



# Teaching Arthur through Performance

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Performing, rather than simply reading, Arthurian texts allows students to experience medieval works in something like their original reception context. (EBV)

This essay argues for the usefulness of teaching Arthurian legend through performance.<sup>1</sup> My remarks are based on recent experiences in the classroom and also in the construction of a performance-based website. I will speak of two kinds of performance approaches to teaching—direct and indirect; I will then weigh the disadvantages of this approach against its advantages.

It is important first to explain why a performance approach to medieval literature makes sense in general—aside from Arthurian material, and aside from the classroom. Almost all medieval vernacular works were originally intended for live performance of some kind: private reading was rare, silent reading virtually non-existent.<sup>2</sup> Many works, such as verse romances, were intended for recitation, frequently from memory.<sup>3</sup> Some works were sung, perhaps with vielle, harp, or other accompaniment. Other works were to be acted out by several performers. Some texts were meant to be read aloud, to individuals or to groups of various kinds.<sup>4</sup> In short, it makes perfect sense to perform—and to cause to be performed—works that were originally intended for performance rather than for fully private consumption. Performance is thus a valuable tool for understanding and appreciating medieval works in something closer to their original reception context.

I teach Arthurian literature through performance primarily in a course called 'Acting Medieval Literature' (I do so in independent studies as well). Many though by no means all of the students for this course come from among the drama students in the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. These are students who are talented, ready and eager to perform, and experienced in doing so—though what this course demands of them is, it appears, markedly different from the understated, realistic style of acting (especially appropriate to film) that is generally taught in drama schools

ARTHURIANA 15.4 (2005)



today. In 'Acting Medieval Literature,' students eliminate the 'fourth wall,' respond to their audience, and make strong use of voice and gesture.

Among the Arthurian works included in this course are *Culhwch and Olwen*, romances by Chrétien de Troyes, *Lais* of Marie de France, the *Roman de Silence*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (non-Arthurian works are taught as well). Works are studied and performed largely in translation—and translations that are attractive orally and do not focus exclusively on the meaning of the work are sought. For works composed in verse, we use translations that retain the poetic dimension of the original, such as Ruth Harwood Cline's versions of Chrétien's romances.<sup>5</sup>

Study of each work begins with reading it carefully. Students are encouraged to read aloud rather than silently, though it takes them longer. We then analyze the work in class, focusing not only on such literary matters as plot, themes, and characters, but also on performance issues. We discuss the importance in storytelling of different voices, facial expressions and gestures. We evaluate the possible use of singing and musical accompaniment, and props and costumes (one or two can be useful to clarify roles and add color, but heavy reliance on them can become burdensome in storytelling). Students then choose a passage to perform—they do about thirty lines from each text studied. They are asked to perform in a way that flows naturally from the work itself, and from what we know (or think we know!) historically about its performance. Performances of a work like *Yvain* may, for example, contain humor, but they should not lose the high ethical tone that characterizes this great romance.

Performance styles should vary from work to work since different works call for a different performance approach: thus, for example, the *Lais* invite a subdued, reading-aloud style (with possible harp-esque accompaniment), while *Silence* calls both for a forceful narratorial voice and plenty of humor. Styles also vary according to students' gifts. Students with musical gifts may sing passages of works, and/or accompany themselves on a guitar or other instrument; students with strongly physical talents may make extensive, even acrobatic use of their bodies; other students may focus on the power of the voice itself.

Students are to recognize that a performance constitutes an interpretation of the passage, so they need to think through carefully how they will perform their lines. For example, in the love dialogues between Yvain and Laudine early in *Yvain*, does the performer want to emphasize the compelling power of love, or rather the potential humor in the scene? Does he/she want to present Laudine in a fully sympathetic manner, or as a difficult and unreasonable





woman? It is often useful for them to see several performances of a single passage by different students; differences in interpretation emerge clearly from this experience: they may, for example, see how the same passage can be read—and dramatically interpreted—in a serious, compelling fashion, or lightly and with a smile or wink to the audience. After a few students have performed, we stop for group critique and discussion of the performances. The performer explains what he or she was trying to achieve. The other students and I offer comments—always words of praise, but often we also make suggestions as to how the performance could be strengthened or improved. One important issue has arisen: How can the male actor use his voice more effectively to represent a female character—and the female actor, a male character—without falsetto and false bass registers which tend to be comic. (The answer is generally: stay within your normal vocal range, and go as high, or low, as is comfortable.) What facial expressions or hand gestures might be more effective, to enhance and clarify the storytelling? (The students have a mime text, such as *The Mime Book* by Claude Kipnis or *The Art of Pantomime* by Charles Aubert, that helps with this issue. They can also be invited to pretend their audience contains foreigners: what would make the passage clear to non-English-speakers?) I often ask students to bring back their performance of a scene after improving it to conform to the suggestions made in the critique session.

Students also write ‘Imaginary Performances’ of passages. In such short papers, students choose and describe a patron (perhaps a great lady interested in hearing about love? a pious, elderly knight? a worldly bishop?); an occasion at which the work or passage is to be performed (maybe a wedding? a coronation? an ordinary evening?); a performance style (solo storytelling? a group performance? perhaps with singing or instrumentation?). We discuss other performance elements as well.

Students generally respond positively to a performance approach to medieval literature (this course fills up almost as soon as it has opened for registration). This way of teaching makes the works come to life in an exciting way for them. Students have said to me such things as, ‘In this course I feel that I have heard voices from the past.’

Some of the results of this experiment are now available on the Internet. Several dozen video clips of performances of Arthurian (and other medieval) material can be found on a website that I co-direct: *Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcase*—<http://euterpe.bobst.nyu.edu/mednar/> (henceforth *PMNT*).<sup>6</sup> Along with work by students, the website also has performances by professionals such as (in the Arthurian vein) Linda Marie





Zaerr's *Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*; it will soon have clips from performances by faculty. The website contains clips from all the Arthurian works mentioned earlier, and will shortly have more, including clips from a story about King Arthur written in Hebrew in Italy in the fourteenth century and from stories featuring Merlin.

Thus far the focus here has been on pedagogical principles related to the nature of the medieval works themselves, as we believe them to have been performed and experienced in the Middle Ages. But pedagogical principles of a more general kind also make this sort of approach attractive. First, students read more carefully when they know they will not just be talking about the work but also performing from it in front of their classmates. (Like the prospect of hanging, performance does focus the mind.) Second, performance promotes a sense of classroom community. Students learn each other's names quickly since they discuss and critique each other's work, and may work together in small groups, which promotes bonding and a spirit of camaraderie. Third, performance highlights—far more than classroom discussion—students' individuality and particular gifts, making each student memorable.

There is a more indirect, but also profitable, way of using performance to teach Arthurian literature. In a traditional (non-performance-based) course, the faculty member might recommend to students that they view and critique performances of Arthurian material; the performances might be those on the PMNT website or performances seen in other contexts. Among the questions that students might be asked to consider are: What interpretation of the work (or scene, themes or characters) is implicit in the performance? Do you agree with this interpretation, and thus with the performance? Did the performance show you things about the work or scene that you had not noticed before? Did the performer miss things that matter to you? Do you find it useful to see a scene performed, or do you prefer to read it aloud for yourself, or silently? Students in this sort of course can also be asked to write imaginary performances (as described above), since many students who cannot—and/or do not want—to perform nonetheless find it useful and illuminating to reflect upon the performance dimensions of a work. Such considerations can help draw their attention to the profoundly circumstantial nature of medieval literature—for example, to the need of both poets and performers to please their patrons; 'mouvance', the fluidity of the medieval text and its openness to new performances and situations, often appears to have been connected to a new patron or new kind of audience (for example, the increased presence of women, or of bourgeois).



The advantages of a performance approach to teaching Arthurian literature have been emphasized here. What are the disadvantages? First, performance takes time; this means that in order to cover works properly one must teach fewer of them. Some faculty members and students will find that unacceptable. On the other hand, performance tends to make the works that are studied deeply memorable to the students—more so than discussion generally does. Next, the grading of performances can present special difficulties—as is always the case with more ‘creative’ approaches to teaching. It has proven useful to lay out clear guidelines according to which performances are evaluated. These include the quality of the memorization, the care with which the performance has been thought through (e.g., the use of voice and gesture), and other objective criteria. Some criteria—such as ‘how well did this performance work?’—cannot help having a more subjective dimension which is one reason why group discussion of the performances is helpful: students may see things I missed. Of course, subjectivism is unavoidable in literature courses, except in purely factual examinations, and some traditional-style exams are given in order to balance things out. In addition, a fully elaborated performance approach is possible only when class size can be kept low. ‘Acting Medieval Literature’ generally has a cap of twenty students. At many institutions, this is simply not possible. But it may be feasible to have some sort of performance track within a larger class: thus, a small number of students might sign up to do some performing, while other students could be directed toward other approaches. Finally, a performance approach tends to work best at the undergraduate level. Graduate students in literature are typically (at least in my experience) quite ill-at-ease at the prospect of performing. Moreover, in French and most other literature departments, this is not at all what they came to graduate school to do! But even graduate students can profitably be persuaded to think at least sometimes in terms of performance, and to do a bit of performing (not surprisingly, clearly dramatic works tend to draw them more). Students can also, and most appropriately, be encouraged to read medieval works aloud, and to think in terms of the use of voice, facial expression, and gesture. Public reading was, after all, an important art in the Middle Ages and beyond.

It has been pedagogically exciting, as well as intellectually stimulating and personally rewarding, to bring performance into the classroom. My students—and I as well—understand the works more richly through this approach; they certainly enjoy them more! It is unlikely that I will ever again teach medieval literature without at least some performance element.

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## NOTES

- 1 This article is drawn from a panel presentation I gave on 'Teaching Arthur,' organized by Maud McInerney, at the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo in 2005.
- 2 See, for example, Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 3 See, for example, Evelyn Birge Vitz, *Orality and Performance in Early French Romance* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1999).
- 4 Many of these performance modes and strategies are discussed in *Performing Medieval Narrative*, eds. Evelyn Birge Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado and Marilyn Lawrence (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2005).
- 5 Ruth Harwood Cline, *Lancelot, or the Knight of the Cart* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991); *Erec and Enide* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000); *Yvain, or The Knight With the Lion* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985); *Perceval, or The Story of the Grail* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983).
- 6 Marilyn Lawrence and I co-direct this site.

