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Le Roman de la rose

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There can be no doubt that the composite Roman de la rose , an allegorical love poem begun between 1225 and 1245 by an otherwise unknown court poet, Guillaume de Lorris, and completed between 1268 and 1285 by the scholastic author Jean de Meun, was the most admired, influential, and controversial literary work of the French Middle Ages. With nearly 300 extant manuscripts (several times the number for Chaucer's Canterbury Tales), the Rose clearly enjoyed exceptional renown among medieval literate populations. The reason for this popularity may well be the poem's encyclopaedic range of themes and styles and its openness to diverse interpretive approaches. Not only does Guillaume's mannerly, euphemistic, and concise Rose stand in stark contrast to Jean's ironic, explicit, and sprawling continuation, but also each of the two authors complicates the production of meaning in his poem by eschewing thematic unity, singular perspectives, and structural stability. Some medieval readers sought to straighten out these problems, emphasizing the passages they considered edifying or amusing, and minimizing or expurgating the rest. Others were evidently fascinated by the hermeneutical challenges posed by a hybrid text and sought to exaggerate its contradictions. **1** Likewise, some modern scholars have claimed that the poem teaches Christian ethics by promoting sensuality ironically, others that it revels in moral indeterminacy and sexual liberation. **2** Regardless of critical bent, most readers would agree with the early humanist Jean Gerson that the Rose contains a remarkably wide range of themes and styles and could 'rightly [be] called a formless chaos, a Babylonian confusion, and a German broth, like Proteus changing into all his shapes'. **3** Indeed, even those scholars who insist on the poem's orthodoxy acknowledge that it teaches its lessons through the juxtaposition of contradictory viewpoints and ironic reversals of meaning.

In this chapter, I will argue that the Rose proliferates alternate meanings only after it has posited an essential core of truth immanent within the text. On one hand, the Rose announces that it contains an overarching design and didactic message that will subsequently be made evident to the reader; on the other, it fails to disclose these and thwarts attempts to impose them from the outside. If the Rose initially suggests that full consensus about textual meaning is not just possible but necessary, it eventually demonstrates that exegesis is itself a fictional construct subject to the vicissitudes of interpretation. Indeed, the authors themselves are described both as the originators of the poem and repositories of its message, and as fictional constructs created by the poem and indissociable from it. Finally, though the Rose is aware of the impact a poem may have in shaping its audience's views, it frustrates attempts to locate its ideological content. In short, the Rose both endorses and debunks claims to mastery, including the author's over his poem and the reader's over interpretation. The result is a work in which we may grasp the concomitant desire for and resistance to totalization in medieval texts. The Rose signifies by means of internal conflict, including, most crucially, between theories of discursive presence (in which essential truths are unveiled through exegesis) and

discursive difference (in which language has no stable ground whatsoever).

In the ensuing pages, I will draw attention to some of the more spectacular forms of internal conflict in the Rose , including antithetical theories of rhetoric and hermeneutics, language and meaning, love and desire. Though my emphasis will be on the expressivity of the Rose independent of authorial intention and the poem's relation to tradition, I will nonetheless examine in turn the two authors and their distinctive uses of allegory: perspective and meaning are constantly fluctuating in the Rose even as the work announces its own rigorous consensus and coherence. I will conclude by sketching an ideological critique of the Rose , but one attentive to the fictional, fluctuating nature of ideology itself.

Guillaume de Lorris

The relationship between fiction and truth is addressed almost immediately in Guillaume's poem. In the opening prologue, the narrator declares that his text should be called The Romance of the Rose and that the reader will find in it 'l'art d'Amors . . . tote enclose' (38; 3: 'the whole art of love . . . contained'). **4** He proposes to reveal this art of love by recounting a dream he once had. Contrary to popular belief, dreams are not deceptions or illusions but 'senefiance' (signs) that show things 'covertement' (covertly) only to reveal them later 'apertement' (16, 19, 20: 'overtly'). The dream the narrator will recount in fact foreshadows real events: 'En ce songe onques riens n'ot / qui tretot avenu ne soit / si con li songes recensoit' (28-30; 3: 'There was nothing in the dream that has not come true, exactly as the dream told it'). The reader is alerted from the outset, then, that the dream-narrative contains an ulterior truth, one pertaining both to the essence of love and to a particular love the dreamer has experienced. If the reader's role is to seek out that truth, the text's is to conceal it, at least temporarily. The Rose thereby seduces the reader into a process of interpretation fuelled by promises of emotional and erotic fulfilment.

Having named his romance and described its signifying mode, the narrator offers his recollection of the events of the dream. The narrator's dream-double, who is nameless but is usually called Amant (the Lover) in manuscript rubrics, discovers the garden of Deduit (Pleasure) while on a springtime walk. Oiseuse (Idleness) admits Amant into the garden, where he witnesses the courtly virtues dancing a round with Amor (Love). Eventually, Amant wanders off to visit the garden; Amor pursues him stealthily, armed with bow and arrows. Amant arrives at the fountain where Narcissus fell in love with his own image and perished. Gazing into the fountain, he perceives the reflection of a rosebush and is seized by mad desire for a particular rosebud. Amor strikes Amant with his arrows and compels him to submit to his authority. Thus begins the love quest, which follows the traditional gradus amoris (stages of love): sight, converse, touch, kiss, and deed (that is, the plucking of the rose). Though Bel Acueil (Fair Welcome) initially encourages Amant's advances, Dangier (Rebuff), Male Bouche (Evil Tongue), Honte (Shame), and Poor (Fear) repel him. With Venus's help, Amant is allowed to kiss the rose, but Male Bouche informs Jalousie (Jealousy), who builds a fortress to protect Bel Acueil and the rose from further advances. Guillaume's work ends shortly thereafter, with Amant lamenting the loss of Bel Acueil. It is unclear whether Guillaume abandoned writing because he saw the love story as necessarily incomplete (the last gradus being suppressed for decorum's sake), or because (as Jean later surmises) death prevented him from completing it.

In keeping with traditional rhetorical theory, a literal reading of this allegorical narrative must be supplemented by figurative meanings. Ancient and medieval rhetors define allegory as 'speaking otherwise': a technique whereby one thing is said and another is meant. Obviously, the poem anticipates the imposition of 'other', extra-literal meanings on the story, and indeed the narrator promises he will eventually reveal such a meaning himself: the reader will know a great deal about Amor's games if he will simply wait to hear the narrator disclose 'dou songe la senefiance' (2070; 32: 'the significance of the dream'). If the truth is now 'coverte' (hidden), it will be 'toute overte / quant

espondre m'oroiz le songe, / car il n'i a mot de mençonge' (2071-4; 32: 'completely plain when you have heard me explain the dream, for it contains no lies'). This explanation is missing from the poem, however, and the reader is left to wonder what hidden content might have been revealed if Guillaume had fulfilled his promise. Is the poem a fragment? Or did Guillaume withhold his gloss deliberately, in an attempt to frustrate his reader's expectations, elicit doubt about the text's veracity, or invite speculation about its meaning? Many critics agree with D. F. Hult that Guillaume's Rose is indeed a finished work, but one that reflects a 'prevailing penchant for indefinite, open-ended texts'. **5** Far from containing its truth, the Rose self-consciously refers to its absence; rather than foreclosing interpretation by imposing a senefiance on the dream, it opens itself to semantic play.

The open-endedness of Guillaume's text is perceptible not just at the macro-level of textual design but also at the micro-level of individual personifications. If the Rose initially appears to encode a literal story allegorically (a young man's awakening to love and his beloved's responses, both warm and cold), it quickly becomes apparent that literal and allegorical meanings are never fully transparent or distinct. Thus whereas Bel Acueil embodies willingness to please, he becomes timorous and reserved when Amant reveals his desire for the rose. Behaving like Honte, Bel Acueil is ashamed of having offered the warm reception for which he is named: 'Frere, vos beez / a ce qui ne puet avenir. / Coment! Me volez vos honir?' (2892-4; 45: 'Brother, you aspire to something that cannot happen. What then, do you want to shame me?'). Venus rushes to Amant's aid and accuses Bel Acueil of being 'dangereus' (3425: 'withholding') as well. Dangier, by contrast, is overly accommodating and is reproached by Honte for not living up to his name: 'Il n'afiert pas a vostre non / que vos faciez se anui non' (3677-78; 56: 'It does not befit someone with your name to cause anything but distress'). Punning on non ('name'/'not'), the text evinces the unreliability of allegorical signs, which may invert or negate the meaning they allegedly contain. Honte's admonition thus reveals two contradictory things: first, that the goal of allegory is to bind words securely to meanings; and second, that it not only fails to do so but also repeatedly draws attention to that failure.

These inconsistencies are far from incidental; indeed, all the figures in the Rose are unsettled by the production of allegorical meaning 'otherwise'. Amor, whose meaning is intrinsically paradoxical (love and war, affection and assault), describes his art as so elusive and unpredictable that it could never be contained in a book: 'Nes qu'em puet espuisier la mer, / ne poroit nus les maus d'amer / conter en romanz ne en livre' (2591-3; 40: 'The pains of love can no more be recounted in a book or a romance than the sea can be drained dry'). Punning on la mer (the sea) and amer (to love), Amor belies the stated goal of the very poem in which he appears: to enclose the art of love. The narrator later returns to this pun, comparing the fickleness of love to the windswept sea and concluding, 'Amors n'est gueres en un point' (3480: 'Love is never in a single place'). Far from being an embodiment of an unchanging truth, Amor is clearly subject to an inexorable ebb and flow.

The meaning of the beloved rose tends to eddy and drift as well. In the prologue, the narrator dedicates the poem to 'cele qui tant a de pris / et tant est digne d'estre amee / qu'el doit estre Rose clamee' (42-4; 3: 'she . . . who is so precious and so worthy of being loved that she ought to be called Rose'), and therefore ostensibly links the rose to a female beloved. Yet, mysteriously, the identity of this dedicatee is never any more substantial than the absent antecedent of a demonstrative pronoun. The rose is, moreover, not actually a personification in that she/it lacks human traits and never speaks or acts. Oddly enough, the rose even lacks unambiguous gender markers. Though it is often taken as a genital symbol, critics are divided as to whether it is vaginal or phallic. The narrator describes the stem as 'droite con jons' (straight as a reed) and adds, 'Par desus siet li boutons / si qu'i ne cline ne ne pent' (1663-5; 26: 'The bud was set on top in such a way that it neither bent nor drooped'). Later, he perceives it as a bud tightly enveloped in leaves; though swelling as it matures, it has not yet unfolded to expose its seed (3339-52). Do these descriptions suggest an intact hymen, an erect penis, or both? Is the beloved male, female, or androgynous? Is Amant's desire heterosexual or homosexual, normative or transgressive? The association of the rose with Narcissus's fountain certainly

contributes to the ambiguity. According to Ovid, Narcissus was pursued by boys and girls and eventually fell in love with himself - a man. Guillaume does little to disguise his source's homoeroticism but instead lovingly describes Narcissus's comely visage and the burning desire Narcissus feels for himself. If Amant discovers the rose by gazing into Narcissus's 'miroërs perilleus' (1569; 25: 'perilous mirror'), might the love quest not be inflected by similar semantic, sexual, and moral difficulties?

The relationship between Amant and Bel Acueil, which dominates the last third of Guillaume's poem, suggests as much. Bel Acueil (who, by dint of grammatical gender, is male) personifies a kind of sexual receptivity that courtly readers would have considered distinctly unmanly. When he is approached by Venus armed with 'un brandon flanbant . . . dont la flame / a eschaufee mainte dame' (3406-8; 52: 'a burning torch whose flame has warmed many a lady'), he promptly yields, granting 'un bessier en dons' (3457; 53: 'the gift of a kiss'). It soon becomes clear that Amant kisses the rose and not Bel Acueil. Yet the temporary ambiguity subsequently takes on broader meaning since Bel Acueil largely replaces the rose as the object of Amant's desire. In the closing pages of Guillaume's Rose , Amant uses lyrical language (including repeated use of joie , a ubiquitous term in love lyric) to refer to the bliss he would experience if Bel Acueil were restored to him. The rose is now little more than an afterthought, and courtly love metamorphoses into its apparent contradiction, an amorous bond between men:

Je n'oi bien ne joie onques puisque Bel Acueil fu em prison,que ma joie et ma guerisonest toute en li et en la rosequi est entre les murs enclose;et de la covendra qu'il isse,s'Amors veut ja que j'en garisse,que ja d'aillors ne quier que j'oiehonor ne bien, santé ne joie.Hai! Bel Acueil, biau douz amis,se vos estes em prison mis,gardez moi seviaus vostre cuer.

(3966-77)

(I have had no blessings or joys since Fair Welcome was put in prison, for all my joy and my salvation is in him and in the rose that is confined within the walls. He will have to come out from there if Love wants me to be cured, for I seek neither honour nor good, neither health nor joy from any other source. Ah, Fair Welcome, fair sweet friend, if you are imprisoned, at least keep your heart for me.)

(61)

Guillaume's Rose concludes soon afterward, leaving the narrator's promises of a truthful revelation unfulfilled. In the absence of this gloss, the poem yields an array of incompatible meanings - literal and allegorical, proper and improper. Simon Gaunt has shown that this semantic openness and sexual indeterminacy have a long afterlife in Rose manuscripts. Some illuminations depict Bel Acueil in female dress in an attempt to 'normalize' Amant's erotic drives. Yet this does little to resolve the problem, since the image yields 'either the troublesome spectacle of the textual and visual contradicting each other, or alternatively . . . the even more troublesome spectacle of a cross-dressed Bel Acueil'. **6** The ubiquitous reading of the Rose as an allegory of heterosexual seduction and of the rose as the beloved lady flies in the face of manuscript evidence, which highlights contradiction and deviation in the text. More to the point, this reading is belied by the text's own fascination with semantic and sexual uncertainty. For as Hult argues, Guillaume's signal achievement is to have attached 'the problem of incompletion . . . to a larger question of the poetic expression of human desire'. **7** Just as the love quest remains in suspense, so, too, the allegory of love remains equivocal and incomplete, even to the point of compromising the moral value of the lessons it purports to teach.

Jean de Meun

As Daniel Poirion remarks, '[Medieval] literature, like [medieval] architecture, is a work in progress, pursued as need be from one generation to the next.'. **8** It is not unusual to encounter texts in which major narrative elements remain unresolved, and it is precisely these enigmatic, open-ended texts that yielded continuations (for example Chrétien de Troyes's Conte du graal , see Chapter). Typically, the continuation exaggerates the ambiguities of the original work through structural, thematic, or stylistic changes. Indeed, Poirion remarks, 'One must not evaluate this kind of undertaking on the basis of fidelity to the model', for continuators typically reinterpret the original text according to the cultural and ideological expectations of a new audience. **9**

This is certainly the case with Jean's 18,000-line continuation of the Rose . Guillaume left many things unsaid for the sake of discretion and stylistic indirection; Jean, a product of his scholastic education, aspires to 'know everything' (15184). Guillaume focuses primarily on description and narration; Jean prefers direct discourse. Guillaume's narrator is a courtly lover; Jean's is also a student, albeit one who often fails to grasp, or is indifferent to, the knowledge imparted to him. Finally, though the goal of the love quest remains the same, Jean's poem actually manages to achieve it, recounting the assault on the castle and plucking of the rose in a series of lurid, thinly veiled sexual metaphors. If Guillaume was reticent about depicting the last gradus amoris , Jean has no such scruples. His goal is to add whatever words are needed to Guillaume's poem, be they 'sages ou foles' (10568; 163: 'wise or foolish'), until Amant is able to take the rose from its branch.

That said, Jean also plainly grasped the constitutive ambiguities of Guillaume's allegory and sought to amplify them using disputatio : the scholastic method for pursuing knowledge through opposing propositions and authorities. Beyond completing the love quest, Jean is not terribly interested in advancing the plot. He emphasizes speeches instead - monologues and dialogues in which characters like Reson (Reason), Ami (Friend), Faus Semblant (False Seeming), La Vielle (the Old Woman), Nature, and Genius hold forth on a variety of issues, including, but not limited to, love. Whereas Guillaume sought to pluralize his poem's meaning by indefinitely deferring textual closure, Jean makes space for an even broader variety of discourses and perspectives, including overtly discrepant ones. Using the techniques of a compilator (who cites the work of others but disguises his own opinions), he transforms Guillaume's psychological romance into a massive polyphonic composition, one in which there are no sovereign voices, only dialectical tensions between incompatible ones.

Poirion observes that this 'blossoming of dialectic' in Jean's continuation is at the expense of 'faith in words', and indeed Jean repeatedly insists on the dislocation of truth and authority in language. **10** As we have seen, Guillaume's Rose casts doubt on poetry as a vehicle for truth by heralding a definitive meaning that never actually arrives. Jean insists that truth is not only lacking in his poem but is also difficult to distinguish from poetry. In the course of a digression about the composition and reception of the poem itself, the narrator urges:

Notez ce que ci vois disant,d'amors avrez art souffisant.Et se vos i trovez riens trouble,g'esclarcirai ce qui vos troublequant le songe m'orrez espondre.Bien savrez lors d'amors respondre,s'il est qui an sache opposer,quant le texte m'orrez gloser;et savrez lors par cel escritquant que j'avrai devant escritet quant que je bé a escrire.

(15113-23)

(Take note of what I say now, and you will have art of love enough. If you have any difficulty, I will explain whatever is troubling you when you hear me interpret the dream. Then, when you hear me gloss the text, you will be able to reply on behalf of love if anyone raises objections; and you will be able to understand through this writing what I will have written previously, as well as what I wish to write.)

(234, modified)

Jean here offers an unmistakeable echo of his predecessor's work: line 15117 is virtually identical to line 2073, cited above. Moreover, just as Guillaume fails to expound the hidden meaning of his dream, Jean's promise of a gloss remains unfulfilled: once the lover has plucked the rose, the poem concludes abruptly with the dreamer's awakening. However, Jean does not simply insist on the failure of allegory to reveal truth; he also suggests the impossibility of discovering anything beyond the imperfect realm of signs. The lack of an ulterior escrit to stabilize the present one is mirrored by a play of verbal tenses in the promise itself. Using the future and future perfect, Jean imagines a subsequent moment in which the reader will know the meaning of a text Jean will have written but has not yet. Since that text does not exist, Jean's Rose is caught in a temporal paradox: it imagines the eventual discovery of its meaning in an escrit that always will have been written but never has been. The allegory does not enclose or disclose its truth. Instead it constructs an infinite loop in which linear chronology collapses into temporal paradoxes and a signifying chain in which there are no stable or positive terms.

Jean returns to the notion of language as a purely relational system at the end of his poem. In the course of discussing the relative charms of young and old women, the narrator summarizes an argument from Aristotle whereby an entity can only be known through knowledge of its opposite:

Ainsinc va des contreres choses,les unes sunt des autres gloses;et qui l'une an veust defenir,de l'autre li doit souvenir,ou ja, par nule antancion,n'i metra diffinicion;car qui des .II. n'a connoissance,ja n'i connoistra differance,san quoi ne peut venir en placediffinicion que l'an face.

(21543-52)

(The nature of contrary things is that the one is the gloss of the other: if you want to define one, you must be mindful of the other, or else you will never achieve a definition, however good your intentions. Unless you know both, you will never understand the difference between them, without which no proper definition can be made.)

(332, modified)

In Jean's hands, Aristotle's logical argument becomes a linguistic and literary one. There can be no knowledge and no determination of meaning without discrepancy. Things are texts ('gloses') that relate to one another as a signifier to a signified or a poem to its exegesis. There are no self-defining values, only contradictions that require the interpretive efforts of a reader in order to yield meaning. Put another way, the signified always functions as a signifier and cannot prevent slippages of meaning. This volatile relationship between figuration and signification is what Poirion calls the irony of Jean's Rose : the discrepancy between a figure of speech and the significance it bears or an irresolvable dispute between competing discourses, none of which is fully reliable. **11**

One might imagine that Reson, as the embodiment of the rational faculties, could resolve these contradictions and yield internally consistent forms of knowledge. Certainly, she claims to offer an alternative to Fortune's capriciousness and Amor's mutability. If Amant abandons the love quest and devotes himself to her, he will become, like Socrates, 'fors' ('firm') and 'estables' (5818; 90: 'strong'). Reson even suggests that she has mastery over allegory itself, that she can extract the 'secrez de philosophie' (7140; 109: 'secrets of philosophy') from 'geus' (games) and 'fables' (7145) through integumental reading. Tellingly, though, this theory arises within a discussion of a mythological exemplum (Jupiter's castration of Saturn and the resultant birth of Venus) that Reson never fully explicates and that she in fact uses to defend plain speaking and to elucidate the arbitrariness of language and the lack of inherent truths in signs. Amant priggishly denounces Reson for using a

vulgarity, coilles (balls), in recounting the tale. She retorts that there is nothing sinful in the things themselves (which God created), nor in the names used to signify them. If, when she originally imposed names on things, Reson had called coilles reliques (relics) and reliques coilles , Amant would undoubtedly now find fault with the word reliques . A word is therefore not intrinsically obscene but becomes so through social convention. As Hult argues, Jean uses this episode to effect 'a direct figurative relationship between castration or bodily dismemberment and linguistic functions as they are predicated upon the tenuous yet commonly accepted bond between word and thing'. **12** Just as Saturn's coilles were severed from his body, so speech is dislocated from intention, signs from referents. And just as Saturn's castration leads to Venus's birth, so 'the loosening of ties between words and things betokens the possibility of figuration in a variety of dimensions'. **13** Of course, Reson, herself an allegory, is not exempt from alienation in signs but is replete with slippages and contradictions. She offers a passionate defence of plain speech and critique of intentionality, but simultaneously insists that her own discourse is deliberately obscure. And though she attempts to convince Amant to shun love, she also tries to convince him to take her as his 'amie' (5771; 89: 'beloved')! Is Reson entirely reasonable and 'estable', then? Or is she instead passionate and 'muable'?

The unreasonableness of reason not only reflects Jean's fondness for irony and paradox but also his awareness that language is fundamentally incompatible with truth. Susan Stakel argues that the language of deceit is pervasive in Jean's Rose and that the character of Faus Semblant offers a paradigm for discursive representation generally. **14** Faus Semblant first appears in the poem as Amor rallies his armies for an attack on the castle. He swears to fight on Amant's behalf, but Amor, doubting that a character so-named could be a reliable ally, demands to know where Faus Semblant can be found when he is needed. The answer does little to reassure Amor, for Faus Semblant is apparently everywhere and nowhere at once. Though utterly ubiquitous, he generally passes unnoticed: 'Onques en vile / n'entrai ou fusse conneüz, / tant i fusse oïz ne veüz' (11154-6; 172: 'I have never been recognized in any town I have entered, however much I may have been heard and seen there'). And though his disguises are many, he is expert at deceiving through signs: 'Sai par queur trestouz langages' (11166; 172: 'I know all languages by heart'). Could Faus Semblant know the language of Reson and furtively speak to readers through her? As Stakel demonstrates, this is indeed the case: the lexical family and synonym group linked to deception (more than 600 words and expressions) pervade all the speeches in Jean's poem, including those of Ami and La Vielle, who openly advocate deceit, and Reson and Nature, who supposedly illuminate higher truths.

The unreliability and inextricability of language find their most radical expression in Jean's authorial signature, really a double signature in which Jean names Guillaume (who failed to name himself) as the original author of the Rose and himself as continuator. He does this obliquely, however, speaking through Amor. Addressing his army before the assault on Jealousy's castle, Amor introduces the previously nameless lover as Guillaume de Lorris and announces that Guillaume will begin 'le romant / ou seront mis tuit mi conmant' (10519-20; 162: 'the romance that will contain all my commandments'). To reaffirm his fealty, Amant has just repeated Amor's commandments, which he first learned in Guillaume's poem. The commandments will indeed be set down - or have been set down, since we have read them now twice. From the naming of Amant we can understand two things: first, that Amant is Guillaume, who will be/was the original author of the poem we have been reading; second, that the poem will have/had a second author. The poem had an author, otherwise it would not exist, but it also will have an author, since Amor prophesies that the poem in which he speaks remains to be written. Tracing another temporal loop and chain of escrits , the Rose incorporates into its narrative the written record of a prophecy of the writing down of that prophecy.

This chronology is rendered more intricate still when Jean identifies himself as the author of the continuation. After introducing Guillaume to his army, Amor cites what will be the last few lines of Guillaume's poem - words we have already read. He then predicts the death of Guillaume, who will leave his poem incomplete, and announces the birth, forty years afterward, of Jean de Meun, who

will discover and complete Guillaume's fragment. In other words, this implicit authorial signature lies chronologically somewhere between Guillaume's death and Jean's birth. This temporal paradox is captured rather creatively in a sixteenth-century illuminated manuscript (Pierpont Morgan M948) in which Guillaume is depicted as a cadaver lying on a dissecting table with a book open on a shelf above him, while Amant waits outside for Jean to continue his story (see Figure). Through this tortuous account of the poem's genesis, Jean suggests that the author and his name are, like the poem itself, signifiers cut off from their origins. The signature does not contain the reality of what it names but is instead a fictional construct liable to the unpredictability of interpretation and the play of differences between 'contreres choses': being and nothingness, life and death. For Jean, subjectivity is constituted in, and fragmented by, language and temporality. It is not a conscious presence or a reliable recollection of the past, rather an evanescence of words and meanings in time.

Le Roman de la rose , Pierpont Morgan M948, fo. 44r. This illumination (from a lavish manuscript produced in 1525 for François I, king of France) appears immediately after Guillaume de Lorris's poem has ended and Jean de Meun's has begun. It depicts Guillaume as a cadaver crowned with laurels and lying on a dissecting table. There is a book (perhaps the Rose itself) open on a shelf above Guillaume. Amant waits outside for Jean to continue the love story.

Conclusion

If the authorship of the Rose is as elusive as its senefiance , could the authors ever be held responsible for the content of their work or its effects on readers? Jean's narrator explicitly addresses this question prior to the assault on the castle, seeking to forestall accusations of obscenity and misogyny. He claims to have done nothing but 'reciter' (15204: 'repeat') the writings of others, and indeed has done so only to advance knowledge. He ought not to be blamed, therefore; rather, 'aus aucteurs vos an prenez / qui an leur livres ont escrites / les paroles que g'en ai dites' (15188-90; 235: 'Do not call me a liar, but blame those authors who have written in their books what I have said').

Is this claim sincere, or yet another instance of imposture and false seeming? The question has been debated at least since the Querelle de la Rose , a late medieval polemic in which Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson disputed the moral status of the Rose with Pierre and Gontier Col and Jean de Montreuil (see further Chapter). The former object to Jean's Rose as an offence against public morality, with Christine objecting in particular to passages that are libellous to women. The latter echo Jean himself, countering that characters speak for themselves, not the author, and that their words must conform to their natures, whether upright or dissolute. As has often been observed, there is unsound reasoning on both sides. Jean's detractors argue that the lack of overt moralization contributes to the delinquency of readers. However, if moral responsibility implies the capacity for choice, they in effect deny readers the necessary precondition for rectitude by insisting that all texts be morally unequivocal. Jean's defenders identified this contradiction and argued for a firm distinction between characters' words, authors' intentions, and the ethics of a text. Pierre Col praises Jean for granting readers the opportunity to learn from, and defend against, his characters' lubricity. Yet in the same breath he defines Jean's intentions and the morality of the Rose almost as narrowly and conventionally as his opponents do: '[Jean] teaches the defenders to guard the castle: and it was for this purpose that he wrote [the Rose].'. **15**

What is most valuable about the Querelle is not, however, the inconsistencies of the opposing arguments, rather the insights it gives us into the difficulties faced by medieval readers as they sought to grasp the moral and political implications of a text in which authority, intention, and meaning have been radically destabilized. These are the same difficulties faced by critics today. Does Jean's rupturing of words and things, language and identity imply an analogous break with social constraints and sexual repression, as Poirion argues. **16** Or is Alastair Minnis right to claim that the Rose exposes 'paradoxes, tensions, and apparent absurdities' internal to elite clerical culture only to promote in turn its core beliefs and values. **17** To my mind, Minnis's argument is the more convincing of the two. If Jean points to rifts and contradictions within clerical ideology, this in turn requires a compensatory gesture: words and fictions that remind the clergy of their power by pointing to the forms of social distinction that constitute them as a ruling class, notably the exclusion and subordination of women. **18**

Strikingly, one of the clearest examples of misogyny in the Rose is also one of its most densely metaphorical passages: the assault on the castle and plucking of the rose. After Venus engulfs the castle in flames and razes it to the ground, Amant thrusts his staff into an aperture in the fortification, scatters seed from his sack onto the rosebush, and, finally, plucks the rose from its branch. Though the ulterior meaning of this scene is never revealed (as was once promised), it plainly represents an aggressive, even violent act of insemination, a sexual union that is anything but mutual, and a juxtaposition of 'contreres choses' in which one thing is known by the other but without reciprocation. Indeed, the rose remains utterly passive, mute, and inert even as she/it is literally and metaphorically inflamed by desire. The Rose here rehearses, without fully ironizing, a display of masculine bravado that depends upon the silencing of contrary discourses (the rose's speech has been nipped in the bud) and the objectification of women (the rose is not, properly speaking, a personification but a flower).

There are, of course, a range of perspectives on this and every other issue related to form, meaning,

and ideology in the poem. The Roman de la rose is a paradigmatic example of the medieval predilection for open, active, inexhaustible texts, and full consensus on its meaning is neither possible nor desirable. If this massive, hybrid, recondite poem presents modern readers with formidable interpretive challenges, it amply rewards us by casting and recasting the very questions that fascinate and disturb us today: the relationship between language and meaning, representation and truth, gender and politics, social roles and moral values.

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Notes

1 See S. Huot, The 'Romance of the Rose' and its Medieval Readers: Interpretation, Reception, Manuscript Transmission (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

2 See H. M. Arden, The 'Roman de la rose': an Annotated Bibliography (New York, Garland, 1993).

3 J. L. Baird and J. R. Kane, trans., La Querelle de la Rose: Letters and Documents (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. 147.

4 References are to line numbers in Lecoy's edition, then page numbers (where relevant) in The Romance of the Rose , trans. F. Horgan (Oxford University Press, 1994).

5 D. F. Hult, Self-fulfilling Prophecies: Readership and Authority in the First 'Roman de la rose' (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 70.

6 S. Gaunt, 'Bel Acueil and the Improper Allegory of the Romance of the Rose ', New Medieval Literatures 2 (1998), 65-93 (p. 75).

7 Hult, Prophecies , p. 261.

8 D. Poirion, Le Roman de la rose (Paris, Hatier, 1973), p. 98.

9 Poirion, Roman , p. 98.

10 Poirion, Roman , p. 142.

11 Poirion, Roman , pp. 145-73.

12 D. F. Hult, 'Language and Dismemberment: Abelard, Origen, and the Romance of the Rose ', in K. Brownlee and S. Huot (eds.), Rethinking the 'Romance of the Rose': Text, Image, Reception (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 121.

13 Hult, 'Language', p. 122.

14 S. Stakel, False Roses: Structures of Duality and Deceit in Jean de Meun's 'Roman de la rose' (Stanford, ANMA Libri, 1991), esp. pp. 46-82.

15 Baird and Kane, Querelle , p. 109.

16 D. Poirion, 'Les mots et les choses selon Jean de Meun', L'Information Littéraire 26 (1974), 7-11.

17 A. Minnis, Magister Amoris: the 'Roman de la rose' and Vernacular Hermeneutics (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 193

18 N. D. Guynn, Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).