

## PASSING THE TEST OF TRUTH: GENDER AS PERFORMANCE IN TWO FRENCH NARRATIVES, MEDIEVAL AND MODERN

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The thirteenth-century French romance by Heldris de Cornuaille, *Le roman de Silence*, and the contemporary novel by the Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun, *L'enfant de sable*, both begin with the same premise: a couple, awaiting the birth of their child, decides to raise that child as a boy, regardless of the actual sex of the child. Cadour and Eufemie choose to raise their first (and only) child as a boy in the *Roman de Silence* because King Ebains has ruled that girls can no longer inherit in his kingdom. In *L'enfant de sable*, the shame within Arabic culture brought to the father who does not sire a male heir further compounds similar financial concerns, so that the father of seven daughters decides that this one *will* be a son. Ahmed's father even goes so far as to have his own finger "circumcised" in place of his son's/daughter's penis by slipping it discretely between the infant's spread legs. Both of the children, Silence and Ahmed, who are born female but whose caretakers raise as males, excel in the masculine pursuits of their cultures. Their cross-dressed performances appear entirely convincing within the narrative frames of the two works--they *pass*.

The successes of Silence and Ahmed do not, however, occur without accompanying crises of personal identity. Adolescence brings to Silence and to Ahmed an awareness of his/her confused gender identity. Silence begins to feel torn by conflicting thoughts, alternately deciding to stop performing as a male (2555-9), only to resolve again to persevere (2625-31). The narrator notes that navigating between the decision to stop and the resolution to continue is not an easy task (2679-81). Silence's "divided" heart ("cuer diviers," 2681) attests to the dissonance between his/her will and actions. Ahmed, in turn, attempts to elude the "unspeakable truth" by avoiding mirrors which would otherwise force an encounter with his/her *false* image (44). For Silence and for Ahmed, adolescence compels a confrontation with their *duplicitous* performances; each responds by accepting his/her dual nature for the masculine advantages that it provides.

Although at the conclusions of the *Roman de Silence* and *L'enfant de sable*, Silence and Ahmed do each assume the female gender, the specificity of this gender remains ambiguous. Throughout the two texts, the reader encounters a debate between Nature and Nurture, or Culture, (made explicit in the *Roman de Silence*, implied in *L'enfant de sable*) concerning the relative strength of each in determining the *true* gender of the child--a debate that reflects and echoes Silence's and Ahmed's own struggles regarding their

gender identity. Nevertheless, in spite of these debates, from birth through young adulthood neither Silence nor Ahmed is ever uniquely one gender or the other. Both texts stress their hybridity linguistically as well as thematically. In the *Roman de Silence*, for example, the narrator repeatedly refers to Silence as the boy-maiden, "li vallés mescine," or as the boy who is a maiden, "li vallés qui est mescine"<sup>1</sup> and juxtaposes masculine and feminine gendered subject pronouns and nouns, as in this description of Silence's successful jousting match:

Moult le fist bien ens en l'arainne  
 Entre ii. rens a la quintainne.  
 Ainc *feme* ne fu inains lanier  
 De contoier en tel maniere. (5145-8, my emphasis)

Similarly, in *L'enfant de sable*, shortly before her death, Fatima, Ahmed's deformed, epileptic wife, succinctly summarizes their complicated gender relations by opposing gendered nouns and adjectives: "Je m'en vais... Je suis ta femme et tu es mon *épouse*... Tu seras *veuf* et moi..., disons que je fus une erreur" (80, my emphasis). In both works, the attention to Silence's and Ahmed's *double* status reveals two hero(ine)s whose power resides in their hybridity.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, takes as her subject the distinction between sex and gender, and the formulation of gender as a culturally constructed, performative act. She identifies *drag* as among those practices that most dramatically exhibit the parodic and performative construction of gender (*Gender Trouble* viii). Looking back to Foucault and Nietzsche, Butler proposes a genealogical investigation of the price that we incur by positing as "natural, original and inevitable," the sex-gender binary. Such an investigation would, she says, focus on "the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (viii-ix, italics in original).

Butler's reading of gender as a *discursively constrained performative act* elucidates in a particularly clear and revealing fashion, the construction of gender of the hero(ine)s in the *Roman de Silence* and in *L'enfant de sable*. Both texts highlight the critical role of regimes of power/discourse in the

choice of the child's gender, as the laws of patrilineal succession consciously and explicitly motivate each father's decision to raise his child as a male. Butler's study considers the way in which the adoption of a gender has become accepted, naturalized, in Western society; in these two texts, the 'naturalness' of gender becomes one of the dominant questions driving the elaboration of the plot. Butler's work also stresses that the realization of the constructedness of gender must inevitably lead to a reevaluation of the degree to which scientific and medical discourses have defined the notion of biological "sex" itself. Far from being a prediscursive, "natural" fact, Butler argues that sex is "as culturally constructed as gender" (7). One advantage to a comparative study such as the one that I am here undertaking is that the historical and geographical distance between the *Roman de Silence* and *L'enfant de sable* offer insights into the variable construction of sex and gender within differing cultures. That the cultural values of sex and gender do vary further affirms their constructedness.

### "Passing"

Within the narrative of the *Roman de Silence*, Silence consistently performs as a boy in an authentic and convincing manner. The other characters in the romance believe him/her to be male--Silence *passes*. He/she excels in scholastic and athletic pursuits, out-performs the two minstrels who initiate him/her into that art, and, as a knight and warrior, is without peer. Even as a young child, the narrator remarks on Silence's nearly perfect masculine performance and exterior appearance:

Il a us d'orne tant usé  
 Et cel de feme refusé  
 Que poi en falt que li n'est malles:  
 Quanque on en voit est trestolt malles. (2475-8)

The irony in the narrator's comment lies, of course, in the fact that the "little" that Silence lacks in order to be a boy is a small, but critical, anatomical detail.

Later, Silence's excellent technique in the jousting arena prompts the narrator not only to laud his/her performance but also to call attention to Nurture's domination over Nature:

Kil vefst joster sans mantel  
 Et l'escu porter en cantiel

Et faire donques l'adernise,  
 La lance sor le foltre mise,  
 Dire peüst que Noreture  
 Puet moult ovrer contre Nature,  
 Quant ele aprent si et escole  
 A tel us feme et tendre et mole. (5149-56)

Carrying the shield on his/her left arm, lance poised on the lance-rest, Silence readies for the attack. The narrator makes it clear that he/she is indeed *no feme et tendre et mole*. He proffers, additionally, that were one of the defeated opponents to learn the truth of Silence's sex, the knight would feel 'great shame' that a *tender* woman had beaten him:

Tels chevaliers...  
 ...grant honte en peüst avoir  
 Que feme tendre, fainte et malle,  
 Ki rien n'a d'ome fors le halle,  
 Et fors les dras et contenance,  
 L'etüst abatu de sa lance. (5157/5160-4)

Clearly, the narrator's assertion of Silence's femininity is a disingenuous one. Silence has 'nothing masculine about her,' he asserts, *except...*'except her tanned complexion, masculine dress, and appearance.' In the immediately preceding lines the narrator has also just described Silence's highly successful and aggressive (masculine) jousting technique that betrays no hint of femininity. We must read "Ki rien n'a d'ome fors..." as the narrator's not-so-subtle affirmation of the opposite--the radical extent to which Silence has been regendered. Silence passes so thoroughly and so persuasively that the "little" that she [sic] lacks becomes all but meaningless in the context of the romance. The *truth* of his/her identity is that which passes for true. Furthermore, in spite of the traditional ending of the romance in which Silence assumes the female gender and marries the king, Silence's earlier triumph as a male has opened a *space* for the possibility of heroic female achievement. Simon Gaunt affirms the empowering, feminist aspect of this message which he sees as contrasting with the poet's misogynistic subtext: "But if the patriarchal aphorism that 'sex is destiny' is ultimately endorsed, Silence's success as a knight serves to articulate...that women may indeed have the ability to take on the cultural role of men, or...that Noreture may in fact have a good deal of power to subvert Nature" (203). Psaki underscores more emphatically the "radical premises" of the text, which she terms "proto-feminist" (xxx).

However, at the same time that Silence's successes within the romance, as a biological female in a male role, assert the seemingly unlimited potential of women to succeed in traditionally masculine pursuits, the reader does not view Silence simply as a successful female (or as a successful male). The narrator's repeated reminders, his juxtapositioning of masculine and feminine pronouns, nouns and adjectives, and Silence's own comments, as well as the on-going debate between Nature and Nurture, make the reader constantly aware of Silence's *double* condition. Although Silence may at times strain to self-identify as a male, or may suffer remorse for the *deceptive* aspect of this performance, the reader views him/her as neither uniquely male nor female. The reader thus perceives the irony of Silence's situation and of the other characters' reactions to his/her performance. Moreover, it is only from this external perspective that the reader can appreciate much of the humor and tension involved in the plot, as, for example, in the threat of homosexual relations when Queen Eupheme attempts to seduce Silence.

Like Silence, Ahmed too *passes* as a male. Exceeding even his/her father, Ahmed rules the household like a tyrant: "A la maison il se faisait servir par ses soeurs....A l'atelier il avait déjà commencé à prendre les affaires en main. Efficace, moderne, cynique, il était un excellent négociateur. Son père était dépassé....Il trônait dans sa chambre..." (51). Indeed, Ahmed becomes so authoritarian and so perversely determined that his/her own mother refers to him/her as "un monstre" (52).

An anonymous correspondent is the first character within *L'enfant de sable* to challenge Ahmed's gender identity, although there are indications that Ahmed's uncles have had certain doubts since his/her birth. The correspondent vows to keep this knowledge secret, and he or she and Ahmed maintain a fairly lengthy exchange of letters throughout the text. The narrator, however, questions even the veracity of these letters: "Sont-elles d'un correspondant ou d'une correspondante anonyme ? Ou sont-elles imaginaires ? Se serait-il écrit à lui même dans son isolement ?..." (59). Shortly thereafter, one of the audience members rises up against the storyteller's version of the story. Identifying himself as Fatima's brother, he claims to know the *true* story of their marriage and of Ahmed's life. With increasing frequency, narrative ruptures and conflicts draw the reader's attention to the inconstancies of appearances and to the inadequacies of reason. In an explicit and vigorous fashion, this novel underscores physical and narrative instability at every juncture. The "truth," always suspect and qualified, can only ever be that which passes for true. And nothing *passes* for long.

Both the *Roman de Silence* and *L'enfant de sable*, then, establish narrative frames that create a socio-economic necessity making plausible the

need to disguise an infant's sex, to raise a girl as a boy. Within these contexts, Silence and Ahmed perform their constructed genders so convincingly that their passing would seem to assert the ultimate power of culture, or nurture, over nature, and bespeak a kind of subversive feminist potential. Yet, such an either/or reading of these two works contradicts the pervasive narrative ambiguities that characterize each text. While the allegorical character of Nature, in the *Roman de Silence*, proposes a strict essentialist view of gender identity that underscores Silence's essential femininity, the allegorical character of Nurture presents a social constructivist perspective that identifies Silence's gender as masculine because Silence has been constructed as male. As each figure attempts to argue for a fixed definition of gender identity, Silence fluctuates alternately from one perspective to the other. In both the *Roman de Silence* and *L'enfant de sable*, the forces of Nature and Nurture strive to compel Silence and Ahmed into a single gender identity, but Silence and Ahmed resist easy categorization. Much like Garber's *bad readers* who "erase" or "look through" the cross-dresser, resisting the power of "blurred gender" (*Vested Interests*, 6), Nature and Nurture work to reposition both Silence and Ahmed away from his/her hybrid *third space*. The strength of this resistance to the enigmatic character of Silence's and Ahmed's hybridity further indicates the degree to which the suggestion of *multiple* "foundational categories of identity" (Butler)--sex, gender, the body--disturbs and threatens the accepted regimes of power and discourse.

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