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Performance-based exploration of the thirteenth-century *Le Roman de Silence* can extend discussions of ambiguity by clarifying the experience of the sound of the poem. Homonymic terminology breaks down the boundary between performer and text, while metaperformance elements impose identities of characters on performer and audience.

When Silence Plays Vielle: The Metaperformance Scenes of *Le Roman de Silence* in Performance

LINDA MARIE ZAERR

The thirteenth-century French *Le Roman de Silence* invites us to participate in a minstrel's perspective on silence. But it is only in performance that this perspective is embodied, and it is only in the discrepancies between what is explicitly stated about sound and the sound actually produced in performance that the fundamental thrust of the text can be realized. Disjunctions within the social fabric of the story are realized in disjunctions between performance and text. In this regard, it is the aural dimensions of performance, not the visual ones, that create perception of incongruous realities. *Performance* is an elusive term, describing anything from memorized minstrel performance, to public or private prelection, to imagined performance in silent reading; but *Le Roman de Silence* explicitly juxtaposes silent scribal text with articulated, instrumentally accompanied minstrel performance. Performance by a single narrator/musician can thus resound with meanings that are elusive and potentially misleading in a silent, primarily textual experience.

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Le Roman de Silence describes how two counts, who are married to twins, fight over their wives' inheritance and kill each other. King Ebain of England unjustly decrees that women can no longer inherit. Subsequently, two of his subjects, Cador and Eufemie, both win the right to choose a spouse, but they are afraid to reveal their love to each other. Finally Eufemie ("Fair Speech") opens a way for their love with an ambiguous utterance, "Amis, Parlés, haymmi! [Ami, speak, ah me!]" (Roche-Mahdi, line 882).[1] The text discusses in detail the difference between her multivalent exclamation and what she had intended to say, "Parlés a mi [Speak to me]" (885), emphasizing by repetition the importance of the ambiguity (882–92). Cador responds by linking his two-fold hope to a further homonymic conjunction in her words: she first calls him "*amis*," giving evidence of love, and then exclaims "*haymmi*," indicating the pain love is causing her (893–907). Eufemie's ambiguous utterance leads ultimately to a kiss and then a wedding. The auditory effect of homonymy is thus the foundation of their marriage.

When Eufemie bears a girl, the couple determines to raise him as a boy, so that he will be able to inherit. They name their child Silence, pointing out that "silence" can take both masculine and feminine endings, "*Scilenscius*" and "*Scilencia*" (2075–82). His name is thus itself a homonym. The two endings, *-a* and *-us*, create a further homonymic contrast: *-a*, the feminine ending, represents the form of the name that is "*par nature* [natural]" (2082), and *-us*, the masculine ending, represents "*us*," usage or nurture, which is "*contre nature* [contrary to nature]" (2081).

The text develops the multivalence generated by spoken sound on other levels. When Silence is old enough to realize his situation, Nature and Nurture engage in an allegorical debate, Nature urging him to live as a girl, and Nurture advising him to continue his life as a boy. Reason intervenes, convincing him to continue as a boy but to learn a skill he can pursue if he has to become a girl.

So Silence runs away with minstrels and learns to play vielle and harp. He tells himself that if he ever has to become a woman, he will have his harp and his vielle to make up for his lack of ability with needlework (2867–69). In less than four years, he surpasses his minstrel teachers, and people want to hear only Silence. The jealous minstrels plot to kill Silence, but Silence thwarts them and returns to his parents in Cornwall. In anger against the minstrels who have stolen away their son, Cador and Eufemie have banished all minstrels from the land on pain of death. When Silence returns as a minstrel, he is threatened with death, but his parents recognize him at last, and, with new understanding of their son, they repeal the law against minstrels. Even as they celebrate their son's return, however, messengers come from King Ebain demanding that Silence go live with him at court.

At Ebain's court, Queen Eufeme ("Ah, Woman," a near homonym with Eufemie, "Fair Speech") attempts to seduce Silence and, failing in her attempt, frames him. As

a result, he is sent to France, where he becomes a valiant knight. When he returns to help King Ebain quell an uprising, the angry queen arranges for him to be sent to capture Merlin, who has prophesied that only a woman can ensnare him. An old man (possibly Merlin) teaches Silence how to capture Merlin, and Silence brings him to court, where Merlin reveals through laughter all the secrets of Ebain's court. The queen and her lover are killed, and the story ends with King Ebain marrying Silence.

Many aspects of the story suggest performance: the fierce and possibly ironic discursions of the author persona, the teller's awareness of the tale's dual embodiment in writing and in performance, the exciting and often humorous plot, the vivid dialogues among richly delineated characters, and, of course, the homonymic themes. In addition to these features, there are two striking performance elements: the appearance of the two nameless minstrels, and the transformation into a minstrel of the eponymous hero Silence.

Current scholarship has become increasingly aware of a rich fabric of medieval performance that resists modern categories. Carol Symes foregrounds the pervasive theatricality of medieval culture in her book on theatre in Arras. As she explains, her book "treats *all* premodern texts as potential participants in a culture of performance—some as the residue of performed actions, some as prompts for performance, some as the focal points of performance—and juxtaposes plays with the variety of other activities alongside which they were produced and transmitted: the display of charter, crying of news, taking of legal testimony, exhibition of relics, celebration of liturgies, organization of ceremonies, preaching of doctrine, telling of tales" (2). This perspective problematizes notions of the generation, transmission, and reception of a text, concepts that are also questioned within *Le Roman de Silence*.

There is no incontrovertible evidence indicating how this narrative might have been performed. Surprisingly, the topic of performance is rarely discussed. Thorpe surmises that the author, Heldris de Cornuälle, was "a professional lay poet" (59), and discusses performance by "the jongleur who recited the poem" (59–60). Suzanne Kocher states that it was "designed to be read aloud" (95), an assumption corroborated by Joyce Coleman's general demonstration of the widespread practice of prelection.

Le Roman de Silence describes in considerable detail two feasts with performances by minstrels. The first feast includes minstrel performance of three specific narratives: one solo with self-accompaniment on vielle; one solo with self-accompaniment on harp; and one performance by two performers, one playing harp and the other vielle. The second feast is the one at which Silence performs, and everyone prefers his performance to that of the minstrels. Whether or not *Le Roman de Silence* was originally performed as these passages describe, these are the terms in which performance is presented in the context of the story.

Historical performance of medieval narrative has been a focus of debate for several decades. Early assertions of minstrel performance of narrative were often based solely on internal references to oral delivery.[2] A variety of interdisciplinary approaches have subsequently made a strong case for narrative performance, drawing on theory of oral performance, musicology, textual analysis, historical records, and a range of approaches involving performance theory.[3] What emerges is a complex web of performance possibilities, not surprising when we look at the range of performance options today and the mutable reality of live performance. Evelyn Birge Vitz et al. effectively express both the range of performance possibilities and one of the reasons performance of medieval narrative has been neglected or discounted: "Narrative swings the doors of performance open wider than any other medieval genre. Whereas song cannot exist without music, stories may be sung, spoken, acted out, or played in wordless mimicry. Readers of drama have long been accustomed to considering performance as a staple of interpretation. Paradoxically, the very multiplicity of ways of performing medieval narrative may have obscured the significance of narrative as a performance genre" (3).

Medieval performers, patrons, or audiences would have been unlikely to make a written record of specific professional performances of *Le Roman de Silence.* Any payment involved could easily have been notated in general terms (to a particular performer or performers, with no mention of the stories performed). Thus the lack of historical documents does not imply a paucity of performance. On the contrary, recent evidence increasingly implies the likelihood of some form of performance of narrative in general, and it may be reasonable to look to the text for some information about that performance. This does not imply a literal and uncritical reading of "minstrel tags," but rather a scrutiny of the terms in which the text presents its own performance.

One way to access medieval performance is to examine passages such as the feast passages in *Le Roman de Silence,* which, when performed, reflect on their own existence as performance. Metaperformance passages, those that describe minstrel performance, are intriguing because they posit specific terms for transmission of narrative. While they may not reflect actual historical performance practices, they do convey historical notions of performance, notions that could be fundamental in understanding how these texts may have been received in their more live-performance-grounded culture.

In *Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages: Instrumental Practice and Songs in France 1100–1300,* Christopher Page compiles a selective compendium of musical references in French narrative fiction, and combines this with a discussion of performance practice. One of the features that emerges is the astonishing diversity of performance and the complexity of associated terminology. Within this milieu, he points to a "predominance of solo minstrelsy" (136) and suggests that minstrels spent much of their

time performing narrative, and that "these narratives were often sung to instrumental accompaniment" (19). Exactly how such performances may have been constructed has been a subject of intriguing debate, yet that debate is not central to this discussion, which looks at the effect of any performance of *Le Roman de Silence* in the general terms inscribed within the romance. The text consistently juxtaposes and balances an authorial written text and a received aural text, and it describes performance by minstrels with instruments.

While it is possible to imagine what the text might be like in minstrel performance, that internal performance is fundamentally different from an embodied physical performance with a breathing voice and vibrating strings. Even prelection lacks the illusion of spontaneous creation that is generated in a memorized live performance with music. It is as difficult to imagine experiencing a live physical performance while reading a written text as it is to envision experiencing a written text in silence while watching a movie with a full sound track.

As a female vielle player, I was intrigued by the minstrel heroine, a figure fairly common in medieval romance but developed very differently here. To explore the performative experience of *Le Roman de Silence* and the role of the protagonist, I memorized the two feast passages and performed them while playing vielle. I thus embodied the metaperformance passages in the terms set forth by the text. In doing so, however, I was surprised to discover that Silence is not present "on stage" during the passage when he performs at the Duke's feast. An audience hearing this narrative performed by a single minstrel would experience in a comprehensible way the thematic disjunction so puzzling when confronted in the text alone. Whether or not this romance was ever performed in the thirteenth century, performance today can validly illuminate the text by embodying it experientially in its own terms. My performance has validity as a critical approach concomitant with textual analysis because it demonstrates, not what a medieval performance might have been like, but what happens to the text in any memorized solo performance with vielle or harp.

It is in the reflexive embodiment of these minstrel passages that the problems addressed by the text are most clearly (un)stated. Typically performance allows characters to speak, to make themselves heard. *Le Roman de Silence* is not unique among thirteenth-century French romances in describing a protagonist performing words and music simultaneously. In *Daurel et Beton*, a young nobleman who is brought up as a jongleur demonstrates his nobility as he sings and plays vielle for a princess; in *Galeran de Bretagne*, Fresne reveals herself to her lover by performing a song with harp; and in *Aucassin et Nicolete*, the heroine, disguised as a male jongleur, narrates her story while she plays vielle. Performance of *Le Roman de Silence*, however, does

not allow us to hear the voice of Silence. Instead, it reveals his silence. It is only in performance that the ambiguities of the text are embodied in the dichotomy between the explicit statements that the minstrel Silence is making music and the reality of his silence.

Scholars have generally acknowledged the paradoxical nature of the text, exploring a range of unresolved discrepancies. Howard Bloch points to "the paradox of the poet who speaks the impossibility both of silence and of an always already dislocated speech" (99); Heather Lloyd describes a "moral relativity" (77) necessitated by deceptive appearances; Michelle Bolduc points to the clash between the text and the miniatures; Simon Gaunt suggests a tension between the author's misogyny and the women's voices that he allows to be heard; and Loren Ringer considers conflicting "interpretation of language on both a written and oral level" (3). A performance-based exploration of metaperformance dimensions of the text can amplify and extend these discussions of ambiguity in the poem by clarifying the literal experience of the sonority of the poem. The homonymic terminology describing the story itself serves to break down the boundary between performer and text, even while the metaperformance elements impose the identity of characters within the story on the performer of *Le Roman de Silence*. Ambiguities generated by sound in performance of the poem propel the audience into the world of the story, where they must confront disjunctions in the poem without the distancing mechanism of the written text, or even that of the performance schema. The nature of the text itself becomes ambiguous in the act of performance.

The author, Heldris, refers to the story ten times using the term *conte*. It is clear throughout that the term refers both to the written text, which is silent, and to its transmission in performance, which is heard. He begins by stating that he is writing ("escrist") these lines (2), and then adjures those who possess them to burn them rather than share them with the kind of people who do not know how to appreciate a good *conte* when they hear ("oënt") one (7). At the outset, the term *conte* confronts the audience with ambiguity about the framework of the story. When Heldris concludes his *conte*, he calls for a blessing on the one who "le vos conte" (6703), who recounts it to you, and on the one who "fist le conte" (6704), who made the story (wrote it). We are confronted with simultaneous images of an author writing and an audience listening. In performance, audience members are distanced by references to an absent author piecing together the words of the *conte* just as it is ("trestolt a talle," 2) and simultaneously drawn into the performance context by explicit allusions to the performer of the *conte* and the audience who hears it, an audience they embody at that moment in time.

This bivalent character of the narrative is thematically central. In a tale that hinges so much on word play relating to sound—Eufeme/Eufemie, parlés a mi/parlés haymmi—it is impossible to ignore the prominent use of *conte* in two very different

senses. The story is framed as a *conte* (tale), and within that framework, two calculating *contes* (counts) initiate the plot when they fight over the inheritance of their wives.[4] The story revolves around two nested injunctions: girls are barred from inheriting because of the avarice of two counts, and minstrels are barred from performing because Silence runs away with minstrels (such as the one telling this *conte*). Love of Silence re-enfranchises first minstrels and then women. While providing a structural framework for the plot, the double use of the term *conte* also blurs the distinction between the world of the two *contes*, the counts who propel the plot within the story, and the world of the *conte* itself, the story in its written and aural dimensions. The use of the homonym *conte* in a minstrel performance thus conflates for the audience performance within the story and performance of the story.

The term *uevre*, also used to describe the text, further blurs the boundary between the story itself and it transmission. Silence is three times referred to as Nature's *uevre* ("s'uevre," 1799; "l'uevre," 1801; and "ouvre," 1807), and *Le Roman de Silence* itself is called *uevre* twice ("m'uevre," 77 and 82). In this context, the term seems confined to the writing process, and Heldris asserts he will begin his work "sans noise faire" (106), without argument, but also, as a secondary meaning, without noise. The work he is creating in writing is silent, and thus free of argument. But performance introduces *noise;* with the introduction of sound comes tension. The ambiguity of homonymy is experienced through sound, and the ambiguity of a minstrel called Silence is embodied by a minstrel in performance. Silence and the story are both creations, *uevres,* characterized by the same qualities. While Silence does not function entirely as an allegorical figure, his name suggests some allegorical dimension, and it is the allegorical aspect of Silence that destabilizes the parameters of the story. In the metaperformance passages, the character Silence and the story become conflated; both are paradoxically and incompatibly silent and noisy. With sound comes internal argument.

The *conte* (both the tale and the situation within the tale triggered by the two counts) inspires a voice in Silence. Impelled by Nurture, Nature's *uevre* gains immediacy. He does not act, but he does perform, and thus gains the power of illusion. Though a woman, he is spurred to perform as a man; though Silence, he is impelled to perform as a minstrel. Ultimately, the revelation of laughter, Merlin's laughter, brings empowerment to others (minstrels and women) even as it deflates Silence, making her once again an *uevre* who is created *sans noise.*

Heldris explores the tension between writing and performance in this *conte,* recognizing that in all manifestations, the generosity of patrons is essential to the empowerment of a tale. He frames his initial diatribe against stingy patrons first in terms of rewards for written verse:

Uns clers poroit lonc tans aprendre
Por rime trover et por viers,
Tant par est cis siecles diviers
Qu'ançois poroit rime trover
Qui peüst en cest mont trover
Blos solement un sol princhier
U il peüst sol tant pinchier
Dont il eüst salve sa paine,
Ne le traval d'une sesmaine.
[A learned man might study long
to fashion rhyme and verse,
but things are so bad in these times
that it's a lot easier to write poetry
than to find in this world
one single solitary prince
from whom he might pinch
even so little that he might have saved himself the trouble—
not a week's wages.] (14–22)

By using the term *cler*, scholar, to describe the creator of poetry and by dwelling on the length of time required to learn to create verse, Heldris emphasizes the written dimension of the transmission. He goes on to ask, "Volés esprover gent avere? [Do you want to see how stingy people are?]" (23). This question serves as a hinge between the narrator's experience as a writer and his experience as a minstrel. He goes on to reframe the problem in performance terms:

Servés le bien, come vo pere:
Dont serés vus li bien venus,
Bons menestreus bien recheüs.
Mais, puis qu'il venra al rover,
Savés que i porés trover?
Bien laide chiere et une enfrume,
Car c'end est tols jors la costume.
[Serve them well, as if they were your father:
then you will be most welcome,
judged a fine minstrel, well-received.
But when the time comes to ask for something,
do you know what you will find?
Very bad cheer and a sour face,
that's what you'll always get from them.] (24–30)

The carefully balanced passages reinforce the dual experience of the written word, which is removed and silent, and the performed experience, which is immediate and noisy. In both cases, the story gains power only in its reception, and this concept is explored most fully through the characters of the minstrels.

When the two minstrels are first introduced, the narrator explicitly calls attention to the oral and written dimensions of the story they inhabit.

> Oiés mervellose aventure
> Si con nos conte l'escriture.
> [Now you're going to hear something amazing!
> As the manuscript tells us.] (2689–90)

We hear about the minstrels, while simultaneously their story is silently recounted in a manuscript. It is here that the dual understanding of the *conte* becomes most ineluctably incongruous. The minstrels share the performance world with the narrator, but they do not participate in the world of the written text. In a minstrel performance of *Le Roman de Silence*, the performer describes characters who participate in the same activity he is engaged in. The minstrels thus become identified with the performer of the *conte*.

The minstrels are represented with remarkable verisimilitude. In one minstrel performance, the timidity of minstrels caught out in the forest at night, and their pragmatic concern over protecting their profits, take on a quality of whimsical self mockery. This is especially true because the minstrels are not named, and thus their identity is more transferable. Their interaction with the porter is a striking reflection of just the sort of humorous exchange that might actually occur between a performer and the people who facilitate the performance.

> Hucent en halt: "Ki est laiens?"
> On lor a dit: "Gent a çaiens.
> Ki estes vos et que querés?"
> Cil dient: "Ovrés, sel sarés."
> [They shouted from below, "Who's in there?"
> The answer came, "The people inside!
> Who are you and what do you want?"
> They answered, "Open up and we'll let you know!"] (2733–36)

Heldris develops the minstrels' arrival at some length, allowing the minstrels to develop distinct identities through specific action and dialogue. A performer cannot

avoid taking on the identity of these performers because of the professional congruence (the physical playing of vielle or harp is essential here) and the intimacy of detail.

When the minstrels perform for the seneschal after dinner, the lines evoke a vivid mental image because they are so precise. The narrative specifies which three tales they perform, which performer plays each, the instruments they use for each, the point at which they shift to a different mode, and the audience's response to them. We even know that the lai about Mabon that they perform is the one that is still popular today.

> Et quant cho vint apriés mengier
> De lor mestier ne font dangier.
> Li uns viiele un lai berton,
> Et li altres harpe Gueron.
> Puis font une altre atempreüre
> Et font des estrumens mesture.
> Si font ensanble un lai Mabon—
> Celui tient on encor a bon—
> S'en ist si dolce melodie
> Qu'il n'i a cel quil bien ne die:
> "Certes que Dex les amena!
> Bien ait qui cha les adreça!"
> [So when they had finished their meal,
> they were quick to practice their trade.
> 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
> that there wasn't a one who didn't say,
> "Surely, God has brought them here!"] (2759–70)

A single performer obviously cannot play both harp and vielle, but when I performed the passage with vielle, I found the fluid transitions from one minstrel to the other and then to both together were comfortable and believable. I used a simple melody with two phrases to accompany the passage. I discovered that I could emulate the transition from one tuning or mode ("atempreüre") to another by moving from the first phrase to the second, which incorporates a lowered sixth. In other passages, this contrast allowed me to highlight distinctions between emotional tones or characters. I further discovered that I could hint at simultaneous performance of vielle and harp by plucking the lower strings with my left hand while I bowed the higher strings.[5] A performance of the

passage with music reveals a high degree of agency in the minstrels; the word *font* occurs three times in the twelve lines, and the minstrels (represented by the performer) are simultaneously engaged both in speaking and producing music on instruments. At any point in the passage, we know exactly who is performing what.

Young Silence immediately recognizes minstrelsy as a bridge between the worlds of men and women, making up for deficiencies in either. In the world of men, Silence as a minstrel can gain respect even if he is not good at chivalry, and in the world of women, she will have her harp and her vielle to make up for not knowing how to do elaborate needlework. In performance there is a humorous irony in the perspective that those who can't do, perform. As a fallback, then, Silence runs away with the minstrels, serves them, and learns their art until he surpasses them. Three years go by, and then the Duke of Burgundy holds a great feast at which the two minstrels try to perform but are stopped because everyone prefers to hear their apprentice, Silence.

Ainz que li menestrel s'en isscent,
Congié ne qu'avoir le peuïsscent,
Li dus une grant fieste i tint.
Icil ki l'a, plus le maintint.
Li menestrel i ont joé
Mais il i sont si desjoé
Que il n'osent un mot tentir,
Car li dus nes violt consentir,
Ne mais Scilence solement.
Celui voelent oïr la gent:
Et cil en ont angoisse et honte,
Moult plus que ne vos di el conte.
Li diols lor est es cuers colés
Que lor mestiers est refolés
Tolt par l'afaire d'un gloton,
Ki pas ne valoit un boton.
"N'a encor pas .iiii. ans d'assés,
Et or nos a ensi passés!"
Font anbedui li menestrel.
"Kaieles! Ki vit mais itel?"
[Before the minstrels left,
before they were granted permission to leave,
the duke gave a great feast.
He showed even greater favor to Silence than before.
The minstrels began a concert there,
but they were so disconcerted

that they didn't dare say a word,
because the duke didn't want to hear them;
he just wanted to hear Silence alone.
Everyone wanted to hear only him,
and the minstrels were enraged and humiliated at this,
much more than I am telling you.
Their hearts were pierced with grief
that their craft was so disdained
all on account of some
no-good, no-talent nobody.
"He doesn't even have four years' experience
and he's outdone us like this!"
both minstrels exclaimed.
"For heaven's sake! Who ever heard of such a thing?"] (3233–52)

This passage parallels the minstrels' performance at the Seneschal's court in that it describes a particular performance at a particular feast.

When I imagined performing this passage, I envisioned using the vielle to represent Silence's performance, just as I had used it to represent the minstrels' performance earlier. What I discovered, however, is that Silence is not present in the passage. I found myself representing, not Silence, but the minstrels, who took on two distinct personalities. Although they plot to destroy Silence, they have my sympathy. Their grief is humorous in its excess and their plot in its extremity. Because their intended victim is so abstract and they themselves are so colourful, they compel empathy. Performance reveals eloquently the incongruous reality that Silence does not participate in performance at the feast, though logically he must be performing. The text never states that Silence plays anything or sings anything or says anything. I cannot make my vielle sing the melody of Silence while I am saying the words of the minstrels.[6]

The central irony of the passage is that the Duke of Burgundy and the other people present all want to hear nothing but Silence alone ("Ne mais Scilence solement," 3241), and it is clear from the minstrels' angry response that the duke and his court get their desire. But we do not participate in their experience of Silence. As soon as the performer appears to be telling how Silence performs, Silence disappears from the text, and the performance is anything but silent. The focus must shift from Silence, who cannot be represented in performance, to the minstrels, whose attempt to play/bring joy ("joé," 3237) has been silenced so that they don't dare venture a word ("il n'osent un mot tentir," 3239). Though their performance has been silenced at the feast, we hear them clearly, and we hear only them for the entire duration of the feast.

In fact, their direct discourse continues quite a bit further, a total of 90 lines (3249–338), during at least part of which Silence logically must be playing, but we see and hear only other people responding to him. We are told that the Duke favours Silence and that he and the other courtiers want to hear only Silence. The rest of the passage is consumed with the minstrels' response to Silence and their observations about how other people are responding to Silence. The minstrels are the ones on stage. Their words are specific about how they want to kill Silence, but generic regarding his performance. The minstrels complain that Silence has surpassed them even though he does not yet have four years' experience (3249–50); that he has completely surpassed all jongleurs (3264–65); that he has stolen their artistry (3268), which is multiplied in him (3271); that he has become so beloved that he will harm their profits (3277–82); and that he must have either taught himself or learned from the Devil (3319). Generic expressions such as these generalize across locations and time, making visualization more difficult. Although we know that Silence has learned to play harp, to play vielle, and to sing, we do not see him engaged in any of these activities at the feast.

Instead, we see in energetic dialogue the minstrels developing their plan to kill Silence. First we see them testing each other, and then one leads gradually to a hint of the plan:

> "Mais se jo vo fiänce avoie,"
> Cho dist li uns, "et jo savoie
> Que vos men consel celissiés,
> Qu'a nului ne le desisiés,
> Certes," fait il, "gel vos diroie."
> ["But if I felt I could trust you,"
> one of them said, "and if I knew
> that you would keep what I say a secret,
> and not tell anyone,
> why, then I would certainly have something to tell you."] (3283–87)

The other provides ardent reassurance:

> "Tolés!" fait il, "gel jehiroie!
> Nostre amistiés va degotant
> Quant vos m'alés de rien dotant.
> Bials dols compaig, ne me dotés!"
> ["Come on!" said the other. "You think I would tell?
> Our friendship is really going down the drain
> if you have begun to distrust me.
> Dear friend and companion, don't doubt me!"] (3288–91)

The first simultaneously justifies and suggests killing the boy, concluding by asking, "Ferons nos iceste ouevre ensanble? [Shall we do the job together?]" (3300). Here the same word, *uevre*, previously used to describe Nature's creation of Silence and the author's creation of the *conte*, is used to describe the minstrels' intended destruction of Silence. "Iceste ouevre" here refers explicitly to this task of killing, but also indirectly and ironically to "this work" (of Nature) who/which is Silence.

The minstrels go on to encourage each other, each asserting in colourful language how eager he is to do away with Silence. The intensity of their desire to kill Silence is so extreme as to be comical. The second minstrel asserts, for example,

> "Compaing," fait il, "par ces .ii. mains,
> Jo n'en voel plus, jo n'en voel mains,
> Ne en penser, ne en voloir.
> Li riens qui plus me fait doloir
> Cho est qu'il dure tant en vie."
> ["Friend," he said, "I swear by these two hands,
> I want neither more nor less;
> our thoughts and wishes are the same.
> What bothers me the most
> is that he is still alive."] (3303–07)

The minstrels determine to be careful so Silence won't guess what they plan. They can kill him in the forest as they travel together. One chortles, "Sans caperon li ferons cape [We'll make him a cloak without a hood]" (3326).

Although we do not hear Silence actually performing at the court of the Duke of Burgundy, there are two places in the text where Silence presents a specific performance on a specific occasion. One of them occurs when Silence plays harp for the queen. Yet even here his performance is presented indirectly. Initially his performance is introduced, not as something that is going to happen, but as something that ought to happen: "De la harpe le doit deduire [He's supposed to soothe her by playing the harp]" (3717), and the queen "Li fait sa harpe o soi porter / Quanses por li reconforter [had him bring his harp along, as if in order to comfort her]" (3725–26). When he does finally and unequivocally perform, the performance itself is barely explicit.

> Sa harpe a cil bien atenpree
> Si a grant dolor destenpree
> A oués la dame de roïne
> Ki sor lui s'apoie et acline:

Et plus et plus de cel s'esprent
Que cil harpe si dolcement.
[The youth's harp was in perfect tune.
This only caused our lady queen—
who was sitting next to him and leaning against him—
unbearable pain.
Her desire for the harper, who played so sweetly,
grew stronger every minute.] (3743–48)

Silence's playing is embedded in a subordinate clause and is presented entirely from the point of view of the queen. His harping becomes peripheral.

There is one occasion, however, when Silence plays vielle unambiguously and conspicuously. When he returns to Cornwall after his years with the minstrels on the continent, the innkeeper sees his instruments and exclaims in horror that minstrels have been banished from Cornwall ever since Count Cador's son was stolen away by minstrels. The penalty for minstrelsy is death. Silence replies, "Or menons nostre vie a joie: / Ki plus l'a longe si l'a poie [Now let's enjoy our life; no matter how long, it's always too short]" (3519–20).

Joy is easily linked with minstrelsy. At the beginning of the poem, Heldris complains about people who will call you "bons menestreus" (26), a fine minstrel, but will pay only with a sad face and a grimace. He addresses these greedy people, saying "Vos le paravés desjué / Q'or n'i a mais ris ne jué" (33–34). (You have de-played/de-joyed the world, so that now there is neither laughter nor play/joy.)[7] He establishes a contrast between minstrels, who bring laughter and play, and greedy patrons, who deprive the world of joy by refusing to reward minstrels. Significantly, Heldris uses precisely this rhyme to describe how the minstrels are hindered from performing at the court of the Duke of Burgundy.

Li menestrel i ont joé
Mais il i sont si desjoé
Que il n'osent un mot tentir,
Car li dus nes violt consenter. (3237–40)
[The minstrels played/created joy (at the feast), but they were so de-played/de-joyed there that they didn't dare venture one word because the duke wouldn't allow it.][8]

Like the stingy patrons of the introduction, the Duke of Burgundy prefers Silence to the minstrels, and he therefore stops the latter from performing.

On his return to Cornwall, Silence, asserting that he wants to live life with joy, begins a performance. But even here it is not possible to visualize a specific performance by Silence, especially when a minstrel performs the passage. "Dont prent sa harpe

et sa viiele, / Si note avoec a sa vois biele [Then he took his harp and vielle, and sang beautifully as he played]" (3521–22). Because it is impossible to play both harp and vielle simultaneously, this passage does not communicate a distinct image of Silence performing; instead, we see two images juxtaposed: Silence playing harp and Silence playing vielle. The reference is thus to a degree generic, but the two activities are limited to that evening's performance. While still in stark contrast with the specificity of the minstrels' performance in Cornwall, Silence comes more clearly into focus as a performer here.

In the description of the events of the next morning, we have the most definite reference to Silence's performance in the entire text. "L'endemain l'enmena al conte / Tolt vielant amont le rue [The next day, the youth was taken to the count, playing the vielle as he went up the street]" (3540–41). That is the limit of the reference; we are never told at what point he stops playing. The verb *vielant* is not even the main verb in the sentence. The passage is intriguing largely for its specificity in contrast with other references to Silence's performance as a minstrel. We can actually visualize the character walking along a street and playing a specific instrument, though, in contrast with the minstrels, we have no idea what music he is playing.

In this passage, Silence defies the injunction against minstrels. In overtly playing vielle, he acts against his nature. He is Silence, yet he is making noise. This is one of a number of places in the text where the allegorical dimensions of Silence collide with a plot that claims for him roles that go against his nature. The *conte* is built around two unreasonable interdictions, one against girls inheriting, and the other against minstrels. Silence defies both, the first by living as a boy so he can inherit, though he is by nature a girl, and the second by living as a minstrel, though he is by nature Silence. After asserting his superiority as a minstrel, he loses that identity as he returns to his role as son of Count Cador. After asserting his superiority as a male knight, he loses that identity and returns to the role of woman.

The conclusion of the *conte* resonates with the multivalent perspectives developed throughout:

> Chi voel a fin mon conte traire.
> Beneöis soit qui le vos conte,
> Beneöis soit qui fist le conte.
> A cials, a celes qui l'oïrent
> Otroit Jhesus cho qu'il desirent.
> [I want to bring my story to a close.
> God's blessing on the narrator,
> God's blessing on the author.
> And as for those—male and female—who listened to it,
> may Jesus grant them their dearest wish.] (6702–06)

In the context of the disjunctions Heldris has created around the term *conte* and the multiple misdirected desires expressed in the story, this formulaic tag creates eddies of turbulent meaning. This instability forces the audience to interact creatively with the text, to find meaningful syntheses and alternative levels of understanding. The audience must choose what will characterize them as patrons of a *conte*, in both its written and its aural dimensions.

The very nature of performance is an appropriate symbol of Silence himself. Music and storytelling are not actions. In a sense, narrative performance is an illusion of action, ultimately dissolved when the performance ends. Silence is living a story. He seems to be producing music, but he is Silence. He has no intrinsic status but that accorded while the performance lasts. In this sense, he is like the minstrel who presents the illusion of action that is *Le Roman de Silence*. The identity that Silence achieves throughout the *conte* dissolves at the end, just as the performance itself dissolves. The simultaneous conflation of Silence and the minstrels, and the opposition between silence and the minstrels, can be embodied only in performance, which enables the reader to fully experience the homonymic dimension of the text.

The effect achieved is analogous to contemporary music. Performance of thirteenth-century polyphonic music forces the audience to interact with two or more melodies simultaneously. Each melody has equal weight, and perception of the multiple "sounds" (melodies) together produces an effect beyond any of the component melodies. In a similar way, the homonymic meanings, the disjunctions between what is said and what is shown, and the explicit contradictions in *Le Roman de Silence* achieve a meaningful complexity in their interaction in performance. Ultimately, a minstrel's performance brings the clearest perspective to *Le Roman de Silence*.

NOTES

1/ Quotations and translations (except where indicated) of *Le Roman de Silence* are from the Sarah Roche-Mahdi edition, with facing-page translations.

2/ See, for example, Ruth Crosby's "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages" (*Speculum* 11 [1936]: 88–110) and Albert Baugh's "The Middle English Romance: Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation" (*Speculum* 42 [1967]: 1–31).

3/ For an example of an approach drawing on theory of oral performance, see William Quinn and Audley Hall, *Jongleur: A Modified Theory of Oral Improvisation and its Effects on the Performance and Transmission of Middle English Romance* (Washington, DC: UP of America, 1982); for an example of a musicological approach, see John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986); for an approach relying on textual analysis, see Murray McGillivray, *Memorization in the Transmission of the Middle English Romances* (New York: Garland, 1990); for an approach based on historical records, see John Southworth, *The English Medieval Minstrel* (Woodbridge, Eng.: Boydell, 1989); and for a range of approaches involving performance theory, Paul

Zumthor's discussions in "Intertextualité et mouvance" (*Littérature* 41 [1981]: 8–16) and "Body and Performance" (in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, trans. William Whobrey. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994. 217–26) are particularly helpful.
4/ Ringer points to the homonym, suggesting that "the counts (spelled '*conte*' or '*cuens*') are often giving accounts ('*conter*') of action that takes place in the story ('*conte*'), all of which can lead to ambiguity" (5–6).
5/ For a video recording of my performance of the passage, see <http://euterpe.bobst.nyu.edu/mednar/>.
6/ I had thought that as a woman I could more easily represent Silence. As in any live performance, however, verisimilitude does not determine perception of the passage. A woman as much as a man ends up representing the minstrels. For a video recording of my performance of the passage, see <http://euterpe.bobst.nyu.edu/mednar/>.
7/ Translation mine.
8/ Translation mine.

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