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Arthuriana, Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2008, pp. 22-40 (Article)

Published by Scriptorium Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/art.2008.0004>



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# A Stylistic Analysis of *Le Roman de Silence*

MARY ELLEN RYDER and LINDA MARIE ZAERR

Stylistic analysis can demonstrate how the *Roman de Silence* incorporates deceleration, acceleration, generic expressions, and deaths in non-realized space to diminish perception of Silence's agency. (MER, LMZ)

The ending of *Le Roman de Silence* is almost universally unsatisfying for modern readers. The thirteenth-century French romance by Heldris de Cornuälle narrates how King Ebain passes a law barring women from inheriting. To evade the law, Cadour and Eufemie raise their baby daughter as a boy, naming him Silence.<sup>1</sup> When Silence is twelve years old, Nature and Nurture struggle over him in an allegorical debate, and Silence chooses to follow Nurture, continuing to live as a man. He succeeds better than male characters in the text both as a minstrel and as a knight. The tale concludes, however, when Silence, having lived his entire life as a man, is forced by Merlin's revelation to return to his 'natural' gender role as a woman, a role for which he has no training. Furthermore, the potential satisfaction of a conventional romance ending in marriage to a king is subverted because King Ebain has consistently proven himself both unjust and ineffective. The reader's bewilderment is not anachronistic; Silence also puzzles other characters in the text. The queen, for example, is frustrated and surprised by 'la nonpossance de celui' [his powerlessness], 3875.<sup>2</sup>

Many critics have experienced an unsettling sense that Silence is both powerful and powerless. However, stylistics, a discipline with roots in both linguistics and literary criticism, may provide a fuller understanding of this bivalent perception of Silence. Stylistics employs linguistic analysis techniques to uncover systematic patterns in an author's rhetorical choices and their effects.<sup>3</sup> Silence is agentive,<sup>4</sup> yet a systematic stylistic analysis reveals that the language of the text relentlessly diminishes his perceived power. In the plot he loses male privilege abruptly at the end, but the reader is not surprised, because from the beginning, the author's choices never license his power.

Stylistic analysis is highly technical, but because it is so comprehensive, the approach tolerates some imprecision in the text. For this analysis, we use the edition by Sarah Roche-Mahdi. This edition is not without limitations: Simon Gaunt, in his review of the book, points to inaccuracies in the transcription

and over-reliance on Thorpe's edition;<sup>5</sup> and Rosalind Brown-Grant, in her review, notes typographical errors and infelicities in the translation.<sup>6</sup> Because these drawbacks do not significantly impact our broad approach, we have chosen to work with this readily accessible transcription and energetic translation, providing alternative translations where necessary.

Not surprisingly, in a text that destabilizes sex/gender categories, critics have discussed ways gender determines allocation of power. Those who see the text as an antifeminist diatribe, demonstrating that women cannot move out of their naturally determined role in society, acknowledge that the work nonetheless allows a strong voice to powerful women.<sup>7</sup> Yet those who see the work as protofeminist find troubling strains to the contrary.<sup>8</sup>

The unsettling dichotomy of perspective has been acknowledged and discussed in a variety of ways. Michelle Bolduc points out that although 'for much of the narrative *Silence* is a dynamic, active heroine, freed from the traditional roles accorded to women,' the miniatures in the manuscript consistently portray her as 'dependent and vulnerable.'<sup>9</sup> Codifying the conflicting perspectives, Lorraine Stock discusses the text as a 'primitivist manifesto.'<sup>10</sup> She argues that *Silence* 'exposes how power is allocated to and appropriated by *both* genders,' and she concludes that Merlin's laughter 'explodes the poem's allocation of power by gender.'<sup>11</sup> Christopher Callahan, too, points to destabilized notions of gender, indicating that in becoming a minstrel, *Silence* gains 'a tangible benefit in the gender blurring which characterizes lyric discourse.'<sup>12</sup> Critics do not always formulate the paradox in terms of gender. Heather Lloyd, for example, suggests, 'in a world where appearances may be deceptive, judgement can never be absolute,'<sup>13</sup> and Howard Bloch concludes that 'the *Roman de Silence* symptomizes the paradox of the poet who speaks the impossibility both of silence and of an always already dislocated speech.'<sup>14</sup>

The overall critical perspective on *Le Roman de Silence* is conflicted, but a systematic stylistic analysis may clarify certain dimensions of the character *Silence*. If one looks just at *Silence*'s actions, it is hard to see how his power can be doubted, and, indeed, Anita Lasry describes him as a heroine who is the 'center of action.'<sup>15</sup> As a young nobleman, he is required to wrestle, ride, hunt, joust, and fight with both sword and shield. Not only does *Silence* do all these things, he excels at every one of them. Moreover, he performs music better than anyone else, crushes the rebellion against King Ebain almost single handedly, and tops off his exploits by catching the notoriously elusive Merlin. How can a reader doubt *Silence*'s agency? It becomes evident that we doubt his agency because the text systematically limits and subverts the effect of *Silence*'s power on the reader/audience. In this way, the text problematizes notions of agency by privileging male, aristocratic values, and simultaneously destabilizing those values.

This bivalence contrasts markedly with contemporary texts. Karen Pratt suggests that comparison with the twelfth-century romances of Chrétien de Troyes highlights the ‘incongruities which are fundamental to the *Roman de Silence*’s comic effect.<sup>16</sup> Along these lines, a cursory comparison immediately reveals that any of Chrétien’s male heroes displays strikingly greater agency than Silence in comparable situations. More significantly for this study, thirteenth-century French romance heroines who, like Silence, disguise themselves as male minstrels, are accorded by the texts significantly more power than Silence.

At least in part an allegorical figure, Silence maintains a contradictory position in a text which claims for itself both written and oral status. Heldris consistently situates his ‘conte’ in both the world of text and the world of performance, balancing the two modes, as at the end when he asks a blessing on both the performer and the author: Beneöis soit qui le vos conte, Beneöis soit qui fist le conte. [God’s blessing on the narrator, God’s blessing on the author], 6703–04. Since a manuscript is silent and a performance is noisy, the character of Silence at the heart of the tale is by its very nature conflicted. Silence, who is a woman, becomes a man; then Silence, which can make no sound, becomes a minstrel. These contradictions consistently clash in the audience’s perception of Silence’s power, his ability to act in male dominated and performance dominated contexts.

Stylistics has isolated many factors that contribute to a character’s perceived power. Some of them have to do with the type of events in which the character participates. Agents in events involving an irreversible and obvious change of state, such as creation or destruction, will be seen as far more powerful than those in events creating a short-term reversible change. The two counts, when they kill each other, are more powerful agents than the king when he wrings his hands over Cador’s illness. Likewise, agents who change the state of another entity that is their equal or superior in power will be perceived as far more powerful, at least in terms of male-dominated cultural values, than those acting on passive, inanimate objects or on themselves. Cador, when he kills the dragon, is more powerful than Silence when he dyes his face or roasts meat. In short, the most powerful agents are those who create a serious or permanent change in an equal or superior. There are 462 references to Silence as an actor or agent in the text, but in only fifteen percent of these (seventy) does Silence effect a serious change on an equal or more powerful entity.

At least equally significant in affecting the perception of power is the quantity of the text devoted to a given event, which determines the pace of the narrative, defined as the relationship ‘between duration in the story (measured in minutes, hours, days, months, years) and the length of text devoted to it (in lines and pages)...’<sup>17</sup> Authors may either decelerate the pace so that the time it takes to read about an event proportionately equals or

even exceeds the duration of the event (as when the queen attempts to seduce Silence) or they may accelerate the pace so that the reading time is far shorter than the duration of the event (as when Silence plays *vielle*). Changes in the pace of a narrative have powerful effects on the reader. Narrative theorist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan observes, ‘acceleration and deceleration are often evaluated by the reader as indicators of importance and centrality. Ordinarily, the more important events...are given in detail (i.e. decelerated), whereas the less important ones are compressed (i.e. accelerated).’<sup>18</sup>

Deceleration works in two ways to increase the perceived importance of an event. First, simply slowing down the flow of information slows down the reader’s construction of the event, thereby foregrounding it, much as slow motion in a film emphasizes the importance of a situation. Second, when more text is devoted to an event, more details are generally given, allowing the reader to visualize and remember the event more vividly.<sup>19</sup> Surprisingly few of the events in which Silence is highly agentive are decelerated in this way. The slowest pace for an event in which Silence takes an important agentive role occurs when Silence fights with the Count of Chester during the rebellion, 5584–5633. Yet even this key event occupies only 50 lines. On the other hand, the queen’s first attempted seduction of Silence, 3743–3895, in which Silence plays an honorable but hardly powerful role, is given three times as much text (153 lines). Heldris thus consistently avoids using deceleration to narrate events where Silence engages in combat, yet applies it during scenes such as the seduction where Silence takes little initiative. The audience thus spends more time experiencing a Silence who is acted upon by others than a silence who initiates action himself.

Deceleration is also conspicuously absent in descriptions of Silence’s minstrelsy. While singing and playing instruments is not highly agentive, minstrels can play powerful roles in medieval texts because their performance may have a crucial role in the cause-effect chain: for example, Fresne, disguised as a male minstrel, reveals herself to her lover by harping a *lai* in *Galeran de Bretagne*, and Tristan wins Isolde back from Gandin by harping a *lai* in *Tristan*.<sup>20</sup> If any of Silence’s minstrelsy has such an effect, we are not directly informed of it. The ‘longest’ stretch of continuous text about a single performance by Silence appears to be four lines expressed in very general terms describing his arrival with the minstrels at the court of the Duke of Burgundy:

Puis sont as estrumens venu.  
 Silences i est plus eslis  
 Que il ne soient, et joïs,  
 Qu’en lui ot moult bon menestrel

[They proceeded to play their instruments. Silence was more sought after than they were, and enjoyed greater success, for he was a very fine minstrel] 3218–21.

The passage is so general that it is difficult to determine how much of it refers to a specific performance and how much to his performances in general. Moreover, in the subsequent description of his abilities in general, aside from being told that he plays harp and *vielle* well, and that he knows many ‘*bials dis*’ [beautiful stories], 3231, we are given no specific details about his performances; we do not know the particular *lais* he performs nor do we hear of his preparation for performance. At a subsequent feast, occupying 124 lines, when we know logically that Silence must be performing, there is no explicit statement that he is performing.

The passage describing the minstrels’ first performance in Cornwall stands in sharp contrast:

Li uns viiele un lai berton, Et li altres harpe Gueron. Puis font une altre atempreüre Et font des estrumens mesture. Si font ensamble un lai Mabon—  
Celui tient on encor a bon. S’en ist si dolce melodie

[One fiddled a Breton *lai*; the other harped ‘Gueron.’ Then they chose a different rhythm [tuning or mode] and played their instruments together. Together they played the ‘Lai Mabon’—this is still a popular piece. They produced such sweet melodies] 2761–67.

Although only seven lines are explicitly devoted to the minstrels’ performance, the passage is highly detailed, including specific features of three *lais*, the instruments the minstrels play, their tuning, and the order in which the *lais* are performed. The passage highlights Helderis’s contrasting treatment of Silence; by choosing not to use deceleration and description for Silence’s minstrelsy, the poet diminishes its impact.<sup>21</sup> When Silence logically must be performing, we experience only the other two minstrels’ response, not the performance itself.

Although not considered a type of deceleration, frequency is another way to increase the impact of an event. Frequency is simply the repeated reference to an event at multiple points in the story before and/or after the event actually takes place.<sup>22</sup> These repeated references are often quite brief, creating a minimal effect on the reader, but when mentioned beforehand, they serve as foreshadowing, and when mentioned afterwards, they serve to prime the event, that is, to bring it temporarily back to the foreground of the reader’s representation of the actions.<sup>23</sup> This type of repetition is common in medieval romance, and Helderis uses the device frequently; it is interesting to note, however, the distribution of such repetitions. Cadour’s killing of the dragon, for example, is mentioned seven times before it happens,

and seventeen times after it happens, the last occurrence being almost 700 lines after the event (line 1212). Even Eufemie's ability to cure Cador after the dragon killing is mentioned twice before the event and ten times after the event, the last one being 600 lines later, 1236. Thus, these events are continually re-primed, bringing back into focus Cador's and Eufemie's power and agency. The frequency of Silence's actions is significantly different. His most agentive deeds, those during the rebellion, though referred to afterwards thirteen times, are not mentioned even once before the battle takes place. His most frequently repeated actions (seventy-three times) are those involving his capture of Merlin, including his preparations for the trip, Merlin's entrapment, and their trip back to court. None of these actions evidence a high level of agency since Silence is forced to set out on the trip, instructed how to trap Merlin (and provided with supplies), and never challenged by Merlin on the trip back. Thus, in contrast with other characters in the text, Silence's most often primed undertaking, his capture of Merlin, is one of his least agentive as it unfolds in the text, while references to his most powerful actions are seldom repeated.

The author's sparse application of deceleration and frequency in describing Silence's activities works to prejudice the reader against viewing Silence as a powerful figure. At the same time, the text makes extensive use of acceleration to decrease the impact of events in which Silence is agentive. Acceleration, the reverse of deceleration, is accomplished, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan reminds us, 'by devoting a short segment of the text to a long period of the story.'<sup>24</sup> By making the reading time far less than the actual duration of the event, the author limits the amount of time the reader spends processing the event, and, by generally providing fewer details, the author makes visualization more difficult and thus weakens the reader's memory trace for the event. The ultimate in acceleration is a *generic expression*.<sup>25</sup> This term is borrowed from linguistics,<sup>26</sup> where it refers to sentences which describe situations generalized across participants, locations and times, such as 'Li buen, li biel el siecle muerent' [The good and the beautiful die young in this world], 2137.

Generic expressions form a continuum; as the number of events or situations referred to in a generic expression increases, the amount of attention the reader can devote to considering each one decreases. As a result, the more generic the expression, the more accelerated the events covered by it will be. For example, 'cuers s'est une creature / Mervelles d'estrangle nature' [The human heart is a creature that has a strange and peculiar nature], 2667–68, encompasses in one sentence all possible situations involving any heart; the generality of the words makes it impossible for the reader to create a clear visualization of any one situation. The less generic statement 'En feme a grant desmesurance / Quant ire le sorporte et vaint' [When a woman is dominated

by rage, she is completely out of control], 3918–19, decreases the number of events covered to include all women (but not men or children) when they are angry; still, it is too general to be easily visualized. Even for some of the least generic expressions like ‘Li senescals por essaucier / Et por aprendre a chevalcier / Le mainne en bos et en rivieres’ [In order to build up his [Silence’s] endurance and teach him to ride, the seneschal took him through woods and streams], 2469–71, which limits events to only those involving both Silence and the seneschal engaging in the same activity, the number of events referred to is still too large to visualize very effectively. Each of these three sentences demonstrates the common pattern: as the sentence becomes less generic, it becomes more detailed. Thus, whenever a text provides generic expressions, both the events described and their participants will have a muted impact on the reader.

About twenty-five percent of references to Silence’s actions (117 of 462) are generic to some degree, which is about the same proportion as for other characters’ actions (twenty-four percent, 137 of 578). For two of Silence’s most important activities, however, fighting and minstrelsy, the percentage of references that are generic is significantly higher. Of the sixty-eight references to Silence’s fighting, over half are generic (just over fifty-four percent); and of the twenty-five references to minstrelsy, twenty are generic (eighty percent). Thus, fifty lines of text describe Silence’s battle with the count fairly specifically, but most of the rest of his participation in the battle is expressed generically. These textual features show considerable range in the level of generality. For example, ‘Sor ces helmes fait retentir / Son brant, que il lor fait sentir’ [He made them feel the weight of his sword and made their helmets resound with the blows], 5543–44, describes only one agent, but multiple actions against multiple enemies. More generically, the passage ‘Silence en l’ost est d’altre part. / O ses François fait grant essart.’ [Silence was on the other side of the fray, mowing down the foe with his Frenchmen], 5521–22, describes multiple agents performing multiple actions against multiple enemies. Most generically, ‘le guerre fine’ [he won the war], 5647, while describing one agent, reduces all of his actions to a single, highly general proposition.

The effect of the generic expressions becomes more evident when compared to Chrétien’s narration of Lancelot’s battles. As just one example, even when Lancelot is torn between two allegorical figures, Pitiez and Largece, and even when he does not end up killing his opponent, his action is specific and energetic:

que cil par le hiaume le sache,  
 si que trestoz les laz an tranche:  
 la vantaille et la coiffe blanche  
 li abat de la teste jus

[The other (Lancelot) grabbed him by the helmet,  
Tearing off all the fastenings:  
The ventail and the white coif  
He struck from off his head].<sup>27</sup>

Silence's actions are never so decelerated and specific.

The text describing Silence's career as a minstrel for the most part shows even more severe acceleration. The first three years are compressed into four lines:

Il a des estrumens apris,  
Car moult grant travail i a mis,  
Qu'ains que li tiers ans fust passés  
A il ses maistres tols passés

[he learned to play instruments so well, he put such effort into it, that before the end of the third year, he had completely surpassed his masters] 3139–42.

Once or twice a single performance is given an entire sentence, such as 'Dont prent sa harpe et sa viiele, / Si note avoec a sa vois viiele' [Then he took his harp and vielle and sang beautifully as he played], 3521–22, but even this does not allow clear visualization of Silence. While Silence might easily play both harp and vielle in the course of one performance, we are denied a specific image of Silence performing because it is not possible to play both harp and vielle simultaneously. Most often his whole career as a minstrel is compressed into a single noun phrase, as when he is described as 'En son mestier si tres vallans' [such an accomplished musician], 3186, or 'moult bon menestrel' [a very fine minstrel], 3221.<sup>28</sup> Thus, two of Silence's most important types of activities, fighting and performing music, are relatively rarely mentioned, and when mentioned, are described using generic expressions which are brief and lacking in specificity. Thus the text privileges fighting and performing music as significant activities by detailing characters' desire to excel in them and describing positive responses to excellence, but simultaneously it denies Silence extensive participation in those activities by refusing to allow the reader/audience to see him engaged in them.

While a character's perceived power is to a large extent governed by the types of events that he or she participates in and the description of those events, it is also significantly affected by a character's intentionality. Independent of how agentive an action is, an intentional action conveys more power in the doer than an unintentional one. For example, many of the queen's actions are not highly agentive; she spends most of her time talking, arranging her clothes, or writing letters. Yet these actions are intentional, done on her own initiative, and, perhaps even more important, they are crucial parts of the plot's main cause-effect chain. Silence's actions

contrast sharply with the queen's. At the most generous interpretation, of all the references to Silence's actual actions in the text (347), barely more than a quarter (ninety-three) refer to actions that Silence both wants to do and does without being ordered to do. Examples of such actions include his preparations for following the minstrels, as when 'Sa sele met et bel s'atorn' [He equips himself well and saddles (his beautiful hunter)], 2876; and his returning home from Burgundy, when he 'Al duc prent congié de sa voie, / Et passe la mer d'Engletierre' [He took leave of the duke, was on his way, and crossed the English Channel], 3482–83. Moreover, of these ninety-three highly independent actions, more than half (forty-eight) are framed as generic expressions, furthering weakening their effect, as in 'Silence remaint a sejour / Avoec le duc a grant honor' [Silence stayed on a while as a highly valued member of the ducal household], 3478–79, a statement which summarizes in one sentence a large and varied group of Silence's activities, such as singing, playing, eating, and conversing with guests.

How can Silence's intentionality be so subverted? Heldris's text accomplishes this by cleverly balancing two independent factors: 1) whether or not Silence wants or is willing to act, and 2) whether or not he is ordered to act. For example, Silence seems to have enjoyed the activities of his boyhood, such as wrestling, hunting, jousting, and riding through the forest, and he voices no objection to wearing boys' clothing necessary to do these things. These positive attitudes are summed up in the statement 'Il a us d'ome tant usé / Et cel de feme refusé / Que poi en falt que il n'est malles' [He was so used to men's usage and had so rejected women's ways that little was lacking for him to be a man], 2475–77. Yet we know that he is living according to 'us d'ome' only on the general command of his parents and guardians (For example, 'Moult le castie biel li pere / Et alsî fait sovent la mere, Li senescals et la norice.' [The father gave him much good advice, as did the mother often, and the seneschal and the nurse], 2463–65, or in response to quite specific instructions (as when the seneschal 'Le mainne en bos et en rivieres' [took him through woods and streams], 2471). Later, when Silence is living at the court of the King of France, the text specifies that he enjoys living as a man: 'Silences ne se repent rien / De son usage, ains l'ainme bien' [Silence had no regrets about his upbringing, in fact, he loved it], 5177–78. However, as with his childhood activities, he is at the French court because he has been ordered to go there.

Along similar lines, even though it is likely that Silence wants to come home again, this is never overtly stated. It is only in response to the command of the King of France that he leaves. 'Le rois fait Silence atorner / Ki plus ne violt la sejourner' [The king commanded Silence to make ready, and [therefore] Silence no longer wished to remain], 5275–76.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, we are left in no doubt that Silence enjoys at least some aspects of the ensuing

battle with the count of Chester: 'Silences n'a soig de juër: / Ne violt pas le guerre atriüer [Silence didn't feel like fooling around, he didn't want to stop fighting], 5639–40. Yet the only reason he is in the battle in the first place is that King Ebain has summoned him to fight. Even Silence's decision to run away to join the minstrels, the one major action he undertakes completely on his own initiative, and clearly something he wants to do, is a decision that subsequently requires him to spend most of his efforts, certainly in all the activities actually mentioned, in obeying the minstrels' orders: going wherever they decide to go, learning to play from them, generally serving them (an activity mentioned twenty-three times), and performing at their or their audiences' command. While any young person is bound to spend time under the control of others, in this case it is not balanced by descriptions of actions done on his own initiative.

The inverse of these actions in which Silence is a willing subordinate are those in which Silence does something on his own initiative, but unwillingly. These occur as small actions embedded in larger undertakings he has been commanded to carry out. In taking the letter to France and searching for Merlin, he is required to make travel preparations, undertake the journey, and find his way without being specifically told how to do these things. But even this limited intentionality is muted because the references to these goal-oriented activities are generally very brief. For example, 'Plus tost qu'il pot passe la mer / Et si s'en vient tolt droit en France' [He crossed the sea as soon as he could and thus went directly to France], 4380–81. In addition, the text often emphasizes the fact that he is performing these tasks very reluctantly, as when 'Cil n'i ose plus sejourner...Si s'en ist plorant de la porte [Silence didn't dare postpone his departure...(He) went forth weeping], 4370, 4372. His reluctance is particularly apparent when he sets out to trap Merlin:

Silence n'a poi[n]t de respit.  
 Vait a son ostel, si s'atorne,  
 Monte el cheval et seuls s'en torne,  
 Pensius et tristres, tolt plorant'  
 Et Dameldeu sovent orant  
 Que il son travail li aliege

[Silence hadn't a moment's reprieve. He went to his room, got his things together, mounted his horse and went off alone, pensive and sad, weeping bitterly, and praying frequently to God to ease his burden] (5856–61)

Thus, though he carries out several specific actions on his own initiative (going to his room, preparing for the trip, mounting his horse, and setting off), these actions have little impact on our perception of his power because they are ancillary activities necessary for a larger task he is forced to carry out against his will.

Moreover, the greatest subversion of Silence's intentionality and initiative takes place at exactly the moment he could so easily have been depicted as having a great deal of each: when he is about to capture Merlin. Instead of portraying him as independently devising and carrying out a successful entrapment, Heldris has him accomplish this feat by slavishly following the highly detailed directions given him by someone else, who may in fact be the victim (5938–95).<sup>30</sup> Point for point, Silence does exactly as the old man has instructed him.

Silence's intentionality is further vitiated by the fact that, although his *actions* are usually crucial to the plot, his *intentions* connected with those actions are irrelevant to the advancement of the plot. This contrasts with the actions of the queen, almost all of which are on the main cause-effect chain. For example, Silence doesn't choose to excel at minstrelsy in order to make the other minstrels jealous, but their jealousy and its results are vital to the plot. Likewise, the queen's passion for Silence and her subsequent actions are key in the development of the story, yet the causes of this passion are either not under his control (for example, his physical beauty), or are the result of his general desire to excel in all activities. Certainly, he does not fight, sing, or play well in order to attract the queen; quite the reverse!

Finally, intentionality may also involve a character's *negative intentions*, that is, an active desire to resist doing something. At several critical points in the story, Silence is coerced into doing something he does not want to do. When he first realizes the queen is trying to seduce him, he tries, at first unsuccessfully, to get away: 'De li s'estorst et si s'en lieve, / Et la roïne le rahert' [He twisted free of her grasp and staggered to his feet, but the queen hung on to him], 3880–81, and when he does escape, it is because she releases him, 'Atant le lasse et cil s'en vait' [And then she let go of the youth and he left], 3895. After this traumatic experience, he is determined not to return to her chamber, but in the end he does:

Mais il i entrera encore  
 A se moult grant male aventure.  
 Por quant s'afice bien et jure  
 Que por plain bacin de deniers  
 N'i enterroit le mois entiers

[But he will enter it again, at terrible cost to himself, even though he swore that he wouldn't go there again for a whole month, not even for a basketful of money] 3964–68.

When Silence finally does go back to the queen's chamber, she locks him in, and he is unable to escape before the king returns.

Not content simply downplaying Silence's power in subtle but pervasive ways, the romance narrative also goes to extraordinary and obvious lengths

to underscore his passivity. This is achieved in two ways. First, seventy-two lines describe in detail how Nature created Silence in the first place. This is, of course, an example of decelerating a critical event; but it is also significant in that it demotes Silence to the status of created object, a work of Nature's art. This objectification is strengthened by the extended similes and metaphors interspersed throughout this section comparing Nature's ability to create people to a baker making bread, 1805–22, or to a potter molding clay, 1828–39, 1887–99.

Second, although the text spends a great deal of time on the creation of Silence, the narrative's most spectacular device for rendering Silence powerless is to make him the victim of highly violent, irreversible events. Of course, these violent events are restricted to certain kinds of mental spaces, a concept developed by linguist Gilles Fauconnier and stylistician Paul Werth.<sup>31</sup> In even the most ordinary kind of language use, people create numerous mental spaces to which they assign various characters and events. Mental spaces include such things as dreams, paintings, stories, perceptions, memories, beliefs, plans, desires, and impersonations. Clearly, events in some of these spaces are not to be considered real, but they all have an impact on the reader/listener's construction of a narrative. To be precise, Silence 'dies' ninety-four times in the text, nearly three times more often than all of the other characters combined (thirty-six). Although these ninety-four deaths all occur in non-real mental spaces, their cumulative effect strongly colors the audience's perception of Silence.

Most of these imagined or potential 'deaths' (sixty-six) are described very generally, as when the minstrels plot to kill him ('Voelent l'enfant livrer a perte' [they wanted to murder the youth], 3346), when he fears for his life ('se jo ma vie perc chi' [If I lose my life here], 3546), and when the French fear he might die ('cho iert pechiés, / Qu'il iert deffais et depechiés' [it will be a pity, for the youth will be executed], 4405–06).

Many references to Silence dying, however, are more specific, making them more easily visualized and remembered. In the hopes, fears, and plans of other characters, and in his own fears and dreams, Silence is hanged nine times, beheaded seven times, burned to death four times, drowned four times, has his neck broken twice, and is torn apart twice by wild animals. Besides all these non-realized killings, Silence 'dies' eight times before he is even christened, and is at least seriously injured in non-real spaces another twenty-four times. To hasten the baptism, Silence's parents claim he is about to die, and this news is reiterated. '[P]artolt tresvole la noviele / Que l'enfes muert' [The news spread rapidly everywhere that the child was dying], 2127–28. The minstrels plot to kill him vividly and repeatedly. For example, 'Sans caperon li ferons cape, / Car le cief perdra al trebuc' [We'll make him a cape without a hood, for he'll lose his head in our trap], 3326–27. The townspeople and

Silence's parents express regret that he will have to die for entering Cornwall as a minstrel. 'Com il a, las, povre sejour, / Car il pendra demain sor jor' [What a pity he'll be here for such a short time—for he'll hang tomorrow morning], 3531–32. The queen frequently threatens Silence with death or asks Ebain to have him killed, sometimes suggesting alternative forms of death: 'Ardoir, u a chevals detraire?' ['Burn him? Have him torn apart by wild horses?'], 4231. The King of France and his advisors extensively discuss the letter requesting that Silence be killed, and the Count of Blois suggests that after a period of time, the King might without blame 'le fait... pendre / U il le fait ardoir en fame' [have him hanged or burned at the stake], 4578–79.

The fact that none of these events actually takes place, however, does not negate their overall effect on the reader. In reading about any event, a reader must create a mental representation of it simply to comprehend the text, thus creating a long-term record in memory.<sup>32</sup> Even for events the reader knows to be non-realized in the narrative at the time of reading about them, the very act of having to construct a representation of the event in order to negate it leaves a memory trace.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, if events must be considered as at least possible at the time of reading or hearing, the audience has no choice but to keep these possibilities alive in memory until they are realized or not.<sup>34</sup> If non-realized or possible events are inserted into a text only once or twice, the effect on the audience's perceptions will be negligible, but when these non-realized events are pervasive, they not only create a strong potential activity in the plot, but may also affect audience perception of the characters involved.<sup>35</sup> Almost all of the moments and utterances in which Silence is 'killed' (eighty-eight out of ninety-four) must be considered possible future events at the moment they are presented in the text and, furthermore, Silence's life is uncertain until he is unmasked. As a result, these 'deaths' are repeatedly primed until the very end of the story. Thus, even though none of the multiple representations of Silence as mortal victim actually occurs, they still play a strong role in weakening his perceived agency by representing him as a victim.

The only other major category of non-realized events in the text refers to Silence having either consensual or forced sex with the queen (fifty-five). When the queen urges Silence to have sexual intercourse with her or claims that he has attempted to rape her, the text creates a mental representation of those two activities. Because these actions portray an agentic Silence, references to them should mitigate the perception of Silence as a victim created by his 'deaths.' That this does not happen is at least partly because the majority of them (thirty-seven) are consensual, in which presumably the partners share agency; but there is a more fundamental difference between the sexual acts and the deaths. Whereas Silence's death, though represented in non-realized spaces, remains a possibility to the end of the story, the reader

knows at the time of reading that the seduction events cannot be real within the heteronormative framework of the non-real mental space they inhabit. The actions involving sexual intercourse cannot happen because Silence is biologically female, and the other ancillary actions which involve Silence tearing the queen's clothes or even beating her are lies presented by the queen after the actual, and very different, narrative events have been described.

These primary effects of the non-realized events in *Silence* are easily described, but the poet's manipulation of what is real in the narrative and what is not has other more subtle effects. Readers of extended narratives have to create and constantly update a character trace for each participant in the text.<sup>36</sup> Typically the trace for a major character will include abundant detail, development over time, and participation (active or passive) in many or most of the plot's agentive actions. In general, a reader will construct only one character trace for each character. At first glance, it seems that a reader or hearer of *Silence* will have six main character traces to construct (King Ebain, Queen Eufeme, Cadour, Eufemie, Silence, and Merlin), along with a number of secondary traces for people like the seneschal, the minstrels, and the King of France. In some instances, however, a reader is forced to keep separate character traces for a single character if that character is leading a double life of some sort, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Since so much of this poetic narrative involving Silence slides back and forth between realized and non-realized actions and roles, it is more reasonable for the reader to maintain at least three separate character traces for Silence: one for Silence the female, one for Silence the honorable (male) knight and minstrel, and one for Silence the dishonorable (male) knight who tries to rape the queen.

In one sense, the character trace for the female Silence is the only real one. However, this is not intuitively satisfying; the trace for Silence the honorable knight seems far more real. Why is this? First of all, aside from simple biological facts, we have almost no information to put into our character trace for the female Silence: she is born, then is submerged, or at least remains dormant, until the end of the story when she is unmasked. We have no opportunity to see her development *as a woman* (strictly speaking), since the story ends right where her life as a woman starts. In contrast, the trace for Silence the honorable knight/minstrel is long and detailed, from his hasty, stress-filled baptism to his triumphal return with Merlin, including almost half (forty-five) of the ninety-four non-real deaths. Furthermore, this character develops over time. Silence the dishonorable knight, on the other hand, does not change over time, but the trace for this character contains more detail than the one for a female Silence. The dishonorable knight trace also includes forty-nine of the ninety-four 'deaths' he undergoes.

In short, if for each character trace we examine the number of details offered, the degree of development of the character, and the percentage of agentive events, the honorable knight persona is clearly the main character trace for Silence. All the realized events in the story belong to a male character trace rather than a female one. And this sense is supported by the fact that Silence is consistently referred to using masculine pronouns and adjectives in the narrative, not only by other characters, who honestly believe he is male, but even by the omniscient narrator and by Silence himself. In this way, dichotomies of gender categories, instead of being reinforced, are challenged by the simultaneity of perspectives. The character trace we are forced to acknowledge as the most accurate is undeveloped, while the trace we know from the beginning to be biologically non-real becomes realized in the text in ways that cannot be negated by logical dismissal.

Because the audience is so encouraged to accept the male knight character trace as the 'real' Silence, the extraordinary number of non-realized deaths serve a second purpose aside from decreasing Silence's perceived power: namely, they foreshadow a 'real' death at the end of the story. The Silence who is killed in all these non-realized mental spaces is, in fact, one or the other of the Silences who is not entirely realized in the first place: the honorable minstrel/knight or the refuser/molestor of the queen. Thus all these non-realized deaths foreshadow the actual death of power and even identity that Silence experiences at the end of the poem. This is why, while the poem leaves its audience dissatisfied, it does not leave them surprised.

To conclude: the *Roman de Silence* incorporates language that consistently diminishes the audience's perception of Silence's power.<sup>37</sup> Only fifteen percent of the references to Silence as an actor or agent are actually highly agentive. Throughout the text, deceleration inflates events in which Silence is an object or product of another's action, but acceleration reduces the impact of the few events where he is agentive. Generic expressions also dilute our perception of his power; when Silence fights male adversaries, he is often represented as just one of many. Finally, when he does act, it is most frequently at the command of someone else, and he often acts unwillingly or his actions bring about results he does not intend. However the text goes beyond making Silence seem weak as an actor; it renders him a passive victim by causing him to be killed ninety-four times in the audience's mind, albeit in non-realized space. Though the deaths are never literally carried out, they contribute to our sense of his powerlessness. Stylistic analysis thus illuminates and strengthens the bivalent representation of Silence, and in so doing, establishes beyond reasonable doubt that the contradictory portrayal of the hero is fundamental because it is so undeniably systematic.

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## NOTES

- 1 It has become conventional to use masculine pronouns to refer to *Silence* because other characters in the text, the narrator, and *Silence* all do so.
- 2 Our translation. Except where indicated (as here), all quotations and translations of *Le Roman de Silence* are from Heldris de Cornuälle, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992 and 1999).
- 3 For a survey of the field of stylistics, see Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short, *Style in Fiction* (London: Longman, 1981) and Mick Short, *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose* (London: Longman, 1996).
- 4 Terms associated with agency have complex ramifications in literary criticism. For this discussion, we are adopting the standard usage in the fields of linguistics and stylistics. A strong agent is a person who intentionally creates a permanent change in another entity. To the extent that the situation in which a person participates departs from this, the person will generally be perceived as less agentive. For further explanation and justification of this usage, see William Croft, 'The Structure of Events and the Structure of Language,' in *The New Psychology of Language: Cognitive and Functional Approaches to Language Structure*, ed. Michael Tomasello (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), pp. 67–92; and Mary Ellen Ryder, 'Smoke and Mirrors: Event Patterns in the Discourse Structure of a Romance Novel,' *Journal of Pragmatics* 31 (1999): 1067–80.
- 5 Simon Gaunt, review of Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, *Medium Aevum* 63.1 (Spring 1994): 146–47.
- 6 Rosalind Brown-Grant, review of Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, *Modern Language Review* 90.4 (Oct. 1995): 995–96.
- 7 Simon Gaunt argues that 'Heldris's text expresses fear of women disguised as misogyny,' but much of his discussion is concerned with the ways in which 'Silence's success as a knight serves to articulate precisely what the poet ostensibly seeks to repress, that is, that women may indeed have the ability to take on the cultural role of men,' 'The Significance of Silence,' *Paragraph: The Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group* 13.2 (1990): 203 [202–16]. Sarah Roche-Mahdi, while suggesting that the author may not support traditional gender roles, demonstrates that Merlin's 'function is to reintegrate *Silence* into her "natural" social role as daughter, wife and mother.' Though *Silence* is

- ‘subversive, secularizing,’ nonetheless ‘[t]he exceptional woman who crossdresses and outperforms men is no solution,’ ‘A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*,’ *Arthuriana* 12.1 (2002): 9, 19, 20 [6–21]. Both find convincing evidence of a powerful woman, yet ultimately conclude that the text demonstrates the triumph of Nature in determining social roles according to gender.
- 8 Kathleen Brahney sees *Silence* as ‘a positive, forceful portrait of womanhood which runs counter to the misogynistic tide of much of thirteenth-century French literature.’ She sees the ending as a triumph, in that *Silence* becomes a queen and ‘restores to all women the right to inherit,’ yet she acknowledges that Ebain ‘is clearly not, from our perspective, worthy of her,’ ‘When *Silence* was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*,’ in *Spirit of the Court: Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, Toronto 1983*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 54, 60 [52–61]. Anita Lasry sees *Silence* as a model of behavior for women, encouraging them to pursue advanced studies, but she remarks, ‘Unfortunately...tradition discouraged the education of women,’ and she cites Paul’s injunction to women to ‘be in silence,’ concluding that ‘Silence...has proved that women can pursue advanced studies and at the same time “be in silence” or exhibit an exemplary feminine behavior,’ ‘The Ideal Heroine in Medieval Romances: A Quest for a Paradigm,’ *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 32 (1985): 241 [227–43].
  - 9 Michelle Bolduc, ‘Images of Romance: The Miniatures of *Le Roman de Silence*,’ *ARTHURIANA* 12.1 (2002): 58 [101–12].
  - 10 Lorraine Kochanske Stock, ‘The Importance of Being Gender “Stable”: Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence*,’ *ARTHURIANA* 7.2 (1997): 27 [7–34].
  - 11 Stock, ‘Importance,’ 7, 25.
  - 12 Christopher Callahan, ‘Lyric Discourse and Female Vocality: On the Unsilencing of *Silence*,’ *ARTHURIANA* 12.1 (2002): 123 [123–31].
  - 13 Heather Lloyd, ‘The Triumph of Pragmatism—Reward and Punishment in *Le Roman de Silence*,’ in *Rewards and Punishments in the Arthurian Romances and Lyric Poetry of Mediaeval France* (Cambridge, UK: Brewer, 1987), p. 88 [77–88].
  - 14 Howard R. Bloch, ‘Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère,’ *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986): 99 [81–99].
  - 15 Lasry, ‘Ideal Heroine,’ p. 227.
  - 16 Karen Pratt, ‘Humour in the *Roman de Silence*,’ *Arthurian Literature* 19 (2003): 87 [87–103].
  - 17 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 52. For a discussion of pace and related matters see also Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).
  - 18 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 56.
  - 19 See Margaret W. Matlin, *Cognition*, 2nd. edn. (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1989).

- 20 *Jean Renart: Galeran de Bretagne*, ed. Lucien Foulet (Paris: Champion, 1925); *Gottfried von Strassburg: Tristan*, ed. Rüdiger Krohn, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980). Both of these texts date from the early thirteenth century. Similarly, in *Daurel et Beton: A Critical Edition of the Old Provençal Epic Daurel et Beton*, ed. Arthur S. Kimmel (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), Daurel's performance reveals that he is a nobleman; in the chantefable *Aucassin et Nicolette*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Champion, 1982), Nicolette effects a reunion with Aucassin through a performance with *vielle*. Many more such examples could be cited, demonstrating the efficacy of contemporary heroes (both male and female) disguised as minstrels in accomplishing something significant to the plot through their performance. Silence's performances, in contrast, only succeed in arousing the envy of the other minstrels or the desire of the queen, results Silence neither intends nor desires.
- 21 For an illustration of how performance heightens the contrast between the minstrels' performance in Cornwall and Silence's performance at the court of the Duke of Burgundy, see a video of Linda Marie Zaerr's recitation with *vielle* at <http://wilde.its.nyu.edu/mednar/>.
- 22 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 56–57.
- 23 Catherine Emmott, *Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 123.
- 24 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 53.
- 25 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, following Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), briefly discusses a similar notion as *iterative repetition*, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 58.
- 26 See Angela Downing and Philip Locke, *A University Course in English Grammar* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 433–35.
- 27 Text and translation from Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart*, ed. and trans. William W. Kibler (New York: Garland, 1984), 2906–2909.
- 28 In fact, reducing an action or series of actions to a noun phrase, as has been done here, further minimizes the perception of the action as a realized event. This is an example of the kind of process Michael Halliday calls grammatical metaphor, *Functional Grammar*, 2nd. ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), pp. 342–53.
- 29 Our translation.
- 30 Sarah Roche-Mahdi ('Reappraisal') convincingly argues that the old man who instructs Silence is in fact Merlin.
- 31 Gilles Fauconnier, *Mental Spaces* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and *Mappings in Thought and Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Paul Werth, *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* (London: Longman, 1999). For further stylistic approaches to this phenomenon, see also Elena Semino, 'Possible Worlds and Mental Spaces in Hemingway's "A Very Short Story,"' in *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, ed. Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 83–98; and Joanna Gavins, 'Too Much Blague? An Exploration of the Text Worlds of Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*,

- in *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, ed. Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 129–44.
- 32 For a psycholinguistic discussion of this, see Marcel Adam Just and Patricia A. Carpenter, *The Psychology of Reading and Language Comprehension* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987), pp. 195–223). Catherine Emmott, *Narrative Comprehension*, pp. 103–32, provides a multi-disciplinary account.
- 33 See Just and Carpenter, *Psychology*, pp. 183–84.
- 34 Emmott, *Narrative Comprehension*, pp. 150–51.
- 35 Ryder, ‘Smoke and Mirrors.’
- 36 Mary Ellen Ryder, ‘I Met Myself Coming and Going: Co(?)-referential Noun Phrases and Point of View in Time Travel Stories,’ *Language and Literature* 12 (2003): 213 [213–32]. Ryder develops the concept of a *character trace* based on Catherine Emmott’s model, *Narrative Comprehension*, pp. 103–32.
- 37 This study suggests how stylistics might be used to elucidate the text further. There are intriguing correspondences with Sarah Roche-Mahdi’s discussion of Merlin, ‘Reappraisal’; Katie Keene’s treatment of Queen Eufeme, “Cherchez Eufeme”: The Evil Queen in *Le Roman de Silence*,” *ARTHURIANA* 14.3 (2004): 3–22; and Sharon Kinoshita elucidation of the feudal politics of the poem, ‘Heldris de Cornuälle’s *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage,’ *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 397–409.