

ROMAN DE LA ROSA

Roman de la Rose. This chivalric romance epic length poem reveals one of the fullest expressions of chivalry and romance in the high Middle Ages, the 13th century. It is in the first part of the poem that these qualities are on display, for that part reflects the dominant chivalric mode of mediaeval sensibility. That first part, 4058 lines of heroic pentameter, was composed by Guillaume de Lorris, ca. 1230. It is entirely about the art of love, mediaeval style—suggestive perhaps of Ovid’s *Art of Love*, but strongly tinged with courtly values. The second part of the poem, taken on at the death of Lorris, was composed by Jean de Meun, who began his work in 1275, and composed 17, 247 lines of the same verse pattern. His work, as we shall say more fully, was of a deeply different tenor from that of Lorris, more worldly and cynical. The result is a double epic, consisting of two sharply different, though remotely related, parts.

The Themes of the *Roman*. The theme of both parts of the poem is love, of course, and the way to understand ladies and win the one you want. The first part, in which chivalry and romance dominate, starts with the implication that the poem is a dream, related by a lover. The lover’s first steps, as the poem opens, carry him to a high wall, which surrounds the castle of a nobleman, a castle called Dedit, or Pleasure. The lover is counseled by the Love God on the best way to pursue the lovely lady he seeks within the *hortus conclusus* (the enclosed garden) which lies within the castle walls—and which in the thought of the time served as a metaphor for the perfect womb of the Virgin Mary. In the course of setting up a plan for the lover, the Love God dispenses a great deal of useful advice on female psychology—no small part of the wide fascination of the text in its time. In the later portion of the poem, while still holding to the dream castle theme, the poet Jean de Meun studs his advice on love with many warnings about the degraded nature of women. For Jean de Meun *Raison, Reason*, becomes the presiding deity, and the spokesperson for caution in the battle ground of romance. But Jean de Meun goes farther, in his spirited assault on the many vices of his time. He takes particular aim against sodomy, which was a sin for the Church, and which seems to Jean to be a beastly deviation from nature. The allegorical deity Genius is assigned especially to the attack on the sodomites, whom he urges to use their styluses to write on the beautiful tablets, women, God has provided for them. Genius wishes sodomites to burn in hell, and in addition ‘may they suffer the loss of scrotum and testicles.’ It is this kind of attack, and a wide range of scurrilous languages Jean de Meun employs, that in part account for the widespread fascination with this text of his.

The Influence of the *Roman de la Rose*. More than 300 manuscripts of the *Roman* were in circulation not long after its composition, which testifies to the attraction of the work. Part of the poem was in its time translated from Old French into Middle English, and one of the translators, reputedly, was Chaucer.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Romance of the Rose, trans. Hargan, 1999.

Secondary source reading

Lewis, C.S., *The Allegory of Love*, 1936. (Old, but absolutely the classic on the topic.)

Further reading

Huizinga, Johan, *The World of the Middle Ages*, 1989.

Original language reading

Zumthor, Paul, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, 1972.

Suggested paper topics

Look at some of the illustrated mediaeval manuscripts of the *hortus conclusus*, to see what ravishing concepts of beauty and peace are summoned up there. Can you see why the lover, in the first part of the *Roman de la Rose*, needed advice on how to proceed within the castle walls? What is the relation between the doctrine of the closed garden and Catholic tradition concerning the birth giving of Mary?

Look into the intersecting world perspectives of Christine de Pisan, Francois Villon, and Jean de Meun. Can you see why Christine de Pisan eagerly joined the public debate about Jean de Meun's work, and why she so disparaged it? Can you imagine Francois Villon reading Jean de Meun? What would his attitude have been?

Excerpt

<http://www.library.rochester.edu/robbins/medsex-heckelR1>

The God of Love and the Affair of the Heart

The God of Love, who had maintained his constant watch over me and had followed me with drawn bow, stopped near a fig tree, and when he saw that I had singled out the bud that pleased me more than did any of the others, he immediately took an arrow and, when the string was in the nock, drew the bow -- a wondrously strong one -- up to his ear and shot at me in such a way that with great force he sent the point through the eye and into my heart. Then a chill seized me, one from which I have, since that time, felt many a shiver, even beneath a warm fur-lined tunic. Pierced thus by the arrow, I fell straightway to the earth. . . . I took the arrow in my two hands and began to pull hard at it, sighing as I pulled. I pulled so hard that I drew out the feathered shaft, but the barbed point called Beauty was so fixed inside my heart that it could not be withdrawn. It remains within; I still feel it, and yet no blood has ever come from there.

I was in great pain and anguish because of my doubled danger: I didn't know what to do, what to say, or where to find a physician for my wound, since I expected no remedy for it, either of herbs or roots. But my heart drew me toward the rosebud, for it longed for no other place. If I had it in my power, it would have restored my life. Even the sight and scent alone were very soothing for my sorrows.

I began then to draw toward the bud with its sweet exhalations. Love selected another arrow, worked in gold. It was the second arrow and its name was Simplicity. It has caused many a man and woman all over the world to fall in love. When Love saw me approach, he did not threaten me, but shot me with the arrow that was made of neither iron nor steel so that the point entered my heart through my eye. No man born, I believe, will ever dislodge it from there, for I tried, without any great joy, to pull the shaft from me, but the point remained within. Now know for a truth that if I had been full of desire for the rosebud before, my wish was greater now. As my woes gave me greater distress, I had an increased desire to go always toward the little rose that smelled sweeter than violets.