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Daniel J. Pérez

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BOOK REVIEW

Heldris de Cornuälle's *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (Editor), 1992. 393 pages. (Paperback, \$19.95). ISBN-13:9780937191323.

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Le Roman de Silence by Heldris de Cornuälle is a post-Arthurian tale that tells the story of a princess born just after the king of England decrees that daughters cannot inherit family landholdings. Silence's father loves his daughter so much that he decides to raise Silence as a son in order to preserve his daughter's right of inheritance. Silentius becomes an excellent son whose skill set overshadows those of his peers. But like most romances of the day, the end of *Silence* is seemingly conventional in every respect. Silentius abandons his life as a male and embraces her inherent feminine charms and virtues in order to marry the man of her dreams.

The battle between Nature and Nurture is crucial to the *Silence* narrative. Nature and Nurture debate Silence's future throughout the work. While Nature envisions Silence as a naturally beautiful innately feminine princess, Nurture extols the inherently masculinized powerful prince capable of overcoming any obstacle in her way, especially Nature. Both debate throughout *Silence* as Silentius/Silentia navigates through the story toward a conventional end. Even though it may seem as though Nature has seemingly won the debate, the truth is not as clear as the end makes it seem. The reader must look to the battleground, Silence herself, in order to fully understand the message and triumph of *Silence*.

Silence's femininity and masculinity physically represent the Nature and Nurture debate. Silence the male, Silentius, excels at everything masculine, even at attracting the attention of females. Throughout *Silence*, Silentius demonstrates how much he enjoys all the freedoms and responsibilities of being male, yet there is always a part of Silentius that is more Silentia or female. In the end, Silence seems to relinquish everything masculine with the help of Nature in order to embrace her fully feminine self, making it seem as though *Silence* promotes traditional, conventional views of gender roles, but appearances, especially in *Silence*, can be deceiving.

The truth of Silence is that she inhabits and incorporates Nature and Nurture in her existence, hence her name. Silence speaks to readers through silence. At the end of the story, Silence seemingly eschews all the masculine attributes nurtured in her. She actually has silently kept them but gives the reader and those around her the impression that she is now fully female. In reality, Silence is vocally feminine and silently masculine, a perfect blend for an exceptional character.

Silence may initially come off to the casual reader as a literary work that paradoxically purports two opposing viewpoints: 1) nature dictates, defines and limits human beings and 2) nurturing can successfully undermine nature through its most powerful weapon, choice. *Silence* clearly presents both ideas, but its true message lies somewhere in between these two opposing forces; the true meaning of *Silence* lives in its silent spaces where the reader is able to take a step back and determine what *Silence* is saying. Much like Heldris of Cornuälle, the reader may have to delve somewhere between silence and thought in order to appreciate the powerful message of *Silence*.