Le Silence de Roman

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Summary

Good Master Heldris of Cornwall
Promised Silence a happy fall
From valiant knight to queenly maid,
Changed a spindle for a blade.
But that fate was far too quick;
Joy is not a three-day trick.
So let Master Malduit tell you all
You've never heard from old Cornwall.

Notes

I certainly did not go into Yuletide thinking, "This year, I want to write an epic in iambic tetrameter heroic couplets!" But the more I considered the source material, the more it seemed like cheating not to at least make the attempt. I hope, like Roche-Madi's translation, you at least find the dedication appealing. Sadly, my Medieval French is good enough that I can puzzle out the original text and see the sophistication and wordplay which was somewhat lost in Roche-Madi's translation (and which I have tried to echo in some small ways here), but not so good that these verses could be in anything but English.
“Silence atornent come feme.  
Segnor, que vos diroie plus?  
Ains ot a non Scilensiüs:  
Ostés est -us, mis I est -a  
Si est només Scilentiä.  
D’illuèc al tierc jor que Nature  
Ot recovree sa droiture  
Si prist Nature a repolir  
Par tolt le cors et a tolir  
Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle.”  
[They dressed Silence as a woman.  
Lords, what more can I say?  
Once he was called Silentius:  
they removed the -us, added an -a,  
and so he was called Silentia.  
After Nature  
had recovered her rights,  
she spent the next three days refinishing  
Silence's entire body, removing every trace  
of anything that being a man had left there.”] – Le Roman de Silence

Good Master Heldris of Cornwall  
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Countess Eufemie, lovely and wise,  
Heard of her son's lost disguise  
And straight to court with her Count she sped  
Before Silence could yet be wed.  
To the king they smiled and put on pride,  
And readily gave Silence as his bride,  
But at night to Merlin's chamber they crept –  
Of course the wizard never slept –  
And railed at his meddlesome words  
And all the trouble that he'd stirred.  
“What is all this rage and sorrow?  
Your girl will be a queen tomorrow,  
Whom the king might have executed –  
Or at least thoroughly destituted.  
You're a terribly ungrateful pair!  
More churlish than I've seen anywhere.  
I've half a mind to make you pay,
Hold your tongues or I just may."
Wizards – as everyone knows –
Make capricious and hot-tempered foes.
They are a dangerous breed to scold.
I would not test one for my weight in gold!
But Merlin laughed as he had in court;
He seemed to find them both great sport.
Then wise Eufemie gentled her tone,
Til no man made of flesh and bone
Might shut his heart to what she said:
“We do not wish our daughter dead;
Don’t think we are not grateful there.
Such tragic loss we could not bear.
But could you leave her no more choice
Than lose her head or lose her voice?”
Those noble two were quite distressed!
Troubles bare truths the best;
in extremity our hearts unlock.
There’s nothing for honesty like a shock.
So these two spoke truths long denied –
Even such fine folk have sometimes lied!
So good Eufemie continued on
All pretense fallen, reserve gone,
“Our stories both you know of old,
When some years past you heard them told,
How King Ebain gave his oath
To choice in spouses for us both
As prizes for our loyal feats –
And yet we knew he tried to cheat,
To marry us both as he liked best,
Twist our reward to his behest.
It’s only luck his will matched ours –
God’s will or fortune-favored stars.”
But Merlin only hooted and laughed,
“Why do you think by wit and craft
I roam wild in the woods
Lonely and bereft of goods?
Never trust the world’s royalty!
There’s no fair recompense for loyalty.”
Then Cador hastened to interrupt:
“Sir, that is quite corrupt!
An honorable man cannot agree.
We should be willing to bend the knee
To a lord who deserves our trust –
Or otherwise when it seems we must.
We mean you only to understand
My uncle rules with a fickle hand.
Many’s the man he’s thrown in a cell
Whose virtue or guilt none could tell!
And when a dragon laid his party waste,
He wept and gibbered, all disgraced.
While I fought his battle against the beast
He cowered until it was long deceased.
We fear this match will come to grief;
There's strong foundation for that belief.
How could such a king delight
In a wife who's far more knight,
More man than he will ever be,
More noble far in all degrees?"
But Merlin, who knew how all things end,
Insisted there was no ill to mend.
“Have faith; there is no need to fret.
The doom that falls merits no regret.
True, there will be repercussions,
So fetch me Silence to join our discussion;
It seems once more I must reveal
What you honest folk have long concealed.”

Silence came straight as she was called
Though through her casement she had crawled –
Since Eufeme's lies had been believed,
The king meant not to be deceived,
So matrons watched Silence night and day
To ensure that she should never stray.
But the agile youth was far too spry
For them to notice should she fly,
So the sentinels slept on, unaware
That their charge was no longer there.
“Father, I've come as you have asked,
Though the course was a daunting task.
What need's so dire to call me out
When nothing but a matron's shout
Could rouse the king to end my life,
To draw and quarter another wife?"
Cador seized his child in his arms,
Relieved to see her safe from harm
Though her countenance was so far changed,
Much young man for girl exchanged,
Cador found himself greatly thrown
To lose the son that he had known.
“Silence, there is much to say,
And matters that we all must weigh.
Your mother and I have never said
How she came to childbed.”
At this, Merlin's mirth was unrestrained;
His laughter rang loudly, uncontained.
“The apple falls closely to the tree!
Though plain for only us to see.
Here's a daughter who was a son
Of a father who wasn't one.
Just as you were raised a man
To defeat inheritance bans
So your father chose to take
Her brother's name for adventure's sake.
When he died of pox in childhood
It couldn't do him any good."
Silence gaped and stood amazed,
Struck dumb with shock and deeply dazed.
She could not credit this revelation –
What a wild allegation!
But Merlin's eye had yet proved keen
On Silence, the nun, and the Queen,
All good reasons to pay him heed,
For all had passed as he'd decreed.
Her parents, trembling, told the story
Of how Cador had sought knight's glory,
And how he could not learn to sew,
But was better suited to slaying foe.
So when his brother passed away
His family thought it meet to say
Their daughter died and not their son.
If they could keep only one
It seemed best to give her joy
And let her be raised a boy.
But such a secret cannot be kept
From a healer even half adept;
So Eufemie found something rare
When Cador came into her care.
But this secret – which she swore to guard –
Proved not to render love disbarred.
And so these two came to wed
As Master Heldris already said,
But Malduit may add a further turn
On how the pair was then concerned
For how they should produce an heir
From both their blood in equal share.
It seemed impossible to surmount.
Nature's law appeared paramount
Until they heard of a wizard in the wild
Whose magic might help them to a child.
And Merlin gave them their desire:
let a womanly man become a sire.
At this Silence was quite undone.
“All this time I've been your son,
Borne the burden of disguise,
Alone beneath a cloak of lies,
Because it seemed to my mind
That I stood unique in kind.”
Merlin snorted at this cry;
He smiled and scoffed and rolled his eyes.
“So lament all under the sun!
Each thinking he's the only one
To bear strangeness as a brand
Like an exile in a far-flung land.
In truth there is no such creature
As one who's common in every feature.”
Merlin spoke the truth, of course,
But with a blunt, unlovely force.
Such wizards are devoid of tact,
They'll beat you bloody with the facts.
But Eufemie could see Silence was stung
So she loosed her better tutored tongue:
“Forgive that we chose long ago
To hide this truth, not let you know;
We thought you might not understand
The secrecy our life demands
When the choice was no obligation,
No kin-demanded aberration.
No law constrained us to this ploy;
It only served our private joy.
Thus we want the same for you –
honor, love, and freedom too –
In any life you might desire.
So we came here to conspire.
If you choose, we'll see you crowned,
Queenly beauty far renowned,
But if that's not a happy thought,
And you're only doing as you ought
For loyalty and duty's sake
That's not the road we'd have you take.”

Silence wavered, all unsure;
The right course seemed, at best, obscure.
And as she stood in hesitation
Nature rushed to her creation.
“How dare you stand preoccupied!
You should rejoice to be a bride!
After all the trouble I've taken
Renewing endowments you’d forsaken
I expect more gratitude
For this matchless form I have imbued
With every beauty and every grace,
Sublime flesh, and perfect face.
At last you have the life you should,
The proper rites of maidenhood,
And natural order is restored –
You're meant for spindles, not for swords!”
At first this case seemed so compelling
Silence couldn't brook rebelling.
But Nurture then arrived in haste –
Not a moment did she waste –
Eagerly she joined the fray
And argued fiercely straightaway.
“How nonsense you are speaking here!
I reared a knight who had no peer;
You'd spend that valor on distaff
When he should be the stronger half.
What fool would choose to be the slave,
Trade weak for staunch and meek for brave,
And never even contemplate
Shunning such a meager fate?
Silence, you cannot think of this!
Do not imagine wedded bliss.
Think of living fast immured,
All adventure forever abjured.
I shaped you for a greater life
Than being only someone's wife."
But this case too seemed quite correct!
The logic strong, without defect.
Silence was wracked by indecision,
Will sapped by sharp division.
Twixt gilded cage and kingly wrath
She couldn't see a possible path.
But from the shadows Reason woke,
And in a quiet voice she spoke:
"Never mind what others will.
They have they own roles to fulfill.
Think instead of what you need,
What you can't bear to concede,
Where you fit, and what you suit,
What burdens sap you to the root.
Choose to run or choose to marry,
Lift a weight you'll stand to carry
Not for a fraction, but the sum
Of all the days you've yet to come.
For Nature born or Nurture grown,
The life you lead must be your own."

Lords, what more can I say?
Reason held the greatest sway.
There was no wedding on the morrow
To the bridegroom's lasting sorrow;
Another count rose in defiance,
Gathered lords into alliance,
And well before the year was out
Ebain's armies fell to rout.
With no Silence to take his cause,
The king was harried without pause,
And last I heard he'd fled northeast,
Presuming welcome, at the least –
Though how Norway took the word
Of Eufeme's killing, I never heard.
Perhaps they sheltered, perhaps they spurned.
In any case, Ebain did not return.
And this is where my tale ends.
No further does my lore extend:
Where Silence went, none can tell.
So Malduit bids you all farewell!
Lords and ladies, one and all,
God grant you the wherewithal
To live by your own dictates,
To choose your paths, to forge your fates.
Tune out romantic troubadours,
And find a bliss that's only yours.

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