview of typical stylistic and thematic tropes—starting with the concept that authorship often has a complicated connection to authority due to multiple scribes, performers, translators, and narrators. Furthermore, while the role of the audience --including women as patrons and listeners-- shaped the genre, so did the ideologies of courtly love shape the court system.³⁴ For medieval and modern audiences alike, romances stand out for their ability to be both complex and playful, to be complicit in constructing and simultaneously undermining order. In this complexity, the storyteller acts as a guide, bringing the audience through the format of interlacing episodic narratives, which beautifully juxtapose and complement each other. The final result of this technique is that,

The strategies and techniques of romance, its displacements and designs appear to create a world of evasion and play, mesmerizing in its intricacies and flourishes. Nevertheless, the apparent frivolity of romance may not be incompatible with the seriousness of its invitations to recognize and reflect on critical contemporary issues.³⁵

Showing where romance asks its audience to look at the world through its inherent contradictions, a perspective that is already queer in the academic sense—often making the romances difficult to interpret for modern audiences. Like *Silence* and Chrétien's *Erec and Enide*, many romances highlight the instability of cisheteronormative discourse while supporting patriarchal and elitist norms.³⁶ Further highlighting this theme Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner states in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, "If the romance succeeds in legitimating a patriarchal empire and in establishing heterosexual, marital love as the norm for romance, it does so by dramatizing the attractions and dangers of those relations that it has suppressed."³⁷ Queer identity is compelling but ultimately deviant. This perspective functions as a first but only small step towards ending oppression. The responsibility of modern audiences is to find places of danger and anxiety and then decide not to turn away.

³⁴ Issues discussed by many scholars including, Huot, "The manuscript context of medieval romance," 68-74 ; Roberta L Krueger, "Questions of gender in Old French courtly romance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 132-134 ; Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-16.

³⁵ Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 27-28.

³⁶ As noted in much modern scholarship in the field, such as Helen Fulton, "Gender and Jealousy in "Gereint uab Erbin" and "Le Roman de Silence"," *Arthuriana* 24, No. 2 (Summer 2014) ; Roberta Krueger, *Woman Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

³⁷ Krueger, "Questions of gender in Old French courtly romance," 144.

Within the romance tradition, especially in Arthurian Middle French, Chrétien de Troyes is considered one of the most innovative and influential authors. The five romances attributed to Chrétien, written during the second half of the 12th century, are known for their detail-oriented mastery of language, interlaced narrative focused around adventure and combat, and complicated attention to themes of romance, prowess, and truth.³⁸ Ultimately, the importance of these romances shows a need for queer anxieties in the foundations of the genre. In particular, Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec and Enide* deals with many relevant themes. Overtly, the ways that contradictions of voice and subjectivity play out within gender hierarchies, specifically related to marriage and passion. And more applicably in the impact of the clothed and sexualized body on gender, which shows that to some extent, the anxieties of church and criminal authorities extended into popular literature.

The following quote explores the sexual desire of the title characters from *Erec and Enide*. During their journey from Enide's family home to Arthur's court, it takes place before their transformation into husband and wife. As lady and knight, they are connected by their mutuality, sexual desire, and their purity of character, which like in many romances from the period, is framed as the natural result of noble birth.³⁹ As the characters view each other, the audience is given a glimpse at Chrétien's idea of a proper romance.

He gazed at her down to the hip;
from chin and white throat he let slip
his eyes to waist, side, arm, and hand.
The maiden also had not scanned
the knight the less in any part,
with great good will and loyal heart,
as if competing with the lord.
They'd not have ceased for a reward.
to view each other and to watch,
for they were equal and a match

³⁸ My summary of Chrétien de Troyes, his impact, writing, and major themes are pulled mostly from, Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Chrétien de Troyes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) ; Douglas Kelly, "Chrétien de Troyes," in *The Arthur of the French: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval French and Occitan Literature*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Karen Pratt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006).

³⁹ Clark, "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class," 56-60.

in handsomeness, nobility,
attractiveness, and courtesy.⁴⁰

Chrétien concludes with the four most important heroic and noble factors inherent in the pair, asserting that although Erec lifted her from poverty, Enide's noble birth places them on equal ground. Highlighting the reciprocal nature allows Chrétien to further glorify marriage in a context that often relies on the danger and passion of adultery, delving into the murky realms of married sexuality, and soon afterward, lust. Not only does he support tenets of nature similar to *Silence*, but the erotic tension in the encounter also relies on the descriptions of the physical body. In connection with the act of watching, the viewer, along with their particular positionality, is entrapped. Throughout this quote, an embodied and ontological definition of gender is supported. Sexual attraction and, therefore, gender roles are dependent on physical bodies, and courtliness is described as dependent on birth status.

However, if this is the setup for Erec and Enide's romance, and Chrétien's encounters with gender and sexuality, the rest of the work complicates this understanding. Attention to the gendered and sexualized bodies placed in social ritual was discussed convincingly by Chloé Vondenhoff, who looks at the impact of the socialized body and its ritual actions on meaning in her comparative literature analysis of *Yvain* and *Erec and Enide*. Her article sets up the importance of encultured actions in the medieval romance genre, which was shaped by a society of demonstrative behavior. Vondenhoff describes, "Just like real people 'do' emotions through socially-shaped bodily practices; fictional characters perform emotion."⁴¹ In this light, Vondenhoff looks at different translations of Chrétien's work, where different formal and personal gestures drastically shift the Nature of the story. In *Erec and Enide*, this shifts the focus even more so to the institution of marriage, increasing Enide's guilt at disobeying her husband and violating marital expectations, which carries performative and public importance.⁴² Correspondingly, in the German translation, Enide offers her services, and her speech, to Erec on her knees, in showing the humility and submission that underscores her words. Furthermore, throughout the poem, it is clear that the audience's understanding of characters is supposed to shift depending on their ability to uphold socialized gender roles.

⁴⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 44, lines 1459-1486.

⁴¹ Chloé Vondenhoff, "The Performative Function of the Socialized Body: Falling to One's Knees in Hartmann's *Iwein* and *Erec*," in *Arthuriana* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 8-11.

⁴² Vondenhoff, "The Performative Function of the Socialized Body," 13-22.

Another quote from the first portion of the romance describes in great length the dressing of Enide in the queen's clothes, which is a major part of her transformation into Erec's wife and true courtly lady. It makes an interesting, almost counter-argument for the performative and ritualistic Nature of gender within the romance genre. The great attention paid to the physical details of court life can also be attributed to genre tradition or to the audience's desire to witness finery described. Despite this, the length of this section, over 120 lines, far overshadows the wedding in both interest and length, placing great importance on the clothing in the socialization of a new gendered role, Enide as a wife.

The court dress was extremely nice,
but truly just as high in price
was that fine mantle, whereas yet
no ribbons were attached and set,
because the purple cloak and gown
were brand-new and no hand-me-down
the cloak was fine and admirable.
The collar had two furs of sable
the tassels had an ounce of gold.
One had jacinth to unfold,
and one ruby with a gleam
far brighter than a candle gleam
the lining was white ermine fur,
none finer and none lovelier
was ever come upon or shown.⁴³

The length and detail of the description of the clothes mark their importance. Even this short section describes the gold, jewels, and furs that now adorn Enide. It also specifically references the price many times, implying that her outward appearance now matched the truth of her experience. The section is also intimately connected to Enide's queenliness, in that Guinevere serves as her initiation to this particular courtly ritual. In total, these examples point to ways that gender and embodied sexuality are unstable concepts in the consciousness of premodern people. The presence of this instability, as well as the attention to clothing, performance, disguise, and

⁴³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, 46-48, lines 1583-1597.

identity, run deep throughout *Silence* as well. As discussed most compellingly by Katherine Terrell in a paper that finds the competing gender ideologies to be not only incongruent but "radically unstable" and unsupported by the language exploring the questions this uncertainty reveals.⁴⁴ But finding places of the same ideas in foundational and normative examples allows modern scholarship to take a more contextualized perspective. The process of queering mainstream examples and synthesizing them with queer people trapped in moments of violence throughout history takes these people out of footnotes and abstract theorization. Not only does this perspective return medieval queer folk to their proper context, but it also points to the foundational anxieties that resulted in violent outbursts and posits resolutions. With this in mind, the essay returns briefly to *Silence* to explore the themes and historiographical context of the text.

Section Three: Returning to Silence

The impetus of this paper revolved around a desire to find queer roots in the literature of the middle ages and was supported by the inherent queerness of *Le Roman de Silence*. However, the journey of Silence, and consequently the journey of queering history more broadly, quickly became more complicated; this is partially because of the complex nature of the text, which raises questions without answering them in consistent or clear ways—the resulting woefully inconsistent scholarship which is full of debates and disagreements on the text and authorial intentions.⁴⁵ Edited for the first time in 1972 by Lewis Thorpe, *Silence* is often referenced

⁴⁴ Katherine H. Terrell, "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Romance Quarterly* 55, no.1 (Winter 2008): 36-46

⁴⁵ The articles below are important to the historiographical tradition of *Silence* but are not mentioned in the paper, Howard R. Bloch, "Silence and Holes: The Roman de Silence and the Art of the Trouvère," *Yale French Studies* 70 No.1 (1986) ; Michelle Bolduc, "Images of Romance: The miniatures of 'Le Roman de Silence'," *Arthuriana* 12, no.1 (Spring 2002) ; Christopher Callahan, "Lyric Discourse and Female Vocality: On the Unsilencing of Silence," *Arthuriana* 12, no.1 (Spring 2002) ; Lynne Dahmen, "Sacred Romance: *Silence* and the Hagiographical Tradition," *Arthuriana* 12, no.1 (Spring 2002) ; Sarah Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12, no.1 (Spring 2002) ; Robert S. Sturges, "The Crossdresser and the 'Juventus': Category Crisis in 'Silence'," *Arthuriana* 12, no.1 (Spring 2002) ; Helen Fulton, "Gender and Jealousy in 'Gereint uab Erbin' and 'Le Roman de Silence'," *Arthuriana* 24, No. 2 (Summer 2014) ; Kristin L. Burr, "Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*," in *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns* ed. Jaine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016)

off-hand as an alternative example or used as lip service to a more radical and diverse picture of the middle ages. A persuasive example of this trope is Roberta Krueger's "Questions of Gender in Old French courtly romance," which initially presents *Silence* as an extraordinary work that destabilizes medieval gender conventions but concludes by highlighting other romances that ask the same questions more subtly.⁴⁶ Ultimately the field of scholarship surrounding the text is expansive precisely because it is challenging; it pushes scholars to question modern assumptions and the conventions of thirteenth-century romance.

The romance has been immensely popular for medievalists since the early nineties when the field started paying attention to issues of gender and sexuality so relevant within the text. One question central to this era of scholarship asks: is *Silence* overall proto -- according to the main body of the plot -- or anti -- according to the conclusion -- feminist?⁴⁷ A question that has inspired much important academic work but is fundamentally flawed in that it assumes *Silence* holds a stable feminine identity. Within this framework, an influential scholar on middle french literature Simon Gaunt sees the text as fundamentally hostile to women, concluding that any glimpse at women, or queer, voices is vastly overshadowed by "the deafening thud of Heldris's attempt to justify his sex" seen most in his denigration of femininity.⁴⁸ This perspective rests on assumptions of authorial intent that demean Heldris' intelligence, neglecting to queer the premodern past within a larger worldview. Understanding the worldview and impact of authorship and audience with curious respect is a methodological foundation of historical study that must be applied to the queer experience. This can be done either through putting *Silence* in conversation with other contemporary sources as done above or through explicitly queer approaches to historical work like those explored below.

As mention above, taking a queer approach to scholarship on the middle ages, especially for *Silence*, means starting the reach outside the strict binaries of the previous discussion. Writing in 1997, Elizabeth Waters proposes a 'third path' that analyzes *Silence* with careful attention to the dichotomy of shame/honor and its relation to queerness and performance,

⁴⁶ Krueger, "Questions of gender in Old French courtly romance," 132-146.

⁴⁷ Recent scholarship with compelling historiographical summaries of *Silence* include ; Caitlin Watt, "Car vallés sui et nient mescine' Trans Heroism and Literary Masculinity in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 55, no.1 (2019): 135-145 ; Katherine H. Terrell, "Competing Gender Ideologies and the Limitations of Language in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Romance Quarterly* 55, no.1 (Winter 2008): 35-37 ; Kristin L. Burr, "Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*," in *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns* ed. Jaine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016), 33-34.

⁴⁸ Simon Gaunt, "The Significance of *Silence*," *Paragraph* 13, no.2 (July 1990): 202-213.

essentially queering the text.⁴⁹ Waters' summarizes the importance of this approach quite eloquently,

This irony demands that we meditate on identity and sexuality. In this way, the text forces thought toward a third possibility outside the heterosexual matrix: attentive readers *must* make sense of incongruous textual identities to keep them from collapsing in on themselves. Silence is more than a female, less than a male; we need a term to describe her that is not dependent on these either/or models.⁵⁰

At the end of the day, Waters shows that the beauty of Silence is in its questions and contradictions, questions, ambiguity, and contraindications that guide scholars of the middle ages to expand their perspectives and find new ways to understand the world. Consequently, the scholarship surrounding *Le Roman de Silence* during the last fifteen years has attended to the issue discussed throughout the paper much more effectively.

The three articles discussed below are examples of this promising work that embraces the multitudes of possible answers within *Silence*, building upon a queer approach started by Waters that rejects stable and binary gender. For example, in her 2009 article, Jane Tolmie frames the poem's treatment of Silence through the lens of guilt and punishment, where the sewing chamber represents a lack of voice, agency, and opportunity. Tolmie furthers her claims by stating that the ending undercuts the binary of heroin/villainess that exists between Silence and Eufeme, rendering escaping from the established mold for women punishable in any form.⁵¹ In another article, Caitlin Watt conducts an in-depth analysis compared to male heroic troupes, assuming a transmasculine identity for Silence, starting by comparing the text to Marie de France's *Lanval* in the Potiphar's Wife motif, which highlights secrets that render them "simultaneously outstanding and outsiders in the court" highlighting the vulnerability of masculinity.⁵² Watt reminds the audience to consider the value of analyzing sources from multiple perspectives. Most recently, Jessica Barr claims that wilderness represents a fantastical escape from the cisheteronormativity created by societal systems. By looking at how cisheteronormativity is constructed in relation to patriarchal rule and court life, Barr finds that audiences "are left to imagine what might lie

⁴⁹ Elizabeth A. Waters, "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in "Le Roman de Silence"," *Arthuriana* 7, no.2 (Summer 1997): 35-45.

⁵⁰ Waters, "The Third Path," 42.

⁵¹ Tolmie, "Silence in the Sewing Chamber: *Le Roman de Silence*," 24-26.

⁵² Watt, "Trans Heroism and Literary Masculinity in *Le Roman de Silence*," 162-166

beyond their bounds" and find that these promises cannot be fulfilled.⁵³ All of the articles make compelling arguments about the gendered ideology within the romance and show that premodern texts can stand in conversation with modern ideas about identity in uniquely productive ways.

In essence, this paper has been about the act of questioning. Medieval authors and theorists questioned vulnerabilities in their cultural framework, often resulting in outbursts of hate. Reactionary violence shows echoes of a queer past, of which we know almost nothing, but which includes voices that must be preserved because they disrupt the image of the monolithic medieval past. And discarding the monolith creates a reciprocal relationship with the past. In this, we are reminded of the difficulty of answering the questions considered earlier: How does anxiety regarding the sexual Nature of bodies connect to theological conventions? Do these anxieties contribute to reactionary violence against people who transgress norms? Furthermore, do authors and theorists of the middle ages generally support an embodied or performative construction of gender? Which instance is more often punished in the source material? By looking at theology, court documents, and romances such as *Erec and Enide* and *Le Roman de Silence* in conjunction, an interplay between indeterminacy, queerness, and anxiety is apparent. It often seems that the more unstable the discussed binary is, the more divergence is punished. This trend points to the importance of paying attention to -- and destabilizing -- areas with great societal anxiety because these places often have the most potential for fighting oppression. Given these points, it is poignant to end with a quote from *Silence*. One that may seem hauntingly familiar to queer people and represents the complicated nature of progress in our society. As Nature reprimands the teenage Silence her words, "There are those who love you now / who would hate you with all their hearts / if they knew what you really are!" pierce the hearts of queer listeners throughout time.⁵⁴

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⁵³ Jessica Barr, "The Idea of the Wilderness: Gender and Resistance in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 30, No. 1 (Spring 2020): 1-20.

⁵⁴ Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 119, lines 2518-2520.

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