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Looking at Failed Masculinity: An Attempt at Reading Medieval Sexuality

In the collective imaginary, the figure of the knight is associated with a specific narrative, a succession of adventures, more or less linear, consisting in rescuing princesses, fighting monsters, or participating in a tournament under ladies' eyes. The knight is a young man seeking both recognition from elders and love from ladies, and, still today, this figure is used to promote a combative heterosexual masculinity, based on physical and mental strength as well as on the seduction of the "opposite sex." These clichés, through diverse revivals (especially during the nineteenth century), are rooted in the Old French poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and they are part of the history of gender, as the construction of an aristocratic masculinity in a premodern Christian society characterized by political instability, cultural expansion, and growing control of the Church over private life. The figure of the knight deals with the history of sexuality as well: the young nobleman should perform his manliness to get access to the heart and the bedroom of his lady while, as William Burgwinkle writes, young knights "are set up as erotic idols, centerpieces of every court festival."[1]

In medieval poetry, sexuality is one of the steps in the initiation process toward accomplished manhood: a classical interpretation of premodern tales (as in Joseph Campbell's work) emphasizes the first sexual intercourse with a woman (either a maiden or a married lady quested by the knight) as an "acme" of adventures.[2] However, this essay's concern is about when this acme is not reached, when the young knight does not behave as expected, and refuses both sexual intercourse and the gendered narrative of virility. What I propose is therefore not a study of successful manliness but of a failed masculinity, through two texts challenging courtly narratives. The first is the tale of *Narcisus et Dané*, from the

[1] William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050-1230* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 140.
[2] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), 116.

twelfth century, which is an anonymous medieval rewriting of the Ovidian tale of Narcissus. This Old French version emphasizes the role of Dané, young daughter of the king offering her love to Narcisus who refuses coldly: as vengeance, he is cursed by Dané to fall in love with his own reflection. The second text is the *Roman de Silence*, from Heldris de Cornouailles, a romance of the thirteenth century about a girl raised as a boy who becomes a knight, because girls are deprived of the right to inherit. Socially recognized as a male (and a handsome and skilled one), Silence rejects the advances of the queen Eufeme by fear to be discovered as a girl, which convinces the queen, offended by the refusal, that Silence is sexually deviant, causing a set of misadventures for Silence that ultimately leads him/her to be undressed in the front of the court and re-assigned to the female gender. In both cases, the missed step of sexual initiation disrupts the narrative, because of the apparent lack of desire for women from Narcisus in one case, and of the female "nature" of Silence under the cross-dressing in the other case.

There are some debates about the importance of sexuality for medieval manhood (Christopher Fletcher, for example, doubts this importance), and about the use or not of the anachronic concept of "sexuality" for the Middle Ages (if we follow Michel Foucault, there is no "sexuality" before the nineteenth century).[3] Concerning the idea of the "unimportance" of sexual acts to define masculinity, my objection is that if sexuality was not as important for lay men, the failure to have sexual intercourse would be without consequences but, as I will show in this article, this position is indefensible. Addressing the possibility to speak about sexuality for a premodern era, I would refer to the definition of sexuality given by Ruth Mazo Karras, more relevant for the study of the Middle Ages than Foucault's: "the whole realm of human erotic experience," "the universe of meanings that people place on sex acts, rather than the acts themselves"[4].

[3] Christopher Fletcher, " « Être homme » : Manhood et histoire politique du Moyen Âge. Quelques réflexions sur le changement et la longue durée," in *Une histoire sans les hommes est-elle possible?*, ed. Anne-Marie Sohn, (Lyon : ENS Editions, 2013), 56-57. Kim M. Philipps and Barrie Reay eds., *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Cambridge, UK: Malden, 2011), 7.
[4] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.

My goal is not to study these failures as something miserable, closed off, or relegated to the margins of the production of courtly poetry. In literature, failure causes disruption and therefore creation, producing an opening, unveiling the "hidden transcripts of resistance to the dominant order."[5] A close reading of these medieval texts allows us to think differently about agencies and animacies and to try to understand the conditions that produce failure, its possible meanings and the space it opens for disrupting a well-known narrative. How does the event of failure crack the appearances of gender conformity and how does it open a path to instability and subversion? There is no possible answer without invoking the regard. The question of the gendered gazes (of the characters, the narrator, the reader) will complete my approach of the two texts, because reading is first an act of seeing and decoding characters in a body of texts, as characters in texts read acts and bodies and decode them; there is neither failure or success in medieval romances without the validation (or disapproval) of the collectivity's gaze.

In *Narcisus et Dané*, the moment of failure happens after more than four hundred verses, when Dané, in love with the handsome young hunter she saw through her window (Narcisus), goes to meet him and offer him her love; without a word, she kisses him, to his great surprise ("merveille"[6]). Then she introduces herself as daughter of the king and she says:

> "Biaus sire, otroie moi t'amor,
> Rent moi santé, tol moi dolor!"
>
> "Fair lord, grant me your love,
> Give me back my health, take away my pain"
> (479-480).[7]

At this point, the narrative is already unsettling for a literary text of the twelfth century. The two characters form the conventional couple of courtly poetry, the young handsome nobleman, who performs an aristocratic activity (the hunt), and the beautiful maiden of a superior social rank. What is unusual here is that the girl asks for the love of the knight, and therefore performs the active role. The reaction of

[5] Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.
[6] *Narcisus et Dané*, ed. and trans. Penny Ely (Liverpool Online Series: Critical Editions of French Texts, 2002) https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/modern-languages-and-cultures/french/liverpool-online-series/ 50.
[7] *Narcisus*, 50.

Narcisus is stinging: smiling, he says Dané is a "*folé*" (485) and explicitly refuses not only her love, but love in general:

> Tu dis qu'Amors te fait mal traire :
> De ce ne puis jou droit faire ;
> Je ne sai rien de tel ahan
> Ne ne l'asaierai auan.
> Mais se c'est voirs que mal te face,
> Garderai m'en : ja Dieu ne place
> Que je l'assai por mal avoir !
> Je ne quier rien d'amer savoir
>
> "You say that Love is ill-treating you:
> I cannot put that right for you;
> I know nothing about such suffering,
> And I shall avoid it; God forbid
> That I should try it out, just to suffer!
> I do not wish to know anything about love,"
> (497-504).[8]

The last verse is particularly important because it emphasizes the clear refusal of Narcissus to know anything about love: we have to understand the Old French word for love, "*amor*", as a more codified version of our modern definition of love, implying the heterosexual desire glorified in the courtly relationship, outside marriage and reserved to the aristocracy, as André le Chapelain explains.[9] Thereby Narcisus locates himself apart from the courtly world, and neither the tears or the nudity of Dané can change his mind[10]. The vocabulary used subsequently by the narrator and by Dané to judge the refusal of Narcisus is quite interesting for understanding the values associated with the refusal to love: the narrator writes that Narcisus's heart is "*félon*" (525), the heart of a traitor, then Dané explains her disappointment with him, saying that he is "*de male nature*" (582), evil.[11] The possible explanation of Narcisus' refusal by his young age, and maybe immaturity, does not fit with neither the content of Narcisus' discourse (refusing *amor* as a whole, not only with Dané) or with the narrator's judgement, which explicitly blames Narcisus for what he is, in his heart and in his nature, and not just a bad decision or a childish behavior.

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[8] *Narcisus*, 52.
[9] André Le Chapelain, *Traité de l'amour courtois*, ed. and trans. Claude Buridant (Paris : Klincksieck, 1974), 106 and 148.
[10] *Narcisus*, 52.
[11] *Narcisus*, 52 and 54.

The situation in the *Roman de Silence* is quite different. Born as a girl, Silence's parents decide to raise him as a boy and as a knight, and after an episode of minstrel career, Silencebecomes a member of the royal court, as the young nobleman and son of count he apparently is. To talk about Silence, I will use the masculine gender, except when Silence evokes himself his "female" nature and at the end of the story when s/he is reassigned as a woman. This choice is dictated by the use of the masculine name "*Silentius*" by the narrator as well by respect for the story, where everyone around Silence considers him as a man. And as the man he is supposed to be, Silence is the object of the desire of Queen Eufeme and subject to her advances: she falls in love with him "*por sa façon, por sa bialtê*"("because of his beauty and demeanor," 3695) and tries to seduce him in her bedroom while the king is hunting (the repetition of the pattern of the hunt in this kind of episode suggests a possible link between this activity and men's neglect of women).[12] As Dané with Narcisus, she tries to kiss Silence and reveals her naked skin, but Silence does not respond because "n'a de tolt cho cure" ("but he wasn't interested at all," 3824) – here it is not irrelevant to notice that, in Narcisus et Dané, a similar sentence is used about Narcisus' feeling about naked Dané's plea, "de quanqu'ele li dit n'a cure" ("Narcisus does not care about anything she says to him," 531).[13] In both cases, the youth does not care/*cure* about the sexual offer. The disappointed queen has a thesis about the reason of Silence's refusal to have a sexual intercourse with her: he is an "erite" because "a feme ne se delite" ("since a woman doesn't arouse him at all," 3936) and "as vallés fait moult bele chiere" ("He likes young men a lot," 3945).[14] The word "erite", or "heretic" in modern English, is clearly an accusation of sodomy, stating explicitly that Silence prefers the company of young men to that of women. The evil nature evoked by Dané about Narcisus may refer implicitly to such an accusation as well: at the beginning of tale, the narrator writes about Narcisus "Dames en canbres fuit et het" ("He hates ladies in their chambers and keeps away from them," 120).[15] The notion of sodomy in twelfth and thirteenth centuries "ranges from being a

[12] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence : a Thirteenth-century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999),186.
[13] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 178. *Narcisus*, 54.
[14] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 184.
[15] *Narcisus*, 36.

simple description of homoerotic relations or attractions to a theological category synonymous with the sinful."[16]

An article of Michael Barbezat, published in the *Journal of History of Sexuality*, establishes that "the homosexual acts serve as an expression of the essence of the heresy" in medieval literary texts: a theological discourse, spreading in lay literature, links sexual deviance and religious deviance, the fallen body and the failed morality.[17] Ruth Mazo Karras writes about the courtly game of love as a "compulsory heterosexuality" in counterpart to the homosociality of the knighthood, to neutralize in advance the possible accusations of sodomy.[18] In the cases of Narcisus and Silence, neither of them can forestall the suspicion of deviance in their erotic tastes: Narcisus seems to follow the aristocratic conventions (horse riding, hunting, noble appearance), while Silence is depicted as a well-educated son of the high-aristocracy, comfortable in the homosocial environment of the court, but they both refuse the game of love, they fail to do what seems usual for a young man of their age (Narcisus by absence of desire for Dané and Silence because his "natural" gender does not fit with his social gender and would be unveiled if he attempts sexual intercourse), and this situation leads them to a strange malediction for the first (or maybe the expression of *queer* malediction would be more suitable), and to the explicit accusation of sodomy for the second. But a deeper inquiry is now needed to go further in the understanding of these failures and their consequences.

The "queer malediction" mentioned is the following: Narcisus, seeking in the woods some watering place to relieve his thirst, falls in love with his own reflection in a fountain, which is not his cisgender reflection as in Ovid's original version, but his reflection as a maiden: he thinks he sees a "fee de mer" ("water fairy," 651) but the author is unequivocal, "c'est sa biautés qu'iloques voit" ("It is his own beauty that he sees there," 659).[19] A superficial reading could conclude that the author

[16] William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature*, 3.
[17] Michael B. Barbezat, "Bodies of Spirit and Bodies of Flesh: The Significance of the Sexual Practices Attributed to Heretics from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century" in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, No. 3 (September 2016): 403.
[18] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Knighthood, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and Sodomy," in *The Boswell Thesis*, ed. Mathew Kuefler (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 273-274.
[19] *Narcisus*, 58.

simply attempts to make Ovid's story more acceptable for his contemporary readers by changing the homoerotic desire of the original story into a more conventional heterosexual desire, with the youth falling in love with the image of a young girl. However, the image of the maiden is still the image of Narcisus, depicted as a man since the beginning of the tale. How can we understand this play between the image, the gaze and the body? To reach this understanding, we should raise the question of the look in the entire tale, not only the look of the cursed Narcisus in this *féérique* fountain – where the fairy is the young man looking through it.

My inquiry about the look is inspired by Jack Halberstam's description of "The Transgender Look": although they work on movies and contemporary culture, we can use their thinking about "a sexual and gendered economy of looking, watching and identifying" in a very productive way for premodern literary texts, where this economy is present as well.[20] At the start of the tale, Narcisus is the subject of a long physical description by the narrator; at this point, no one looks at Narcisus except the author and the reader. We read the portrait of a handsome youth of fifteen years, tall, and the depiction follows the conventions of the genre: beautiful face and eyes, skin white as snow, blond curly hair, pink cheeks, and even a touch of eroticism with his mouth that kindles the fire of desire (59-114).[21] Conventions of the genre, as I said, but essentially conventions for depicting the beauty of a maiden! Except for his height, tall with measure (common attribute for the nobleman), the portrait is androgynous, without reference to the male body but apparently feminizing Narcisus in presenting him as an object of love, with his gorgeous beauty and his mouth calling for lust.[22] If we follow Jane Gilbert, effeminacy is a mark of boyhood in opposition to manhood, but Narcisus is eroticized and therefore involved in an adult economy of desire.[23] Furthermore, this depiction of the male character as an androgynous source of love (and lust) announces in some way the disruption of the courtly narrative, where the man is

[20] Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), 83.
[21] *Narcisus*, 34-36.
[22] Sébastien Fray, "A propos de l'esthétique des corps virils chez Bernard d'Angers: beauté clericale et beauté chevaleresque," in *Revue d'Auvergne* 610 (2014): 54-55.
[23] Jane Gilbert, "Boys Will Be … What? Gender, Sexuality, and Childhood in *Floire et Blancheflor* and *Floris et Lyriope*," *Exemplaria* 9, no. 1 (1997): 43.

supposed to seek the love of the lady and not the reversal, as in this story with Dané.

Narcisus seen by Dané is quite different from the narrator's point of view: at her window, in her tower, she notices him as following,

> La fille au roi de la cité
> Des fenestres a jus gardé;
> Dané ot non la damoisele,
> En tote Tebles n'ot si bele.
> Ele coisist le damoisel,
> Voit le si fier, si gent, si bel,
> Graisle par flans, espés par pis,
> Les bras bien fais, auques vautis;
> Lons et grails avoit les dois,
> Et les jambes et les piés drois ;
> Voit le cheval qui se desroie
> Et fait fremir toute la voie"
>
> "The daughter of the king of the city
> Looked down from the windows;
> The young noblewoman was called Dané,
> There was none so lovely in the whole of Thebes.
> She noticed the young man,
> Sees him so proud, so attractive, so handsome,
> Slim-hipped, broad-chested,
> With well-shaped legs and feet;
> She sees the horse prancing
> And making the whole road shudder."
> (127-138)[24]

First, Dané is described by only one verse, very generic, that introduces her in the narrative, but she owns something Narcisus is deprived of: the gaze. Gardé/coisist/voit/voit… And following this extract: voit/esgarde/voit.[25] The insistence on the look of Dané upon Narcisus is almost hypnotic for the reader in this repetition. Moreover, the Narcisus seen by the maiden is not the same as in the previous description: neither androgyny nor mouth calling for lust, but a manly knight on his horse shaking the pavement of the road as an ancient god, proud with an athletic and strong body. This switch of point of view can be explained by the gendered economy of looking: from the narrator's perspective, Narcisus depicted as object of desire is feminized, in an animacy hierarchy where the beauty is something

[24] *Narcisus*, 37.
[25] *Narcisus*, 37.

to conquer and where gender draws boundaries between masculine/feminine, active/passive, subject/object, and therefore the narrator's gaze masculinizes itself in objectifying Narcisus' "feminine" beauty.[26]

Here, I refer to the notion of animacy deployed by Mel Y. Chen as "the quality of liveness, sentience, or humanness of a noun or noun phrase that has grammatical, often syntactic, consequences" that "can't be limited to the linguistic, for animacy lies within and without."[27] But, in the eyes of Dané, in her role of king's daughter waiting for her hero in her tower, he must be virile. However, this theoretical consideration is too simple. First, if we admit that Narcisus is feminized by the male gaze to fit as an embodiment of beauty (necessarily feminine in a heteronormative way), we must admit the powerfully homoerotic feature of this description as well, where the narrative offers an erotization of a male teenager for a gaze that tautologically genders itself as male in feminizing the object of desire. Then, the traditional animacy hierarchy where the masculine prevails over the feminine is challenged when Dané is animated and Narcisus de-animated, the latter being reduced to a lovely image seen through a window. "De tout çou qu'ele li voit faire", the structure of this sentence gives animacy to Dané, even if Narcisus "acts" (riding), the reader perceives him only through Dané's mediation, through her gaze, which is not a passive one: it constructs a new representation of a manly Narcisus and gives birth to the love that will destroy both characters.

This gaze that gives manhood to Narcisus opens another question, about the sexual initiation that possibly makes a man from a boy and a woman from a girl: is it the sexual practice that makes fully-grown people, or something more relevant to the issue of desire? (I do not reference marriage, because it is not question here of legality or theology, but of the way people imagine and give sense to their lives, and early courtly poetry has little to do with marriage, but a lot to do with eroticism and initiation in an adult world.) A more biological statement would say that *to desire*, in the meaning of having a libido, opens a path to adulthood (at least in a hormonal and

[26] Mel Y. Chen, "Language and Mattering Humans," in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, ed. Mel. Y Chen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 23-25.
[27] Mel Y. Chen, "Language and Mattering Humans," 24.

reproductive way) but maybe this tale teaches us that *to be desired* is what opens this path, making us adults through the gaze of the others. At least, Narcisus appears to us as a man for the first time in the eyes of Dané, and not an ambiguously gendered boy as for the narrator.

The attraction of Dané for Narcisus takes shape in an explicit erotic sublimation during the narrative: she wants his "bouce por baisier"("what a mouth for kissing," 283), bringing back the eroticization of the beginning with her desire for the virile Narcisus, and the sight of him makes her *"escaufe et art"* (warming up and burning, 310).[28] Eventually she leaves her tower to meet him, naked under her coat (the cliché of the maiden waiting in her tower to be freed by a man is completely subverted), provoking a watershed in the economy of looking: she symbolically passes through the window and at their meeting, Narcisus, for the first time, is animated: "Tot droit a lui vint la pucele; / Cil l'esgarda, si la vit bele" ("The maiden came straight up to him; / He looked at her and saw how beautiful she was," 447-448).[29] We now see Dané through Narcisus' gaze. He finds her beautiful but refuses her love; he could be (should be?) attracted by her but he is not, and we find again this passage of failure from him (not from Dané, beautiful enough to be desired).

What does this inquiry bring to us? The failure is contextualized and, in some way, announced since the beginning of the text, by the objectification of Narcisus, then his confrontation with Dané's desire. But the failure itself is a step toward the tragic outcome of the story[30]. When he sees himself as a fairy in the fountain, Narcisus is both animated and de-animated, he is subject and object of his own desire, in a complete blurring of female and male points of identification, bringing a third point of view on himself (the maiden-version of himself after the effeminate boy and the handsome man); the failure replaces the sexual initiation as acme of the narrative, and rather than establishing a stable identity as male subject (that is the purpose of the sexual initiation), it has for consequence to split Narcisus

[28] *Narcisus*, 42 and 44.
[29] *Narcisus*, 50.
[30] M.W. Bychowski, "The Mirror of Narcissus: Confessions of Transgender Suicide in the Middle Ages," to be published in *The Medieval Feminist Forum* (2019), 9.

between two versions of himself, subject-male and object-female. Narcisus calls "cose" the reflect "que laiens voi" ("Being, he says, that I can see in there," 679), se chosifiant lui-même / objectifying himself through his own gaze.[31] As for Dané, the attraction is also clearly physical, described by using the vocabulary of fire, and a strange expression about the love felt inside him and giving him *"Coeur d'aïmant, vaines de fer"* (an "heart of adamant, veins of iron," 755): could these words about a symbolic hardness, about iron veins, be linked with the awakening of his sexuality, of his desire in a trivial way?[32] After the androgynous and childish Narcisus then the manly knight in the eyes of Dané, now we have the heterosexual desire of Narcisus for a female himself. Tragically, he cannot pass through the fountain-mirror as Dané with her window; in François Villon's allusion of the myth in his ballade "Bien heureux est qui rien n'y a" about love, this one gives a more literal interpretation of Narcisus's death: he dies drowned in the fountain, drowned in his own reflection and desire.[33] When he finally realizes that he sees himself, his "Je suis ce que je tant desir" ("I am what I desire so much," 910) echoes Dané's "Je te desire sor tote rien" ("I desire you more than anything," 462).[34] He finally dies joined by Dané, and they both die for the love of the same person but of different genders, for the manly Narcisus for her and for the water fairy he saw through the fountain-mirror for him. There is a kind of queer erotic triangle here, between Dané, Narcisus-subject and Narcisus-object: Narcisus-subject is born because of Dané's gaze, and her curse gives him animacy, and then, after the translation from Narcisus-object to Narcisus-subject, Narcisus-subject recreates Narcisus-object in the mirror, his gaze reflected by the water dissociating the both.

The conclusion, when Narcisus-object kills both Dané and Narcisus-subject by his inaccessibility, leads to the survival of only a Narcisus-object, in other words the myth survives beyond the story, which is the object of this research (a conceptual part of the scholarly work being the objectification of our subjects/matter). Can we see this complex play involving gender, bodies, gazes and

[31] *Narcisus*, 60.
[32] *Narcisus*, 62.
[33] François Villon, *Poésies complètes*, ed. Claude Thiry (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1991), 141.
[34] *Narcisus*, 68 and 50.

desire as the staging of a hermaphroditic Narcisus, neither masculine or feminine or rather the both alternately, united through the philter of the fountain? The narrative recalls another rewriting of Ovid, the tale of Hermaphroditus in the *Ovide moralisé* (fourteenth century), where Hermaproditus is almost drowned in a fountain by Salmacis because he refused her love, and they meld in one individual, both male and female.[35] Here, despite the attempt of Narcisus to grab the "cose" through the water, there is no melding between Narcisus-subject and Narcisus-object, the fluid surface of the water being paradoxically an impassable border. In a productive way, M.W. Bychowski reads the story of Narcisus (through Gower's adaptation in middle English) as a transgender story, where the youth, raised as a cisgender man, sees in the fountain/mirror the woman they are (using the neutral non-plural pronoun).[36]

This reading echoing contemporary issues around transgender biographies and necropolitics (with the final suicide) allows us to interrogate the possible contradiction between Narcisus's assigned gender and Narcisus's self in their androgynous body, even if we have to hold back from the possibility of associating the failed masculinity with a necessary feminine self, which would be a reinforcement of the dichotomy male/female, without taking into account the infinite number of nuances and subtleties of the self between these categories of female and male (this is not what M.W. Bychowski does, but it is a potential risk of the search of a "female self" behind each failed masculinity). Whether Narcisus or just his/them gaze is transgender, gender mostly deploys itself through this text as a narrative of looking, the same individual being able to be feminine or masculine depending on who looks at them.

Narcisus et Dané is not only the story of Narcisus, but also of Dané. As evoked since the beginning of this essay, she is a quite unusual figure for a courtly narrative. She is the main character of the story, the most animated until her curse on Narcisus, who, before that, is no more than an image. She actively loves, refusing to stay in her tower to wait the arrival of a hypothetical lover and refusing to ask the "*consel*" of her father, because she fears an arranged marriage with another lord

[35] "Hermaphroditus" in *L'Ovide moralisé*, 4, ed. Cornelis de Boer (Amsterdam: Müller, 1915), 54-62.
[36] M.W. Bychowski, "The Mirror of Narcissus," 1.

and she wants a husband for her "*plesir*": by her thinking and her act to leave the castle to meet Narcisus without the authorization of her father and king, she challenges patriarchal social structure and royal law.[37] Raymond Cormier sees Dané as a heroine in rebellion against the confines of the patriarchal society and emphasizes her quest for freedom, even interrupted by the male self-destruction of Narcisus.[38] In taking initiatives and in reversing the animacy hierarchy, Dané becomes the subject of her own story and holds a symbolic masculine position. Narcisus takes animacy only after being cursed by Dané, suddenly animated by love for himself, as a reflect of her own destructive love for him. Nevertheless, Dané is still dependent on a man: she suffers for him and she dies for him, unable to overcome the death of her lover; her becoming-subject cannot resist Narcisus' failure to love her, and it breaks, unachieved. Her quest of freedom therefore ends with her sacrifice for a man, re-establishing in extremis a hierarchy in lives' value (because Narcisus would not die for her, he dies for himself).

The use, by a female character, of an agency usually masculine to experiment freedom is more explicit and more literal in the *Roman de Silence*: Silence, born as a girl, is socially a male. The choice to study a cross-dressed "female" character to discuss masculinity can seem questionable, especially since I have said in my introduction that the knight is always a man, but Silence, throughout (almost) all the story, is considered as a man by everyone except himself (sometimes) and few relatives. Moreover, the passage where he fails to satisfy the queen's sexual appetites apart, Silence performs an irreproachable chivalric masculinity, successful in each task he undertakes or is assigned to do, whether it is as a noble member of the court, as a minstrel, or as a knight. For example, during a tournament, the following occurs. [39]

> Silence ne se repent rien
> De son usage, ains l'ainme bien.
> Chevaliers est vallans et buens,
> Mellor n'engendra rois ne cuens.
> Ne vos puis dire la moitié

[37] *Narcisus*, 42.
[38] Raymond Cormier, "Tisbé, Dané, and Procné: Three Old French/ Ovidian Heroines in Quest of Personal Freedom," in *Sexuality, the Female Gaze, and the Arts; Women, the Arts, and Society*, ed. Ronald Dotterer and Susan Bowers (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), 102-106.
[39] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 242.

De si com li a esploité

"Silence had no regrets
about his upbringing, in fact, he loved it.
He was a valiant and noble knight ; no king or count was ever better.
I can't tell you half
of his exploits.
(5177-5182)

Silence, at the age of seventeen, is the best knight of the tournament, better in his performance of knighthood than the others, presumably cisgender men. Silence is not only virile in his acts, but also in his appearance. Depicted as a handsome youth, he arouses the desire not only from women (as Queen Eufeme) but from men too: the court of the French king is very receptive to his beauty ("A le bialté de cel enfant / Sont li Franchois moult entendant," 4417-4418) and, particularly, the king of France embraces him and explains it as following: "Sa grant bialtés m'a afolé / Que baizié l'ai et acolé" ("His beauty and noble bearing moved me / to kiss and embrace him," 4469-4470).[40] The highest person in the political and patriarchal hierarchy of France, the symbolic father of all the kingdom, confesses having been moved by the view of Silence's beauty, to the point of having been driven to kiss him. The word used, "*afolé*", means strong, almost disturbing feelings. Maybe these feelings inspired by Silence to men (as the homoerotic depiction of Narcisus by the narrator of his lai?) are the reason of the accusation of sodomy expressed by Eufeme, added to his refusal to have sex with her. She tries to destroy him by accusing him of a rape attempt (although his true "fault" is to refuse to touch her), leading Ebains, the King of England, to remove him from the court, a first time to France (hence the episode at the French court) and a second time in a supposedly impossible quest, which is about catching Merlin in the woods, because a prophecy says that only a woman could catch him, "par engien de feme" (5803), by woman's trick (and, obviously, the royal couple considers Silence as male).[41] Concerning Silence's own stance about himself, he is torn by the duality of his/her gender identity: one time, inspired by "Nature", he wants to keep "us de feme" ("women's ways," 2558) and, later on, inspired by Noreture, he says "car vallés sui et nient

[40] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 206 and 209.
[41] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 272.

mescine" ("for I'm a young man, not a girl," 2650).[42] This debate between allegorized "Nature" and "Nurture" evokes some more contemporary debates between the natural and the social, the body and the gender, this dispute here embodied by Silence.

One observation I would raise is the fact that without this "conflict" with the queen, Silence could continue to perform as a man; actually, until it would be necessary to have sex, Silence could be a man. He is a perfect knight, recognized by the court. The stumbling block to his full acceptance as an adult nobleman is to be involved in a love story, therefore the chivalric manhood needs the sexual initiation to be achieved. Silence cannot be naked without unveiling his secret, and, at the end, after catching Merlin, he is undressed in front of the court to "prove" that the prophecy and Merlin are right, that he is a woman.[43] The court who once recognized him as a good knight now looks at the uncovered body and assigns him to female "nature." This dramatic question of the nudity for the transgender person who did not benefit of surgery (obviously impossible in the Middle Ages) was underlined by Jack Halberstam in their analysis of the film *Boys Don't Cry* (about the life and death of Brandon Teena), especially the traumatic scene where Brendon is forced to unbuckle his pants and to show his genitals to confirm that he is not "a man" (in the mind of the bullies who force him to do that): the brutal male gaze castrates Brandon according to Halberstam.[44]

We can use the same notion of castration about the unveiling of Silence's nudity in public: deprived of the men's dress he used since his childhood, all his manliness patiently constructed (through education, prowess, etc.) is erased by the collective male gaze of the court and he becomes she. And she loses her agency: after that, the right to inherit is restored for women, but the king chooses her as a new wife (without apparently asking her permission), and he thereby grabs her inheritance for his own family, then the story ends.[45] However, the question of agency in the *Roman de Silence* is far more complicated than it seems. Silence does

[42] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 120.
[43] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 308.
[44] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 87-88.
[45] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 177.

not choose to be a man: it is a decision taken at his birth, by his father, because a girl cannot inherit, and he has no son. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Silence's own feelings about gender identity are complex and hesitant. Later, as knight, he is constantly at the orders of kings, of England and France, without any opportunity to take initiative. Father and kings guide his life, even as man he can escape from the patriarchal institution. Moreover, there is no mention in the text of Silence's desire, either for a man or a woman. Silence is eroticized, objectified, embraced, by men and women, but expresses no personal desire. The poet even makes a rime with "Scilence / abstinence" (2673-2674), emphasizing the absence of sexuality of Silence.[46]

In an economy of looking and desire, Silence is completely deprived of animacy, reduced to the *cose* towards which the lust of others gathers. Again, as with Narcisus, he does not assume his male-subject position in the traditional animacy hierarchy, being passive and objectified by the others; even his name evokes his deprivation of voice to express himself, as well as his secret. Nevertheless, there is one time of true freedom for Silence, of authentic agency, when he joins the minstrels and becomes one of them, escaping his father for a while. Choosing a false identity, Silence keeps a male identity, proving his appropriation of the manliness and his use as agency... and finding a voice, literally! During this time when he is a singer, Silence is depicted by his parents mourning his absence as the "mireöirs del mont" ("the mirror of the world," 3063).[47] This expression recalls the one used by M.W. Bychowski about Narcisus in the title of her article ("The Mirror of Narcisus") as well as the *Roman de la Rose*, where the fountain of Narcisus is described as "li mireör perilleus."[48] The gaze is involved in the mirror, thus does it mean that Silence reflects what his relatives want to see in him, as Narcisus seems to do: showing an androgynous embodiment of beauty for the narrator, a handsome manly knight for Dané and a fairy for himself? The expression seems to insist on Silence as a surface for the gaze, where the world (an expression about the human community?) can see itself. The fact that Silence cannot be involved in sexual

[46] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 124.
[47] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 144.
[48] M.W. Bychowski, "The Mirror of Narcissus."
Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Daniel Poirion (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971) 80.

activity without breaking his constructed identity, without breaking the mirror he is, can be read as a sign of his fundamental androgyny, or non-literal hermaphroditism, or transgender, whatever we call that, all these words being fair but none of them can probably reflect the medieval experience of gender nonconformity.

My point is that the *Roman de Silence* can be interpreted as a story of a girl constrained to be a boy by her father because he has no son, or as a tale of a girl using manliness to get access to a personal freedom usually refused to women, or as a transgender narrative about the rejection of the confines of gender assignment and naturalistic discourse: none of these readings is false. Silence is a mirror where we can see our own gender narratives and where the characters of the book can see their own gender expectations (Silence making the pride of her parents and of the courtly society), but this status is not compatible with a sexuality, which in the Middle Ages establishes a strong distinction between active/passive and penetring/penetrated.[49] The public undressing of his body then the arranged marriage with the king break the mirror, and they turn Silence into a "simple" wife: she is reintegrated into the patriarchal institution and a sexuality is assigned to her (the passivity and the search of reproduction to give an heir to her husband). Failing the manly initiation means the end of ambiguity, the downgrading into the gendered animacy hierarchy, and, of course, the end of the romance. This "downgrading" is a reminder of the medieval conception of femininity as an imperfect masculinity, a *failed masculinity.*[50] Silence defines himself as "*mescreés*" (3641), "poorly done," a false male, reflecting misogynistic conceptions of gender[51]. However, I do not think that in medieval poetry, failing to be a man means becoming a woman. In the case of Silence, it happens because she does not choose to be a boy, and then she is re-assigned by the court (male collectivity). But Narcisus does not become a woman, even if he first sees himself as female in the fountain, and the medieval society does not allow the long-time gender-passing, even for a "failed"

[49] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Eurie*, 3-4.
[50] Michael Uebel, "On Becoming-Male", in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 370.
[51] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 170.

male. Again, clinging to the dichotomy male/female is a blinding of what the medieval texts can offer as representations of nonconformity, and which queer spaces can appear in a text.

Narcisus, Silence, Dané. To complete my inquiry, I need to bring one more name: Merlin. He appears at the end of the *Roman de Silence*, through the story of prophecy and the quest of Silence already mentioned. He is described by Eufeme as "fil al diäble" ("son of the devil," 5792) and as "salvages," (5799).[52] He embodies his wildness by his hairy body: "Cho est uns hom trestols pelus/ Et si est com uns ors velus"("he is a man all covered with hair, / as hairy as a bear," 5929-5930).[53] Added to the fact only a woman can catch him, there is a lot of elements that makes him an extraordinary character, out of the world of men and out of Christianity (because of his demon father). The mission of Silence is to reintegrate him into the human world (even by accident, given the fact that the king and the queen predict the failure of Silence because they consider him as a man); in some way, this success for Silence (catching Merlin) is also a second failure as man, because a man cannot do that. The trick used by Silence to catch him (suggested by a strange old man in the woods) is to attract him with food (cooked meat, milk and honey) and to put him to sleep with wine.[54] Sarah Roche-Mahdi suggests that the old man helping Silence is probably Merlin himself, as this other old man who looks at him when he is back at his father's court after the minstrel episode: "tricking" the tale, Merlin is a "metacharacter" who knows the end of the story from the beginning.[55]

In the Arthurian tradition, Merlin is a soothsayer, but in this story, he goes further than "just" predicting the future: he seems to help Silence to catch himself and thus to accomplish a prophecy about himself. Another point deserves to be underlined, it is the fact that the prophecy should be accomplished by "engien de feme," however the tactic to catch him is not from Silence (just an executor) but from the old man/Merlin. In *Narcisus et Dané* there is a similar character, "uns

[52] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 272.
[53] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 278.
[54] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 274.
[55] Sarah Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12, No. 1, (Spring 2002), 10-13.

devins" (41) telling to Narcisus' mother that her baby will not survive if he sees himself.[56] The soothsayer echoes the author/narrator who writes, some verses before, that he is about to tell the story of "Narcisus, qui fu mors d'amer" ("Narcisus, who died of love," 35).[57] The two figures share with the reader a knowledge of what will happen in the story, placing him in an omniscient and conniving position, but Merlin is a character far more complex than the soothsayer in *Narcisus et Dané*, as he proves once brought at the court by Silence (6161-6196): [58]

> Voit Merlins venir un vilain :
> Uns nués sollers porte en sa main
> Bien ramendés de cuir de tacre.
> Merlins le voit de deseur l'acre,
> Si en commenche fort a rire
> Mais ne volt onques un mot dire.
>
> "Merlin saw a peasant approach,
> carrying a new pair of shoes,
> nicely mended with brand-new leather.
> Merlin saw him in the field below
> and began to laugh heartily,
> but wouldn't say a word."

The unexplained laughter of Merlin continues in seeing poor people begging at an abbey, the burial of a man, the king himself then the queen, in front of whom "*Merlins en rit, por poi ne crieve*" ("Merlin laughed so hard at the queen he nearly died," 6276).[59] Later, Merlin gives some answers about his irrepressible laughter: for example, he laughs about the peasant because he knew that he would die on his way, about the queen because she cuckolds her husband with a lover dressed as a nun, and, obviously, he reveals the cross-dressing of Silence, provoking the execution of Eufeme and the marriage/gender re-assignment of Silence. Wild man and seer, Merlin perceives both the future and the truth of "nature" behind social surfaces: the adultery of the queen with her cross-dressed lover and the female "sex" of Silence. Concerning Silence, Merlin shows the ability to see through the mirror, where the others only see the reflect of their world, they see only what they want to see. His laughter, born from his superhuman regard, acts as a disruption in the civilized and

[56] *Narcisus*, 32.
[57] *Narcisus*, 32.
[58] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 290.
[59] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 294.

motionless world of the court; coming from the margins of the courtly world, Merlin re-establishes the natural order depicted by Alain de Lille (where the male must be active and the female passive, other configurations being "against nature") and he behaves as the guardian of "patriarchal values, reaffirming the power structure."[60] In a way, Merlin provides help to the king to heal his own failed masculinity, putting an end to the "unnatural" prowess of the "vallés ki ert meschine" ("for the young man who was a girl," 3704) and to the queen's adultery, giving him a new younger wife, probably more fertile than Eufeme who apparently gave no heir to the king.[61] The failed masculinity of Silence therefore opens the path to the re-establishment of the masculinity of the king, as if Silence was Merlin's instrument to save the kingdom from the sterile and sinful queen. Moreover, in unveiling to the entire court what the reader knows since the beginning, Merlin's gaze is placed aside the reader's gaze, as with the soothsayer in *Narcisus et Dané*.

With his role of almost *deus ex machina* throughout the story, Merlin appears to have a curious gift of ubiquity, that maybe reflects the ubiquity of the narrator who writes as Heldris de Cornouailles and acts as Merlin in the narrative; Merlin moves in a world he knows without being part of it, as the writer entering his creation, as the reader suddenly immerged in a narrative where he is the one who knows the truth. Merlin can be considered as a door open on the "transversal gaze" I mentioned in the introduction, controlling the narrative as the writer controls it and sharing with the narrator and the reader an overlook unattainable for usual characters of romance. But Merlin's transversal look is not a way to open a new space here: on the contrary, it is a tool to re-establish the naturalized sexual and political order and the gender hierarchy.

Before concluding, I wish to wonder again about the possibility of an alternative space opened by failed sexuality and missed manhood, despite the conservative endings of these stories (deaths of Narcisus et Dané, gender re-assignment of Silence), because "the process of identities formation amounts to

[60] Alain de Lille, *The Plaint of Nature / De Plancta Naturae*, ed. and trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto : Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980)
Sarah Roche Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin," 19.
[61] Heldris de Cornouailles, *Silence*, 174.

nothing less than a process of spatialization."[62] To talk about a literal space, the two tales make a great deal of the woods and the wilderness. Merlin is a wild man restoring the power of "nature" (or rather a naturalized patriarchy), and so he does not open a space of queering, but we might conceptualize the woods differently: after all, the restoration of the "good" at the court of Ebains (women's right to inherit and death of the "bad" queen) came from Silence, a character from the margins of gender and sexual conformities. For example, M.W. Bychowski invites us to think of the woods in which Narcisus discovers the fountain and his reflect as "the unknown, a wood of alternatives," providing some possible meanings: "madness [...] retreat into isolation, internal life, and non-normative ways of being."[63] The way in which Narcisus gets access to these woods is interesting: he is going to hunt with some companions, but apart from them (443-446): [64]

> Et Narcisus venoit ariere,
> Tot sous parmi une quaiere:
> Ja estoient si conpaignon
> Bien loig, le trait a .i. bojon.
>
> "And Narcisus was riding along behind
> All alone along a country road:
> His companions were already
> A good arrow-shot ahead."

In fact, he is not really with them, he is riding alone. Afterwards, at the fountain, he mourns them (927-930):[65]

> Que sont ore tuit devenu
> Mi conpaignon, qui m'ont perdu ?
> De totes gens sui eslongiés
> Et en cel bos tous seus laissiés
>
> "What has become of them all now,
> My hunting companions, who have lost me?
> I am far away from everyone
> And left alone in this wood.

Not completely inside of the society but not completely outside, at least at the beginning, Narcisus experiments the achieved loneliness in the woods, facing his reflection and desire, lamenting the loss of his companions, who did not seem

[62] Michael Uebel, "On Becoming-Male," 368.
[63] M.W. Bychowski, "The Mirror of Narcissus," 1 and 9.
[64] *Narcisus*, 50.
[65] *Narcisus*, 70.

attached to him. Moreover, what is Narcisus looking for in these woods? His taste for the hunt is also a taste for wilderness, for a world outside civilization. Narcisus acts as a reversed wild man: he belongs to the "civilized" society but he seeks to escape it. Can we read it as a quest of the interiority of a youth, going further into his mind (allegorized by the woods) until the revelation of the impossibility of courtly love and the sexual initiation (meeting with Dané), leading him to this fountain-mirror (his soul?) where he sees at last what he desires, even if it causes his death? What is he truly hunting?

William Burgwinkle, in his analysis of *Guigemar*, notices that hunting is a suspect activity for some medieval writers, associated with something wasteful, selfish or even with sodomy for Jean de Salisbury.[66] However, in Marie de France's *Guigemar* and *Lanval* (where the accusation of sodomy is explicit, as in *Silence*), knights refusing first the sexual initiation end by finding love with ladies.[67] The story of Narcisus is more radical, leaving him no possibility to survive his hopeless love. This brings us to another conception of the space, not in terms of places but of minds. Maybe it is wrong to focus on the sad marriage of Silence or on the deaths of Dané and Narcisus. Maybe the most important is not the ending of these stories, which follow the conventions of their time, where the nonconformity must be redeemed or erased, but what these stories open.

Silence challenges the naturalistic discourse about gender hierarchy and women's presumed weakness with her prowess, she proves that a woman can be a minstrel or a knight (still today, a quick look at toy catalogs shows that this simple idea is still not acknowledged by many) and can defy gender norms by being a transgender character desirable by both men and women, against the too common representations of cross-dressing as grotesque. In *Narcisus and Dané*, the agency of Dané can be read as a claim of active love, against arranged marriages and passivity while awaiting the arrival of a prince, whereas Narcisus, through his gaze on the water, opens the possibility of imagining both an alternative desire and an alternative self, different from what the others see or understand. This notion of

[66] William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature*, 153.
[67] Thomas R. Schneider, "The Chivalric Masculinity of Marie de France's Shape-Changers," *Arthuriana* 26, No. 3, (Fall 2016), 34-36.

possibility is maybe an important concept in a hermeneutic of the failure, this "something" created by the incapacity to fulfill the expectations. Possibilities of appearance, of gaze, of desire, of love, of acts, of departure, of journey home, of imagination, of understanding, of self-producing. Possibilities of interpretation as well (all the scholarly works as this paper act as a proof of it), of projection for the reader, of self-appropriation of Narcisus and Silence's narratives in the personal history of the reader. A "grammar of possibilities", to quote again Jack Halberstam, that reminds us that a narrative is not only made of what happens, but also of all these side roads glimpsed or hardly considered, these paths not followed but still present, as ghostly alternatives.[68]

Rather than a conventional conclusion, I propose an epilogue to this inquiry, using another text, the famous *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris, from the thirteenth century. In this romance presented as the dream of the narrator/author, Guillaume, the fountain of Narcisus is present as previously mentioned. The tale shortly narrated by Guillaume is almost the same as in *Narcisus and Dané* except there is no mention of Narcisus seeing himself as a maiden, and this version is therefore more faithful to Ovid's version.[69] What is interesting for us here are the verses following the tale, about the fountain itself :

"C'est li mireörs perilleus,
Ou Narcisus li orguilleus
Mira sa face ses yex vers,
Dont il jut puis mors tous envers.
Qui en cest mireör se mire
Ne puet avoir garant ne mire
Que tel chose a ses yex ne voie
Qui d'amer l'a tost mis en voie.
Maint vaillant home a mis a glaive
Cis mirëors, car li plus saive,
Li plus preu, li miex afetié
I sont tost pris et aguetié"

"This is the perilous mirror
Where Narcisus full of pride
Looked at his face and his green eyes
he enjoyed and died reversed.
Who looks through this mirror
Cannot be safe and looks at

[68] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.
[69] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, 77-79.

Which thing his eyes don't see
puts him on the path of love.
Many glorious men fought against
This mirror, because the safest
The bravest, the most prepared
they are all caught and held captive.
(1571-1582).[70]

We can note the insistence on the gaze and the reflection through the play with the verb "*mirer*". Then a name is given for the fountain, "*Fontainne d'Amors*", and the narrator, young and ignorant about love, looks inside and falls in love with a rosebud that he wants to gather, seen through the fountain, clarifying that the rosebud means a woman.[71] The sexual meaning of the rosebud is quite clear and has often been noted by scholars. What interests me here is the symbolism of the mirror and the genealogical narrative established by the narrator, from Narcisus to him, with a succession of lovers between them. Narcisus, in his homoerotic self-love, appears as the symbolic "first lover" when Guillaume discovers the heterosexual desire through the same fountain-mirror where Narcisus loves himself. Does this mean that "love" now only concerns the knight and his lady, and that it has nothing to do anymore the Ancient homoerotic love as in Ovid's stories, as a kind of genealogy from Antiquity to courtly love? Anyway, this fountain is in Guillaume's dream (and thereby the story of Narcisus is part of his mind), in a kind of temporality outside of "real" time, and it is a shared place for homoerotic desire as well as for heterosexual desire. It is as though the fountain reflects the desire of each person looking through it, putting everyone in face of what s/he wants in his/her heart. Even if there is a play between homoeroticism as self-love and heterosexuality as attraction for alterity (the "opposite sex"), the fountain can be read as a queer place, offering the possibility of the queer look and of unconventional desire. I brought this text here in order to emphasize the presence of the homoerotic desire in the chivalric heterosexual world, also demonstrated by the ambiguity of the narrator of *Narcisus and Dané* in his portrait of Narcisus, and by the attraction of the imaginary French nobility for Silence as a young man.

[70] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, 80-81. (Personal translation)
[71] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, 81.

All this economy of desire implies the distinction between the active lover and the passive loved one, while, in a naturalized patriarchy, the young man must prove that he deserves to be admitted into male adulthood. Silence and Narcisus are not able to do that, therefore Silence does not achieve his almost "perfect" chivalric masculinity, and Narcisus goes out of his childhood only to die in front of his impossible self-love: Silence-mirror broken by both the laughter of the wild man and the male gaze of the court; Narcisus broken by the mirror of his transgender beauty. The youth failing sexual initiation disrupts any discourse about chivalry as an acme of heterosexual manhood, and it acts as a reminder of the fragility of gender constructions, that can fall apart when the aspirations of the self are stronger than the social constraints.

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