Rowan Tackitt
Dr. Kris Trujillo
CMLT 50201 Pre-Modern Critical Theory
June 10, 2024

Courtly Love and Trans Critique: An Extended Review of "Courtly and Queer" by Charlie Samuelson

In "Courtly and Queer," Charlie Samuelson confronts assumptions about courtly literature complicitly constructing patriarchal hegemony by unearthing the inherent deconstructive queerness at its core. His interdisciplinary approach integrates literary, medieval, and queer studies by juxtaposing modern queer theory with high medieval French verse romances (*romans*) and late medieval French *dits* about courtly love from both well-known and obscure texts. Samuelson argues that the distinction between *romans* and *dits* is an artificial one which obscures their complex relationship; analyzing them in-tandem allows him to locate queerness at the center of medieval court narratives, rather than on the margins. According to Samuelson, the courtly and the queer are not fully separate categories but rather intertwine and engage with each other, almost as if lovers themselves.

Samuelson defines "queer" to mean "all that resists the notion that courtly literature seeks to present gender and sexuality as coherent and/or normative," (1) or simply unrestrained ambiguous indeterminacies, which is inseparable from poetic indeterminacy. Sameulson's queerness destabilizes binary oppositions such as same/different, self/other, medieval/modern; by showing its overlap with "courtliness" (literary sophistication), Samuelson disrupts a conventional narrative that figures medieval romance's politics of gender and sexuality as coherent, normative, and conservative.

Courtly and Queer is comprised of four chapters discussing subjectivity, metalepsis, lyrical insertions, and irony, alongside a concluding coda about slashes. Samuelson provides summaries and context for each narrative he analyzes, then juxtaposes them with modern theory. His theoretical framework is inspired by those such as Carolyn Dinshaw, Carla Freccero, Paul de Man but engaging most directly with the works of Lee Edelman and Judith Butler. Samuelson writes in a way which makes this framework accessible, guiding readers through complex queer and critical theory as they both structure and are structured by his primary sources.

Chapter 1 confronts the ambivalence of the reflexive subject by analyzing Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier*, Christine de Pizan's *Duc des vrais amans*, and Machaut's *Fonteinne amoureuse* through the lenses of Alain de Libera and Judith Butler. The notion of the subject—undergoing a transformation in the Middle Ages—emerges from the interpenetration of the object as an amalgamation of the self and other. This self-conscious unruliness makes the subject queer because it resists the logic of language or narrative, only existing to the extent that it desires but incapable of "straight" determination of that desire. Samuelson argues that medieval *dits* may be understood in a similar manner, reflexively developing the subjectivity of earlier verse romances.

Chapter 2 introduces metalepsis as provocatively unintelligible narrative insertion: a disruptive folding of space, temporality, or subject. Samuelson refers to Lee Edelman and Judith Butler in his analyses of *Partonopeu de Blois,* Froissart's *Prison amoureuse,* and Heldris of Cornwall's *Le roman de Silence* — the latter of which will be further discussed in the second part of this review. By destabilizing notions of inside and outside while calling narrative legibility and legitimacy into

question, Samuelson argues that metalepsis destabilizes relational representations of gender and sexuality as following a set narrative progression. Embracing unruliness destabilizes binaries upon which the patriarchy and historical understandings are based.

Chapter 3 explores the interpenetration of lyric and narrative, arguing that lyric insertions are not disruptive but rather generate a deconstructive dialectical engagement and a "disorientation of positionality" that denaturalizes desire. To Samuelson, its indeterminacy is what makes lyric insertion comparable to queerness, troubling binaries of language, narrative, and desire. His analysis inserts Edelman into Jean Renart's *Roman de la rose*, Jakemés's *Roman du Châtelain de Coucy et de la dame de Fayel*, and Nicole de Margival's *Dit de la panthère*, reading both genres as long poems as opposed to verse narratives. Supplementary material becomes, paradoxically, integral—and vice-versa.

Chapter 4 destabilizes assumptions of constructive meaning by combining Edelman's queer desire with Paul de Man's negativity of irony, arguing that irony is (embodied by the) queer (and courtly) and resists future meaning through its repetitive search for pleasure. By juxtaposing Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* and *Cligés* with Machaut's *Jugement* and *Voir Dit*, Samuelson analyzes intersections of deconstructive irony and deviant desire, concluding that the ironic and the queer both create pleasure by embracing the unseemly and unraveling (narrative) order. Queerness is not an adjective or verb but "the drive" that ironizes narratives about the centralization of patriarchy and marginalization of resistance. Amidst this argument, Samuelson defends unproductive pleasure from a narrative of productivity, providing a meta-defense for his book as a whole.

The book closes with a coda titled “Slashes” which ties together Samuelson’s thesis. Inspired by Carla Freccero’s *Queer/Early/Modern*, Samuelson sees slashes as interrupting formulations, forcing pauses and pondering, allowing for directional ambiguity, and setting a foundation of narrative uncertainty – the same goals he aimed to achieve throughout his book. He hopes to inspire future readings into indeterminate relationships, and I aim to fulfill this wish by further examining *Le Roman de Silence* in the second half of this review.

While "Courtly and Queer" offers a compelling analysis, it would perhaps be better developed through the lens of trans theory. Samuelson focuses on the indeterminate space between binaries and its ability to destabilize existing narratives — then insists on referencing binaries of queer and straight rather than the underlying gender binary, even when his sources have explicitly transgender themes. He calls for non-binary thinking—between and outside rather than one and/or another—but misattributes this transness to queer sexuality in his single-minded focus on a binary of straight(forward)/queer (turn). What could have been a book about the non-binary is instead a book about binaries which theorizes the non-binary without acknowledging it. Further, Samuelson uses “s/he” (4, 12, 20, 210) rather than the gender-neutral “they” when uncertain of his subject’s pronouns, which is itself a microcosm of the problem with his book: his focus on the slash obscures the existence of alternatives and their meanings. He justifies his use of “s/he” in reference to *Le Roman de Silence* because he interprets the eponymous character as “struggling with the gender binary… torn about by it rather than… transcending it” (88). By framing the gender-neutral pronoun as a transcendence of gender, he inadvertently frames his definition of queerness and his entire analysis as a “struggle with

the gender binary" despite his stated interest in the distance between opposing binaries and what can happen "when criteria of sameness and difference, rather than being asserted or assumed, are challenged and destabilized" (155) — which could more reasonably be interpreted as play than conflict. Stepping into trans theory could have provided valuable insights into the intersections of medieval and modern conceptions of gender and sexuality alongside broader power dynamics and historiography, rather than simply highlighting the unruliness of both.

Samuelson expresses wariness of scholarship which relies on close historical contextualization (208), but even loose historical contextualization could have benefited his analysis and directed him to the field of trans studies. Much like his conception of queerness, the medieval hermaphrodite was an ambiguous, indeterminant figure of juxtaposed binaries which has threatened narratives of gender, politics, and history across pre- and post-modern contexts. The label itself was not a clearly defined one, encompassing a range of non-normative gender and sexual expressions as well as morphological possibilities. Biologically, a hermaphrodite would have been what we now refer to as intersex: a person born with sex characteristics outside of the male/female binary. Socially, the phrase may have referred to a gender non-conforming or transgender person. Ethically, a hermaphrodite was something or someone aberrant, a hybrid monster acting against Nature and the will of God. The chapter "Concerning Monsters in Nature" in *De Secretis Mulierum*—credited debatably to Albertus Magnus in the thirteenth or fourteenth century—described hermaphrodites as such due to the fact that "a certain part of their body are outside the bounds of the common course of the nature of the species" (Lemay 112). The creation of a hermaphrodite was never on the part of Nature's intentions, which

were always pure, but rather a production mishap of some sort. In Alain de Lille's twelfth-century *De planctu naturae*, the hermaphrodite is specifically condemned as "subject and predicate: on and the same term is given a double application... The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects" (67-78). Yet, later, while listing the creatures of the world and their roles, the bat is described as "a hermaphrodite among birds, [holding] a zero rating among them" (94). If an animal could be a hermaphrodite—literally or metaphorically—then the hermaphrodite was in some way part of the natural order. According to a *De Secretis Mulierum* commentator: "Philosophers answer to this that they are created for the adornment of the universe. For if different colors on a wall decorate that wall, so different monsters embellish the whole world" (Lemay 113). The hermaphrodite thus held an incoherent yet prominent place in the medieval imagination.

Nor was this figure necessarily kept at the fringes of medieval court. John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* warned against the dangers of mismanaged courts by comparing the philosopher-courtier to the hermaphrodite (90-91). A number of canonized saints such as Marinus, Eugenius, and Pelagius were venerated in the Middle Ages for socially transitioning to male (Roche-Mahdi xvi). Meanwhile, "female crossdressers" in medieval literature such as *Grisandole* and *Le Roman de Silence* challenged cultural subjectivity, representing boundary transgressions and aristocratic anxieties (Sturges 2002; Clark 2002). The hermaphrodite embodied a mixture of categories, and thus the permeability of the boundaries upon which medieval social institutions were based. The literary ambiguity of the hermaphrodite proves that they and the categorical emulsions they represented were present at the heart of medieval society.

Miniature from *Le Roman de Silence* manuscript depicting the eponymous character exposed before the king. Provided by Dr. Jacqueline Victor from the University of Nottingham's Wollaton Library Collection. Time has fittingly obstructed Silence's sex characteristics in a manner which portrays the unknowable ambiguity of the hermaphroditic body.

In 1911, a box ironically labeled "old papers – no value" was discovered to contain letters written by Henry VIII alongside the anthology of a professional entertainer. This anthology included *Le Roman de Silence*, a previously-unknown thirteenth-century narrative attributed to Heldris of Cornwall—a pseudonym seemingly based on the Saxon leader slain by Duke Cador of Cornwall, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (Roche-Mahdi 1992, xi). *Le Roman de Silence* tells the story of Silence, the only child of Count Cador of Cornwall and his wife, Eufemie (not to be confused with King Evan's wife, Queen Eufeme of Norway), who is secretly raised as a boy after King Evan bans female inheritance. I use they/them pronouns for Silence in order to challenge Samuelson's interpretation, as their gender ambiguity is a predominant discourse in the text. Running away with traveling minstrels at the age of twelve, Silence undertakes an adventure which ends when the wizard Merlin—a personification of writing and reading (Gilmore 1997, 111; Roche-

Mahdi 2002, 13)— reveals their identity. Merlin simultaneously exposes the queen's secret lover, disguised as a nun in her entourage, and Silence is married to King Evan after Eufeme and her lover are sentenced to death (Roche-Mahdi 1992).

The romance begins with—and is frequently interrupted by—Heldris' condemnation of those who only desire wealth and pleasure instead of valuing honor and hard work. He proceeds to tell a story in which a person with great honor and skill is caused ceaseless trouble by the intertwined financial and sexual desires of others. Female inheritance was banned because two men died in a duel over their twin wives' inheritance (Roche-Mahdi 1992, 14-17); Cador's desire for Eufemie inspired him to slay a dragon—which was easily overcome due to the greed it represented—and subsequently ensured their marriage and inheritance (20-25); Queen Eufeme's desire for Silence caused them to be exiled (198-201), nearly executed (202-205), and ultimately exposed (306-309). Haunting this narrative is Uther Pendragon's desire for Gorlain of Cornwall's wife, Igerne, which Merlin had magically enabled. As Samuelson points out (96), Silence's mention of this offense was seemingly random; however, Roche-Mahdi 2002 claims that Merlin was introduced earlier in the romance as an unnamed old man (166-169), which may have allowed a medieval reader to recognize the connection.

In the end, Silence was subject to the king's desire (Roche-Mahdi 1992, 312-313) after being forced to satiate Merlin's (276-287). Contrary to the Roche-Mahdi translation, Gilmore 1997 translates Merlin's capture in a way which carries sexual undertones:

> 'Abandonés li soit li fus,
> Et si vos traiés bien en sus.

> Li car sera tres bien salee,
>
> Et quant l'ara adevalee,
>
> Et mangie al fu d'espine,
>
> Angoisçols iert por la saïne.
>
> Metés le miel si priés qu'en boivie
>
> Anchois que del lait s'aparçoivie.'
>
> 'Abandon yourself to his fire, and if you draw yourself well on top of him the flesh will be all tarnished, soiled, and when he burns it, works it, it will be brought down, subjugated, overwhelmed, and consumed by the fire of his prick, he will be full of anguish, desire for the breast. Put the best close by so he'll be deceived by it before perceiving his devastation, destitution' (121).

Yet Silence themself repeatedly displayed a lack or resistance to desire. At twelve years old, they rejected the idea of sleeping with a man:

> Trop dure boche ai por baisier,
>
> Et trop rois bras por acoler.
>
> On me poroit tost afoler
>
> Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,
>
> Car vallés sui et nient mescine.
>
> Ne voel perdre rna grant honor,
>
> Ne la voel cangier a menor.
>
> But I have a mouth too hard for kisses, and arms too rough for embraces. One could easily make a fool of me in any game played under the covers, for I'm a young man, not a girl. I don't want to lose my high position; I don't want to exchange it for a lesser (Roche-Mahdi 124-125).

Roche-Mahdi compares this passage to *Le Roman d'Eneas*, in which Camille states "I did not come her to show off or indulge in debauchery, but to practice chivalry. I want none of your deniers: you have made a very foolish bargain. I know better how to strike down a knight than to embrace him or make love to him; I do not know how to do battle on my back" (Roche-Mahdi 1992, xiv). Later, as a

teenager, Silence rejected the beautiful Queen Eufeme multiple times (176-183 and 266-269) — which led her to, ironically, accuse Silence of sodomy (184-185). Silence's suffering stemmed more from the conflicting expectations placed upon them than from their own desire (124-127); suitably, for their trans identity, as the hermaphrodite's chastity was key to its morality while its safety relied on a suitable performance of gendered expectations.

In effect, Silence's subjectivity was based on their reflexive turning away from the opposing outer desires which they were ambivalently gendered by. Callahan 2002 suggests that Silence became a minstrel to avoid choosing one gender, transcending the gender binary through music: a discourse which defines maleness in female terms. Silence's ambiguous subjectivity was also frequently demonstrated through the alternating use of pronouns and gendered language. For example, during a joust, Heldris describes:

> Moult le fist bien ens en l'arainne
> Entre .ii. rens a la quintainne.
> Ainc feme ne fu mains laniere
> De contoier en tel maniere.
> Kil Ve1st joster sans mantel
> Et l'escu porter en cantiel
> Et faire donques l'ademise,
> La lance sor Ie faltre mise,
> Dire peiist que Noreture
> Puet moult ovrer contre Nature,
> Quant ele aprent si et escole
> A tel us feme et tendre et mole.

> 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-positioned lance, might well say that Nurture can do a great deal to overcome Nature, if she can teach such behavior to a soft and tender woman (Roche-Mahdi 1992, 240-243).

Heldris follows this passage with a tangent about proper courtly behavior, which he specifies is learned in childhood — just before mentioning that Silence never regretted their upbringing (242-243). The narrative is constantly looking back at the ambiguous creation of the subject of Silence, whose transgender reflexivity reflects indeterminacy at the heart of medieval courts.

Courtly propensity for deviant desire thus becomes the driving force for gender and poetic indeterminacy, just as Samuelson argues poetic indeterminacy serves as the root of desire for medieval court narratives (210). The vast range of scholarly interpretations also reflects the unruly relationship between medieval and modern. The impossibility to control the meaning of *Le Roman de Silence* precisely exhibits the ironic, metaleptic, interpenetrative ability of transness to unravel coherence and relationships — making it a powerful mode of analysis for Samuelson's thesis.

References

Alan de Lille. "Meter 1." In The Plaint of Nature, translated by James Sheridan, 67-148. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980.

Clark, Robert. “Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the ‘Roman de Silence.’” *Arthuriana* 12, No. 1 (Spring 2002): 50-63. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870413.

Gilmore, Gloria Thomas. "Le Roman de Silence": Allegory in Ruin or Womb of Irony?” Arthuriana 7, No. 2 (Summer 1997): 111-128. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27869258.

Halsall, Paul. “The Questioning of Eleanor Rykener (also known as John), A Cross-Dressing Prostitute, 1395.” *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*. Last modified May 31, 2024. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1395rykener.asp.

John of Salisbury. “Of the flanks of the powerful, whose needs are to be satisfied and whose malice is to be restrained.” In *Policraticus*, translated by Cary Nederman, 85-91. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Lemay, Helen Rodnite. “Concerning Monsters in Nature.” In *Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’ De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries*, 111-119. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Puff, Helmut. "Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (1477)." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, No. 1 (January 2000): 41-61. https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-30-1-41.

Roche-Mahdi, Sarah. *Silence: A Thirteenth Century French Romance*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992.

Roche-Mahdi, Sarah. "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the Roman de Silence." *Arthuriana* 12, No. 1 (Spring 2002): 6-21. https://doi.org/10.1353/art.2002.0051.

Samuelson, Charlie. *Courtly and Queer: Deconstruction, Desire, and Medieval French Literature*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, 2022.

Sturges, Robert. "The Crossdresser and the 'Juventus': Category Crisis in 'Silence.'" *Arthuriana* 12, No. 1 (Spring 2002): 37-49. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870412.