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Strategies for Teaching the *Roman de Silence*

KATHLEEN BLUMREICH

As its title suggests, this piece offers a variety of strategies for teaching the *Roman de Silence*. Included here are ideas for small group, whole class, and research assignments.(KB)

The *Roman de Silence* is a rich poem: its characters are complex, its plot is unique among Arthurian tales, its language is both playful and philosophically elusive, and its themes are provocative. For these and other reasons, many of us are routinely including *Silence* in our medieval literature courses. Because we don't expect students to come to us as experts on the poem, however, we need teaching strategies that will both guide students and allow them opportunities to explore the text on their own. What follows are some approaches to the romance that I have used successfully in my own undergraduate classrooms; I offer them for your consideration.

PRELIMINARIES TO DISCUSSION OF *Silence*

**Plot Outline*

Ask students to prepare an outline of the plot, paying special attention to critical turning points in the narrative. On the first day of discussion, ask two or three students to provide a summary of the romance for the rest of the class; disagreement about 'what happened? when?' can help you to discern which students are having difficulty seeing how events connect to one another, and thus which students might have trouble later on understanding thematic elements in the poem.

**Journal Entry*

If you require reading journals, ask students to compose an entry in which they comment on what they perceive to be the most striking or controversial or interesting aspect of the text. Depending on how you incorporate journals into your courses, you might ask three or four students to share their remarks—this can often generate lively debate since readers invariably focus on different issues.

**Quiz*

Give a quiz designed to assess reading comprehension and/or initial interpretation of the romance. Questions might require students to provide a short synopsis of the story; to compare/contrast two characters and their motivations (e.g., Eufeme vs. Eufemie, Evan vs. Cador, Nature vs. Nurture); to identify and explore a major theme; to select and comment upon the function of a recurring symbol or image. After you have marked and returned the quizzes, go over them with the class as a whole. Questions that elicited varied (but not absolutely inaccurate) responses can be used as the basis for discussion.

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES

**Short Presentations*

Ask students to volunteer to join one of the six groups listed below, noting that each group will be responsible for giving a presentation to the entire class on this area of 'expertise.' To ensure that all students participate during the preparatory session (30–45 minutes is usually sufficient), you may wish to circulate as the students work together, looking over notes, asking and answering questions, pointing out areas that the students might have missed. Within the groups themselves, students should determine who will present what; that is, each student should plan to speak on some aspect of the assigned subject so that no single individual is stuck lecturing while the rest lean idly against the blackboard. (I prefer to have students stand in front of the class when they give their presentations because it forces them to make eye contact with their colleagues instead of 'talking to the teacher,' it allows them ready access to the blackboard, and it gives me an opportunity to become a member of the audience whose focus is on the presenters' ideas rather than on who may or may not be paying attention.) The most successful group presentations begin with members introducing themselves, listing their points on the board, and then discussing their findings in turn. If the time that you have scheduled for *Silence* is limited, you may decide that any questions from the audience should be held until the end of a particular group's presentation. Doing so can help students—and you—to avoid going off on tangents.

Group 1—Major Characters

Who are the major characters in *Silence*? How do you determine whether a character is 'major' or 'minor'? Is there a single protagonist and a single antagonist? Describe these characters, concentrating particularly on their behaviors, motivations, and interactions with one another. Should Master Heldris/the intrusive narrator be considered a character in the romance? Why or why not? To what extent is this poem 'character-driven'?

Group 2—Minor Characters

Who are the minor characters in *Silence*? How do you determine whether a character is ‘major’ or ‘minor’? Describe these characters, focusing especially on their behaviors, motivations, interactions with one another, and importance to the plot as a whole. What would be the impact on the storyline if one or more of these minor characters were omitted?

In my own classes, fierce arguments have developed as the result of overlap between these two group presentations. On one occasion, Merlin was claimed as both a major and a minor character; this sparked tremendous debate over the role of the supernatural in *Silence* as well as over whether Eufeme had actually succeeded in defeating Silence since had it not been for Merlin, Silence would not have been unmasked, forced to leave behind her ‘masculine ways,’ and then married off to Evan.

Group 3—Thematic Issues

What is this text *about*? That is, what is Heldris trying to say to us about human behavior, the ways in which we structure our lives, our social institutions and so forth? Generate a list of as many thematic issues as you can, providing examples from the text for support. Examples of thematic issues may include the following:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| passion vs. reason | justice vs. injustice/expedience |
| love vs. lust | nature vs. nurture |
| avarice vs. generosity | wisdom vs. ‘street smarts’ |
| duty vs. desire | obedience/conformity vs. rebellion |
| truth vs. deception/‘silence’ | virtue vs. vice |
| courage vs. cowardice | ‘savagery’ vs. ‘civilized’ behavior |
| honor vs. dishonor | education and learning |
| reward vs. punishment | the importance of counsel |
| good vs. evil | gender and gender roles |
| power vs. powerlessness | familial relationships |
| speech vs. silence | the battle of the sexes |
| freedom vs. ‘captivity’ | |

Students might also notice that Heldris sometimes gives mixed messages. For instance, compare these aphorisms: 'Silence relieves anxiety' and 'Truth should not be silenced.'

Group 4—Symbolism/Imagery

As you skim through the text, make a list of as many instances of symbolism and/or imagery as you can (e.g., the cross-shaped birthmark on Silence's shoulder; the depiction of Eufeme being put aboard ship with a variety of animals). Do certain symbols/images get repeated? Where? Do you notice any pattern in Heldris' use of symbolism/imagery? How do these symbols/images assist the reader in better understanding characterization in the romance? How do these symbols/images serve to emphasize or clarify thematic concerns in the narrative?

Group 5—Tone and Style/Rhetoric

What is the overarching tone of *Silence*? Where do you notice tonal modulations? How do these shifts in voice affect our overall impression of Heldris' purpose in writing *Silence*? For instance, if the poem seems to you didactic, how do you account for the playful sections? If the poem strikes you as often tongue-in-cheek, how do you account for the 'preachy' digressions? Is it possible that 'Master' Heldris was really 'Mistress' Heldris? How does the gender of the author affect the way in which we hear his—or her—voice? What specific rhetorical devices does Heldris employ (e.g., *occupatio*, irony, tense shifts, puns), where, and why?

Group 6—Connections to other works

What similarities and differences do you notice when you compare *Silence* to: epics (e.g., *The Song of Roland*), didactic pieces (e.g., sermons, morality plays), allegories (e.g., *The Romance of the Rose*), other Arthurian romances (e.g., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), possible source materials (e.g., Ovid's tale of Iphis and Ianthe; *Grisandole*)? How do these similarities and differences affect our understanding of *Silence*? of Heldris's purpose in writing this romance? of the function of literature in medieval society? of shifting definitions of 'hero' or 'protagonist'?

** Character Interviews*

Another method through which students can become more adept at character analysis is the Character Interview. For this exercise, assign students to work in pairs: one individual should take on the identity of a major or minor character while the other, acting as a reporter, asks questions and notes responses. After 10 minutes or so, have students switch roles (the character becoming the reporter and vice-versa) and play out the exercise for

another 10 minutes. Students should then compare the information they gathered: how do the responses differ? What accounts for these differences?

Character Interviews can also be conducted in a whole-class format. Ask students to volunteer to play one of the major and/or minor characters in the poem, and then have this group sit at the front of the classroom. Members of the audience should ask questions, as if at a press conference. Because gender stereotypes are explored to a significant degree in *Silence*, it is useful to ask female students to adopt male roles and male students to adopt female roles.

* *Scene Rewrites*

Select the conclusion or some other controversial scene in the text and ask pairs of students to rewrite that passage from a modern perspective. Through this exercise, students are required to examine Helderis's tone and intent, as well as the poem's thematic elements, including what cultural values and norms are stressed.

If you allow students to submit creative pieces in lieu of standard academic essays, scene rewrites are a good option, particularly when accompanied by a brief textual analysis and/or project rationale.

* *Investigative Reports*

Although much of *Silence* scholarship focuses on gender-related issues, the text also invites us to explore such matters as family relationships, politics, education, law, minstrelsy/entertainment, and economics in the thirteenth century. For this exercise, assign pairs or small groups of students to conduct library research on one of the aforementioned topics. Each team or group should then present its findings in the form of an oral report to the rest of the class.

This assignment is also useful as a prelude to discussion of *Silence* because students themselves are given some responsibility for supplying information about the text's sociohistorical background. Similarly, investigative reports can be used as the basis for research essays.

WHOLE-CLASS ACTIVITIES

* *The Trial of Eufeme*

Toward the end of the poem, Eufeme is caught in the trap that she had set for Silence. Ironically, although the queen had consistently pleaded with Evan to execute Silence without benefit of trial, it is Eufeme herself who is summarily convicted and put to death. Legal technicalities aside, this swift justice is problematic because we never get to hear how Eufeme might have

explained her actions, nor are we shown that Evan's sentence is anything more than a way to rid himself of a 'bad' wife. A primary outcome of staging the trial of Eufeme is that students gain practice in exploring both character motivation and causal relationships within the text.

For this exercise, ask students to imagine that Eufeme has appealed Evan's judgment, and then break the class into three groups: Prosecution Team, Defense Team and Mediation Panel. (The Prosecution and Defense Teams should have the same number of students on them so as not to give one side unfair advantage.) Allow 30–45 minutes for the teams to prepare their cases; during this time, the Mediation Panelists should discuss anticipated arguments and formulate questions that they would like to ask of the Prosecution and Defense.

As in a court of law, the Prosecution should present its arguments first. At any point, members of the Mediation Panel may seek clarification of the Prosecution's stance and ask questions. However, Panelists should not present arguments of their own, nor should anyone from the Defense Team interrupt or react verbally to the Prosecution's statements.

Once the Prosecution has rested, the Defense Team should present its rebuttal, as well as provide additional points not covered by the Prosecution but important to gaining justice for Eufeme. As before, the Mediation Panelists may ask questions, provided such queries are for the purposes of clarification. Members of the Prosecution should not interject or engage in debate.

After both sides have had sufficient time to give their views, the Mediation Panelists should meet privately (i.e., out in the hallway) to discuss what the two sides have argued and to adjudicate the case. Following this, Panelists should present their finding to the rest of the class, along with their reasons for having so decided.

A number of variations on this whole-class activity are possible. For instance, students might choose to have Silence appeal her 'sentence' of forced femininity and marriage to Evan; or students might explore whether Helderis's romance is inherently misogynist; or students might pit Nature against Nurture.

* *Scene Enactments*

Scholarship has well demonstrated that the *Roman de Silence* is often open to interpretation: the same incident or utterance can evoke dramatically different responses, depending upon the reader's theoretical approach and/or personal 'filters.' To show students—quite literally—how a multiplicity of meanings can be derived from the text, select a key scene (e.g., the Nature–

Nurture–Reason episode, the Merlin at Court scene) and ask students to break into acting groups. Students should work out blocking, line-delivery (including tone, where to place pauses, where to highlight a word or phrase for emphasis), and be prepared to provide a rationale for their interpretation of the scene. Memorization of lines isn't necessary, but actors should be sufficiently familiar with the text so that they don't stumble over, mispronounce, or skip parts of the scene.

Once students have prepared their enactments, have each group perform in succession, holding off questions or comments until the end. Differences in understanding of characters, Heldris's intent, and so forth will become increasingly apparent, even if the student-actors are not going to become Oscar nominees any time soon.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO *Silence*

As noted earlier, a great deal of the published criticism on *Silence* deals with gender-related matters (e.g., *Silence*'s asexuality and role confusion; Nature's insistence on biological determinism; Eufeme's lack of 'feminine' qualities). This is not entirely surprising given how much of the romance is itself concerned with what it means to be female, what it means to be male. Different textual interpretations emerge, however, when we approach *Silence* from specific critical perspectives. Provided below are questions that you might pose to students as they read *Silence* through the lenses of New Historicism, Marxist, Queer, Legal, and Psychoanalytic theory.¹

**New Historicism*

If we consider *Silence* as a kind of historical narrative, how does the poem enhance our understanding of human experience in that particular time and place? In what ways is the text a 'cultural artifact,' part of a 'thick description' of the poem's sociohistorical context?

In what way(s) can it be said that characters in the romance both shape and are shaped by their cultural milieu? For instance, how is *Silence* (or Eufeme, Eufemie, Cador, Evan, etc.) simultaneously a product of society and active in creating that society itself?

Identify the various ideological discourses—religious, political, legal, scientific, economic, educational—at work in the poem. How do these discourses overlap, compete, and/or complement one another?

Drawing upon Michel Foucault's insights into the nature of 'power,' explore the ways in which power 'circulates' in the romance as opposed to being seen as residing in one specific entity or institution. How are exchanges of power 'negotiated' in the poem?

Consider the following statement: 'The meaning of the text is the history of its reception.' How has critical reception of *Silence* changed over time? How have readings of the text both shaped and been shaped by the culture out of which these readings emerged? What impact might these interpretations have on future audiences, on future scholarship?

* *Marxist Theory*

To what extent is *Silence* concerned with economic issues? What does Heldris have to say about: wealth and material goods; differences between social classes; arranged marriage; inheritance laws; labor and services?

What examples of commodification, use value, exchange value, and sign-exchange value appear in *Silence*?

How does an interpretation of the romance change if the text is read from an anti-capitalist perspective or from the perspective of Social Conflict Theory? [Here, students might be asked to consider instrumental vs. structural Marxism, theory of surplus value, anomie ('normlessness').]

* *Queer Theory*

Is *Silence* a heterosexist and/or heterocentric text?

To what extent does this romance embrace 'compulsory heterosexuality'? What are the consequences for characters who fail to conform to normative behaviors?

Are there instances of homophobia and/or negative stereotyping in *Silence*?

How does Heldris define 'natural' and 'unnatural' sexuality?

From the perspective of Queer Theory, how does *Silence*'s transvestism function within the text?

* *Legal Theory*

Discuss the importance of legal terminology and concepts in *Silence* (e.g., *guerdon*, *calenge*, investiture, 'friendship and protection,' treason, adultery, false accusation, rape, forgery, exile, promises/vows, pacts/contracts, the *lettre de cachet* that Eufeme sends to the King of France, inheritance laws, the lord-vassal relationship, criminal punishments such as drawing and quartering).

Compare King Evan's law barring female inheritance to Cador's declaration that minstrels are banished from his lands, upon pain of execution. On what basis are these laws formulated? Why do Evan and Cador later reverse their decisions?

In what way(s) does *Silence* demonstrate the interdependence of divine/moral, natural, civil, and ecclesiastical law?

Does *Silence* ultimately support a conflict view of law and order, a consensus view, or neither?

* *Psychoanalytic Theory*

In what ways are 'identity' and 'gender identity' distinct in this romance? In what ways are they synonymous?

How does anomie cause identity confusion for the main characters in the poem?

Are there characters in *Silence* who are 'id-driven'? 'ego-driven'? 'superego-driven'?

What theory of moral development emerges in this text? Compare Heldris's ideas to those of Kohlberg. Or, discuss Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs in connection with *Silence*.

Many of the characters in the poem employ defense mechanisms in order to justify or cope with their behaviors and circumstances. Where does Heldris present instances of: denial, reaction formation, projection, avoidance, displacement, selective perception and/or selective memory?

How can Freud's theory of *eros* vs. *thanatos* be used to explain the actions of one of the following characters (Eufemie, Silence, Eufeme, Evan, Merlin)?

Is it possible to read *Silence* as a psychomachia? Why or why not?

Although unlikely to generate an MLA *Approaches to Teaching* guide in the near future, the *Roman de Silence* is nevertheless very successful in the classroom. As I have suggested here, Heldris's text lends itself well to a variety of teaching techniques; I hope that some of the strategies given above will be useful both to first-time and veteran teachers of the romance.

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NOTES

- 1 For a remarkably accessible and gracefully written explication of theories ranging from Psychoanalytic to Postcolonial, see Tyson.