NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE *ROMAN DE SILENCE*: LESSONS IN INTERPRETATION

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ONE of the most entertaining and provocative qualities of the thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence* is the author's sophisticated use of a not so sophisticated narrator. Heldris de Cornuälle gives his audience multiple levels of meaning to sort out, as he makes his curmudgeonly narrator recount the adventures of a young man named Silence, the best knight in the world, who faces political and personal conflicts partly because of a secret: underneath his armor Silence is a girl. In both modern English and the original Old French, to speak about Silence is to confront the inadequacies of a gendered language. I follow the narrator's convention by referring to Silence with masculine pronouns whenever he dresses as male, and with feminine pronouns in the few passages where she is perceived as female. The romance does not offer such a solution to the dilemma of which pronoun to use to for the narrator, the primary character discussed in this article. I choose the masculine pronoun advisedly, because the text's twice-mentioned attribution to "Maistre[s] Heldris" seems to refer to the narrator in line 6684, though to the author in line 1. Unknown aside from the single manuscript of the *Roman de Silence*, the author Heldris draws material from the Lives of cross-dressed female saints such as Pelagia, Eugenia and Marina, and from vernacular romances such as the *Roman d'Eneas*, *Dolopathos/ Les Sept Sages de Rome*, and the *Estoire Merlin* (Roche-Mahdi xii-xvi). Yet he goes well beyond these sources when he gives his poem a split-level narrative structure.

References are to line numbers as given in Roche-Mahdi's edition of the *Roman de Silence*. All translations are mine.

Sometimes the characters' actions and the narrator's comments contradict each other outright. Other times the narrator caps a complex episode with a tangentially related comment or an ironically simplistic summary (Psaki xxv). Over the course of the romance, we see a widening gap between what the narrator says and what he shows. This paper will consider the functions of such discrepancies, particularly their didactic purposes.

The gap between the characters' story and the narrator's occasional comments provides, for one thing, considerable humor. This humor derives from his personal quirks and axes to grind, from his odd juxtapositions of material and his playful changes of topic or attitude. One example of a narrative about-face appears in the passage describing the courtship of Silence's future parents. At first the narrator teasingly insists that he will not tell us whether the lovers Cador and Euphemie kissed each other often:

> Et se vus verté m'en querés,
> Ja par moi sage n'en serés (lines 1103-04)
>
> [And if you seek the truth from me,
> You will never be any the wiser].

However, the narrator contradicts himself immediately afterward, with a second and ironic reference to the truth (*verté*) of his words:

> Mais j'os bien verté aficier
> Tolt sans mentir et sans trecier,
> Qu'anchois que de baisier cessassent, /.../
> Peüst on une liue aler (1107-11).
>
> [But I do dare to affirm the truth,
> Entirely without lying and without tricking you,
> That before they stopped kissing, /.../
> One could have walked a league.]

The narrator repeatedly uses the noun *verté* when teasing his audience with questions of his story's veracity. Here the word *verté* plays on the gap between truth and not-truth, as does the narrator's insistence that he is not lying, remaining silent, or tricking us. In fact, silences and tricks abound in his commentary on the story. This is not to say that the narra-

tor is simply untrustworthy, but rather quirky and self-contradicting in a way that adds interest and humor to the narrative. In passages such as this, a seven-hundred-year-old smirk passes from author to audience, sometimes behind the narrator's back. His textual performance is minstrel-like in its emphasis on the individual voice that tells the story and "spins" it. Like a juggler teasing the crowd, the narrator makes a show of barely maintaining control of the tale.

Yet the *Roman de Silence* offers serious lessons as well as humor and entertainment. Much of the text's didactic message has to do with the virtue and skill demonstrated by certain characters. The hero Silence, for example, embodies many qualities worth imitating, as shown in considerable detail in the middle of the romance when Silence runs away to become a minstrel. His friends and family members express tremendous grief at having lost a young man who was so virtuous, valiant, noble, and handsome (lines 2995-3126, especially 3011-12). This long passage twice names Silence a "mirror of the world" (3063 and 3116). In this context the noun *mireöir* indicates that the hero is the best in the world: a good son, a dear friend and relative, a young person of exemplary character and upbringing. The term *mireöir* does not simply draw attention to the hero's superlative goodness, however; it also has didactic connotations (Di Stefano 547). The medieval French expression *un mirouer de* usually presents the "mirror" as a didactic model to be imitated, and it tends to reflect things not just as they really are but especially as they ought to be.

Through the story of Silence and the other characters worthy of imitation, the romance teaches a number of lessons, three of which will interest us particularly. First, it shows that one should not assume surface appearances tell the whole truth. Second, the romance demonstrates the usefulness of knowing how to keep silent and keep secrets. Third, it advocates a style of decision-making that is collective rather than autocratic, methodical rather than hasty, and open to possibilities beyond simple binary pairs of opposites. In each of these lessons, a significant role is played by the gap between the story and the narrator's commentary about it. This is a space into which, as Terry Eagleton writes in another context, "the leverage of critique could be inserted" (58). In the *Roman de Silence*, audiences are invited to use the gap for a particular kind of critical thinking: that is, to apply the very lessons that the romance teaches.

The romance contains dozens of examples of split-level narrative structure, and analysis of them all would exceed the scope of this paper. Two of the most prominent ones appear at the beginning and the end of the text, positioned so as to suggest that the gap between story and narration is an integral part of the narrative structure.

Heldris opens his text in a way that inverts the common relationship between a medieval romance and its narrative frame. Ordinarily such a device serves to guide audiences' interpretations of the larger story that takes place within it. Yet the story of *Silence* so far exceeds its narrative frame that the audience is obliged to work backward: it becomes necessary to interpret the narrator's commentary in light of the characters' example, rather than primarily the other way around.

In the first hundred lines, the narrator begins his tale by a characteristic digression, an anti-prologue in much the same way that the narrator is an anti-narrator. This introduction flouts the convention of identifying a patron and praising his or her generosity: instead it criticizes patrons for their stinginess and society for its greed. The prologue is presented as separate from the rest of the poem, ostensibly serving not as a guide for readers but as therapy for the grouchy and possibly inebriated narrator, whose personality appears in full force from the beginning:

> Ainz que jo m'uevre vus conmence,
> M'estuet un petit que jo tence
> Pour moi deduire en bien penser,
> Car je me voel tost desivrer,
> Que quant venra al conte dire
> N'ait en moi rien qui m'uevre enpire.
> Or dirai donques ma gorgie. (77-84)
>
> [Before I begin my story for you
> I've been saving up a little griping to do,
> So that (afterward) I can move on to good thoughts;
> I want to blow off some steam (or "sober up") soon
> So that when the time comes to tell the story
> There will be nothing in me that will worsen the work.
> So now I will say some insults.]

The prologue concludes with the narrator's laughable statement that he wants to begin the poem "Sans noise faire, et sans tenchier" (106) [without quarreling, and without fussing]. Yet the prologue itself certainly

qualifies as *noise* and *tenchier* in all their senses: "noise, fuss, difficulty, resistance, blame, quarrels, reproaches" as well as, of course, "talk," one of the primary meanings of both *noise* and *tenchier*. The passage attests to an awareness – on the part of the author, if not of the narrator – that digressions such as this one qualify as *noise*. Such *noise* is the opposite of the silence and discretion which the protagonist exemplifies and the romance advocates. Thus Heldris refuses to represent the narrator as a *mireöir*, and instead gives that role to the romance's sympathetic characters such as Silence, Euphemie, and the French king. Despite the unusual aspects of the prologue already mentioned, its depiction of the narrator does introduce a quality of the romance that will be carried through the work. From the outset Heldris offers a playful forewarning about the tasks of interpretation that the text will set before its audience.

The tension between divergent levels of story and narration is underscored by the romance's ending with a pointed example of the inconsistency between them. Its brevity and abruptness make the ending seem more a non sequitur than a resolution of the complex plot. Earlier the narrator spends many lines telling us exactly how Silence is made, both as a girl and as a boy, but then offers only the briefest mention of the hero's final transformation into a woman (6664-68). As for the subsequent wedding, the narrator says merely, "Li rois le prist a feme" (6677) ["The king took her as his wife" or "The king took him for a woman"]. There is no description of a wedding mass, no celebratory feast, and no mention even of Silence's reaction to the marriage proposal. No dialogue appears in the text. Given the near-total absence of detail in what would traditionally be one of the culminating moments of the plot, the narrator's comments more closely resemble Cador's hasty judgment than the French king's well-considered one.

The narrator's final comments cannot possibly be the real moral: he says we should appreciate good women more than we criticize bad ones, "on doit plus bone feme amer/ Que haïr malvaise u blasmer" (6685-86). This statement makes little sense in the context of Silence's sudden feminization and marriage to the king. Nor is it a logical conclusion that good women should try harder to do good, "efforcier plus de bien faire" (6701). If the romance does indeed have to do with the behavior of women, that message is greatly complicated by the plot's problematization of gender categories, to a point that leaves the narrator's facile proverbs far behind.

A central lesson of the *Roman de Silence* is that things – and people – may not be what they seem. The tale refers to truths that are *covierte* or *aperte* (411-12), disguised or visible, much the way the protagonist's body is clothed or revealed. Silence dresses as a boy, then later escapes from the court disguised as a poor boy:

> D'une herbe qu'ens el bos a prise
> Desconoist sa face et deguise (2909-10)
>
> [With a plant that he picked in the forest
> He makes his face unrecognizable and disguises it].

The romance's human characters consistently fool one another by superficial appearances, with results ranging from the absurd to the tragic. Only the omniscience of Merlin brings into focus, by contrast, the characters' shallow perspective and likewise the narrator's.

Questions of appearance and reality are also played out at the level of the narration. Here puns are common and multiple meanings coexist. The narrator frequently reminds us that we should not take things too literally; for example, in the context of his analysis of a character's words, he states "li parole est covierte" (908) [the speaking is disguised]. Although he warns against overly literal and superficial interpretation, however, the narrator persists in offering exactly that. Such a mismatch between the story and its narration suggests that in the narration, things may not really be as the narrator says they are. He names things as what they appear to be, even when audiences know the reality is more complex. For instance, whenever Silence appears as a male character, the narrator refers to him with the grammatically masculine forms of pronouns, adjectives, and verbs; but in the few passages where Silence appears as female, the narrator speaks of her in grammatically feminine terms. This use of grammatical gender suggests more than simple respect for the character's choice of self-presentation. The text methodically destabilizes and complicates its gender categories by leaving unresolved the repeated struggles of Nature and Nurture, personified rivals for control of the protagonist's gender identity. When the narrator calls Silence "he" or "she," we always know there is more to the story.

A second lesson in the text is that of the value of discretion. Until the poem's last few lines, Silence's successes depend upon his ability to

keep secrets. Preservation of the secret of Silence's transvestitism means that justice can be accomplished, because, as the story implies, it will be fair for Silence to inherit the family estate. The hero's social status, family relationships, and professions as a knight and minstrel all require his silence about his sex, and sometimes about other matters as well. Excessive talkativeness and the inability to keep a secret are faults that the narrator repeatedly ascribes to women; however, the character who most exhibits these traits is not Silence or Euphemie, nor even Eupheme, but rather, the narrator. He confesses to his own loquacity in the passage where he says he has embellished this story he is ostensibly translating from Latin into French:

> Jo ne di pas que n'i ajoigne
> Avoic le voir sovent mençoigne
> Por le conte miols acesmer:
> Mais se jel puis a droit esmer
> Ni mettrai rien qui m'uevre enpire
> Ne del voir nen iert mos a dire
> Car la verté ne doi taisir. (1663-69)
>
> [I'm not saying I don't often mix
> Falsehood in with the truth
> To ornament the story better,
> But if I manage to refine it right
> I will not put in anything that worsens my work
> Nor will truth be the least bit lacking in it,
> For I should not keep the truth silent.]

One possible interpretation of this passage is that the narrator's superficial digressions constitute an addition to the larger and arguably truer story he is telling, but that they do not really silence or obscure it. This parallels the experience of the character Silence, who, despite masculine clothing and acculturation, debatably retains some feminine *nature* (at least, in the Old French sense of *nature* as "genitals" of either sex). Similarity between Silence and the story itself is punned upon repeatedly, for example in the line "Por le conte miols acesmer," because the story is a *conte* and, as Cador's male heir, Silence grows up to become a count or *conte* (1665). The protagonist is *ascesmé* in even more senses of the term than the tale is: Silence is dressed up, talented and meritorious, and, as a knight, equipped for battle. Both *contes*, the story and the pro-

tagonist, maintain a kind of secrecy in that they do not always state their truths directly, but indirectly demonstrate them. Audiences' interpretations must then take into account the process of "translation" said to shape the text or hero(ine) that we encounter, and the narrator describes such processes as not simply as retelling but also as addition (*ajoigne*) and decoration (*acesmer*). Luckily the romance itself provides clues about interpretation, and once again the most successful model is not the narrator but the sympathetic characters.

A final lesson has to do with decision-making. Gina Psaki notes that in the *Roman de Silence* authorities rarely make decisions alone, and if they do, it leads to disaster ("Introduction" xvii). A clear example of bad judgment is Cador's banishment of all minstrels from his country on pain of death (3117-27). This decree is hastily made, poorly considered, autocratic, and based on a mistaken assumption that Silence has been kidnapped. It apparently results in the death of many minstrels, and puts Silence's life in danger, as the count inadvertently banishes his own child. The decision derives from an either/or way of thinking that proves insufficiently flexible to take into account the situation's subtleties.

In contrast to Cador's banning minstrels, an example of a good decision is that of the French king when Eupheme forges a letter asking him to kill Silence. Instead of taking on the problem alone, the prudent king convenes a meeting of his counts (4494, and the narrator puns again in line 4495, "Des trois contes m'a un conté..." ["I've heard recounted, about the three counts, ..."]). They discuss Silence's fate at great length, and the poem gives their debate word for word; the decision-making process occupies more than four hundred lines (4459-4878). Even in these difficult deliberations, the French king and his counts do not merely choose the lesser of two evils – either to fail Ebain, the king's relative and ally, or to kill Silence even though the king has publicly embraced him and given him the kiss of peace. The council goes well beyond these obvious binary options and instead creates a third possibility which allows all the sympathetic characters to retain their honor. Here the French king can be taken as a *mireöir* or exemplar, and the passage's overall implication is that good judgments are made collectively, carefully, and with discretion. For readers or listeners seeking an example of successful interpretation and conclusion-drawing, the French king presents a far more successful model than does Cador or the narrator. Both of the latter lack the Frenchman's sense of proportion and deliberateness.

In conclusion, then, the actions of the story and what the narrator says about those actions are separated by a gap that forces the audience to put into practice the romance's own lessons in the very act of reading or hearing the poem. We have considered three such lessons. First, when audiences try to make sense of the narrator's commentary that is dissonant with the action of the story, they apply the lesson that things may be more (or less) than what they are said to be. Second, for didactic purposes the narrator's "keeping silence" may be quite effective, since this makes the audience grapple with his relatively indirect handling of the most complex and far-reaching themes his story explores. Third, the inconsistencies between the story and the narration force the audience to make judgments and decisions about the text, since the story and the narration can be so different as to resist any literal, straightforward interpretation. Listeners and readers are encouraged not merely to choose between the conflicting messages of the story and the narration, but, rather, to judge wisely by considering all the story's facets, in order to create a meaningful whole that makes sense of all of them – much as the French king and his counselors did when deciding how to respond to Eupheme's letter.

While saying one thing and showing another, and constantly playing on reality and appearance, the poem emphasizes the importance of the audience's process of interpretation. Howard Bloch has commented that "the *Roman de Silence* is in fact all about misreading" (98). The poem does indeed contain numerous examples of misinterpretation by its characters, including the narrator. However, the romance's ways of presenting these misinterpretations help teach the audience how to read, hear and understand. Thus I take issue with Bloch's statement that the romance implies "the perceptual and cognitive impossibility of seeing, reading, hearing, or breaking the silence whose transgression is the premise of fiction" (98). Instead, the romance's clever incorporation of its lessons into its own structure attests to the possibility of reading well. The text encourages its audiences to practice the lessons it teaches, and to take part in an always incomplete process of making meaning from its complex juxtaposition of what is said and what is shown, what is stated and what is kept silent.

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