

## *Introduction*

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Literary history tells a well-established story about the *Roman de la Rose* as the most influential work of Old French literature, surviving in over three hundred manuscripts and fragments, more than almost any other vernacular poem of the Middle Ages. The presence of so many beautifully illuminated copies of the *Rose* testifies to its popularity amongst a wealthy, aristocratic audience, and the poem's afterlife and reception history is generally thought of in relation to such a courtly milieu. Seeing the text as a literary monument, however, has often meant that its existence is simply taken for granted, and little attention is paid to the original context of the poem's production. This collection seeks to redress the balance. Rather than concentrating on what the *Roman de la Rose* became, we want to explore how it came about and how it responded to and intervened in the intellectual environment of its composition. The particular context – the clerical and Latinate academic world of the 1260s and 1270s whose centre was the University of Paris – is that of Jean de Meun, the more significant of the two authors. His continuation, over four times longer than the first section ascribed to Guillaume de Lorris, abounds with explicit and oblique references to Latin works studied in schools and universities and, for all the brilliance of Guillaume's poetry, Jean's far outdoes it in sophistication and complexity. After its completion by Jean in the 1270s or, at the latest, the early 1280s, the *Rose* became an instant success and was read by secular and clerical audiences alike. The vast range of different themes explored in the *Rose* – from discussions of fortune, predestination, and free will to speculations about an ideal human society and from Roman history to optics via aesthetic theory and meteorology – has led some to see the work as a sort of encyclopaedia, as part of a trend in which authors such as Gossouin de Metz and Brunetto Latini produced compilations of knowledge in the vernacular for secular audiences.<sup>1</sup> Even if the scope of the material treated in the *Rose* could be called encyclopaedic, however, its seemingly chaotic organization and its ironic and playful tone

are difficult to reconcile with an encyclopaedic design. Accordingly, the *Rose* has variously been described as an 'encyclopaedia in disorder', an 'anti-encyclopaedia', or a mirror reflecting 'the epistemological fragility of the encyclopaedic project'.<sup>2</sup> While the poem engages with contemporary and often controversial ideas and debates, it does so via an unstable and unreliable framework of vernacular love poetry. Where a compilation of knowledge aims to provide a wealth of easily retrievable and useful information, the *Rose* offers paradox and confusion alongside the promise that its deliberately staged ambiguities and contradictions can be resolved through careful interpretation.

The *Rose* is undeniably an intellectually ambitious and demanding poem, but readers and critics have struggled to put their finger on how exactly the poem's ideas work and how it ought to be read. Explaining how the *Rose* articulates and develops ideas, and how it relates to contemporary philosophy and to contemporary thought more broadly, requires literary scholars, intellectual historians, and historians of philosophy to work together.<sup>3</sup> Literary scholars have long acknowledged the need to read the *Rose* in the light of thirteenth-century thought,<sup>4</sup> and recent scholarship has placed a renewed emphasis on the poem's intellectual context, stressing the difficulty of understanding exactly how the *Rose* draws from and engages with it.<sup>5</sup> Intellectual historians and philosophers, by contrast, have generally neglected the role of vernacular French poetry in the history of medieval thought. In this volume we have sought to adopt a collective and coordinated approach to the question so as to illuminate the distinctive nature of the *Rose*'s poetico-philosophical method and to examine its wider relevance to intellectual history. In addition, we hope that this volume can contribute to a broader discussion of the history of interactions between texts divided into the unstable categories of literature and philosophy. More specifically, we want to explore how literary texts can engage in sustained intellectual speculation, challenging received notions about the relationship between philosophical thought and literary form. Standard historical accounts of literary texts often represent them as intellectually inert, passive channels for the transmission of ideas developed or articulated more fully and authoritatively by philosophers in non-literary forms. By contrast, we have started from the hypothesis that literary works of fiction in the vernacular, in this case the *Roman de la Rose*, can actively engage with philosophical debates and developments. They do so, we suggest, specifically through the particular contingency of poetic fiction, in which events described and statements made cannot necessarily be taken as unambiguously true or false.<sup>6</sup> As the character of Raison points out in

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the poem, the knowledge she attempts to convey in her long speech is closely and intimately related to the kind of demonstrative knowledge or *scientia* pursued by scholastic philosophers at the time, even though the relationship is oblique and paradoxical:<sup>7</sup>

Or te demonstreré sanz fable  
 chose qui n'est pas demonstrable,  
 si savras tantost sanz sciance  
 et connoistras sanz connoissance  
 ce qui ne peut estre seü  
 ne démontré ne conneü.  
 (RR 4249–54)

Now I shall demonstrate to you without  
 fable something that is not demon-  
 strable, and you will soon know without  
 knowledge and understanding that  
 which cannot be known or demonstrated  
 or understood.  
 (Translation emended)

While the *Roman de la Rose* is influenced by institutionally established modes of thinking, it also engages with these modes actively and creatively, developing its own distinctive form of speculation as a poetic, fictional narrative. Accordingly, the poem invites readers to explore ideas as they arise from the specific challenge of interpreting an allegorical narrative from which no definitive and authoritative conclusions can ever be drawn.

From what follows it should be apparent that our approach differs greatly from the 2017 collection of essays *Jean de Meun et la culture médiévale* that considered Jean's writing in its cultural context.<sup>8</sup> That volume focused far more on the historical figure of the author, was less concerned with the philosophical trends to which he responded, and paid far greater attention to the reception of the *Roman de la Rose*. This volume, on the other hand, is less traditional in its approach to literary history and pays greater mind to the content of the poem itself, reading passages closely in order to bring out their philosophical ramifications.

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Understanding how the text was produced and how it engages with the thought of its time demands careful consideration of the ways in which it mobilizes, articulates, or enacts philosophical ideas. Philosophical or encyclopaedic readings of the *Rose* have often assumed that its plot is largely an incidental device, adopted to provide unity to an otherwise disparate, even rambling assemblage of Jean de Meun's 'vagues dissertations scientifiques'.<sup>9</sup> In the present volume, by contrast, we begin with the assumption that the *Rose*'s specifically narrative and poetic character is an essential, integral element of how meanings and ideas are produced by the text. Accordingly, it is important to situate any discussion of its

philosophical developments within the fictional framework that the *Rose* itself provides. We shall examine this question in some depth in this first part of the introduction, before discussing the poem's place within its contemporary intellectual culture in the second part.

The poem begins with the narrator's appeal to Macrobius's *In somnium Scipionis* as a textual authority (RR 1–20), in order to affirm the truthfulness of a dream the narrator experienced at the age of twenty, and which he is about to recount (RR 21–30). In his dream, the narrator, commonly known as Amant (the Lover), walks into the garden of Deduit (Pleasure) and finds at its centre a reflective, mirror-like stream. The stream is identified as the fountain of Love, in which the Narcissus of Classical mythology was fatally captivated by the beauty of his own reflection. In this fountain Amant sees a reflection of the Rose, with which he promptly falls in love. He is then shot repeatedly with arrows fired by the Dieu d'Amor (God of Love), also known as Cupidon (Cupid). Seeking above all else to possess the Rose, he must negotiate a series of prosopopoeic characters, such as Honte (Shame) and Dangier (Refusal), while enlisting the help of others such as Bel Accueil (Fair Welcome), Ami (Friend), and Cortoisie (Courtesy). After he manages to kiss the Rose, Jalousie (Jealousy) becomes enraged and builds a tower in which to imprison the flower with La Vieille (Old Woman) as a chaperone. Eventually, after Faux Semblant (False Appearance) and Astinence Contrainte (Enforced Abstinence) help by killing Male Bouche (Evil Tongue), Amant is able to approach the tower. Venus, Amor's mother, appears in her dove-driven chariot and fires a burning brand that burns down the tower. Amant goes into the rubble, equipped by Venus with a phallic pilgrim's staff and a pilgrim's scrip containing two testicular hammers. Persuading Bel Accueil that he will do the Rose no harm, he shakes the rose-bush violently and then spills his seed into the flower before the text comes to its sudden conclusion.

What are the implications of this narrative framework for our approach to the poem, specifically in terms of its relation to thirteenth-century philosophy and intellectual culture? Investigating how a poem or a fictional narrative might convey an idea necessitates the consideration of form and style as integral elements of the ideas expressed: there is no getting at *what* is meant without also examining *how* it is expressed.<sup>10</sup> The importance of the active power of poetic form in shaping its meaning can be illustrated through analogy with a key idea of thirteenth-century natural philosophy, namely Aristotle's notion of

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hylomorphism:<sup>11</sup> every creature is comprised of its form, an active, often masculine shaping principle, and its matter, the passive and often feminine material upon which the form acts and which it 'informs'. According to hylomorphism, the existence of form without matter – or vice versa – is inconceivable. By analogy, then, the articulation of seemingly 'immaterial' philosophical ideas is in fact possible only through a process where a material support – in this case, language – is 'informed', allowing the 'formulation' of ideas. To neglect the impact of the 'material' qualities of a text such as the *Rose* – its adoption of imaginative allegorical fiction and verse – on the seemingly immaterial ideas expressed in/through it is to neglect its hylomorphic character. Only by paying close attention to the mutually enmeshed nature of thought and language, idea and expression, form and matter can it make sense to discuss the *Rose*'s philosophical content.

The theory of hylomorphism thus provides a suggestive model for understanding the *Rose*, although one that is also potentially problematic and that might even appear to be inappropriate. The poem, in fact, appears to describe its own relation to any sort of metaphysical or philosophical truth in very different ways that are reminiscent of a dualistic, Platonic ontology rather than the Aristotelian notion of hylomorphism. The *Rose*'s narrator appeals to conspicuously binary and dualistic terms, invoking a clear rupture between the dream-narrative recounted by the dreamer/lover and its deeper meaning: 'moi ai ge fiance / que songes est senefiance' (for my part I am confident that a dream signifies, *RR* 15–16, translation emended) and the narrator later promises that he will 'espondre' (expound) the true 'senefiance' of this dream:

Qui dou songe la fin ora,  
 je vos di bien que il porra  
 des jeus d'Amors assez aprendre,  
 puis que il veille tant atendre  
 que je die et que j'encomance  
 dou songe la senefiance.  
 La verité, qui est coverte,  
 vos sera lores toute overte  
 quant espondre m'oroiz le songe,  
 car il n'i a mot de mençonge.  
 (*RR* 2065–74)<sup>12</sup>

I can assure you that whoever hears  
 the end of the dream will be able to  
 learn a great deal about the games of  
 Love, provided that he is willing to  
 wait until I have begun to expound  
 the significance of the dream. The  
 truth, which is hidden, will be com-  
 pletely plain when you have heard me  
 explain the dream, for it contains no  
 lies.

Similar promises are reiterated multiple times later, also in Jean de Meun's continuation of the poem:

Et se vos i trevez riens trouble,  
 g'esclarirai ce qui vos trouble  
 quant le songe m'orrez espondre.  
 (RR 15,115–17)<sup>13</sup>

If you have any difficulty, I will explain  
 whatever is troubling you when you hear  
 me interpret the dream.

Raison, as part of a frequently quoted exchange with Amant, articulates similar principles of interpretation, applying a principle to the interpretation of texts analogous to that of interpreting dreams. In urging Amant to study the deeper, philosophical meaning of pagan myths, she observes that

qui bien entendroit la letre,  
 le sen verroit en l'écriture,  
 qui esclarcist la fable occure.  
 La verité dedenz reposte  
 seroit clere, s'el iert esposte;  
 bien l'entendras, se bien repetes  
 les integumanz aus poetes.  
 La verras une grant partie  
 des secrez de philosophie  
 ou mout te vodras deliter,  
 et si porras mout profiter.  
 (RR 7132–42)

anyone who understood the text properly  
 would find a meaning in it which would  
 clarify the obscure discourse. The truth concealed  
 within would be clear if it were explained;  
 you will certainly understand it if you recall to  
 mind the integuments of the poets. You will find  
 there a great number of the secrets of philosophy,  
 in which you will gladly take great delight and  
 from which you will also be able to gain great benefit.

Raison's explanation again implies a Platonic dualism in which the visible or physical covering of the allegorical text, the surface of its literal sense, conceals a separate, extractable truth that can be uncovered and independently articulated. All the passages just quoted invariably invoke broadly analogous hermeneutic binaries – *songe* versus *senefiance*, *covert* versus *overt*, *mençonge* versus *verité*, *trouble* versus *cler*, *letre* versus *sen*, *fable* versus *verité* – which suggests that in this poem too the presentation of philosophical or metaphysical truths appears to function according to a fundamentally dualistic principle rather than any kind of entangled hylomorphism.

At the level both of ideas and of terms, such dualistic explanations recall the hermeneutic and philosophical principles of Platonizing twelfth-century Latin poetry, and particularly the work of authors such as Alan of Lille, Bernardus Silvestris, and William of Conches.<sup>14</sup> Such authors developed or implied elaborate systems of allegorical interpretation, often employing terms such as *integumentum* (covering) or *involucrum* (enveloping) to refer to a fictional textual surface that both covers and contains deeper philosophical truths that need to be recovered or extracted.<sup>15</sup> Jean de Meun's familiarity with this tradition is well established, as is his disruptive use of it. On closer inspection it becomes clear that Jean invokes such

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Platonizing theories of philosophical allegory only to frustrate established expectations of allegorical interpretation and exposition.<sup>16</sup> The *Rose* deliberately and ostentatiously breaks its own promises to deliver anything like a tangible or stable exposition of its own *senefiance*, notably by reiterating its disingenuous promise of elucidation one last time just before the (anti-) climax of the Lover's quest: 'Bien orroiz que ce senefie / ainz que ceste euvre soit fenie' (You will certainly hear what this signifies before my work is finished, *RR* 21,183–4).<sup>17</sup> We are given no *senefiance* but are plunged instead into a whirlpool of obscene metaphors, until the dreamer finally scatters his seed into the Rose and wakes up:

A la parfin, tant vos an di,  
 un po de greine i espandi  
 quant j'oi le bouton  
 elloichié.

...

Ainsi, oi la rose vermeille.  
 Atant fu jorz, je m'esveille.  
 (*RR* 21,689–91, 21,749–50)

I can tell you that at last, when I had shaken the  
 bud, I scattered a little seed there.

...

And so I won my bright red rose. Then it  
 was day and I awake. (translation emended)

The earlier promise to 'expose' the significance of the dream (*espondre le songe*, *RR* 2073 and 15,117) is simultaneously frustrated and fulfilled: rather than being provided an *expositio* (*espondre* with an O, from Lat. *exponere*), here we have a simple scattering of seed, an expansion (*espandre* with an A, from Lat. *expandere*: to scatter, to disperse, or simply to expand).<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, then, the poem's relentless and systematic refusal to perform the long-anticipated 'exposition' amounts to an implicit rejection of Neoplatonic ideas of integumental philosophical poetry. But the rejection is only partial: while the promise to lift the veil is never kept, the *Rose* insistently claims to contain, convey, and enclose some larger truth, even though the exact modalities by which such truth might be recovered are never explained. In this 'Romanz de la Rose, / ou l'art d'Amors est tote enclose' (*Romance of the Rose*, in which the whole art of love is enclosed, *RR* 37–8; translation emended), any philosophical truth remains stubbornly 'enclosed', contained yet imprisoned, locked up – just as the Rose, the object of the lover's quest, remains confined within Jalousie's tower. But whereas the Rose is ultimately won by the lover/dreamer/narrator, the philosophical secrets of the text remain inaccessible to the reader, impenetrably wrapped up in the body of the text, and ultimately inextricable from its poetic, fictional, and linguistic texture. Indeed, the standard hermeneutic binaries opposing surface to meaning, husk to kernel, and the literal to



the allegorical no longer obtain and we are left with an unstable, inextricable compound of poetic fictions and philosophical truths. For all of its ostensible commitment to a Platonic hermeneutic dualism, then, at the level of its own poetic practice the *Rose* remains a deliberately impenetrable, inscrutable, stubbornly hylomorphic text that resists any attempt to be fully 'known'.

Critics have attempted to describe this complex subversion or transformation of established traditions of allegorical interpretation in various ways. For Maureen Quilligan, allegory has been replaced by euphemism so that instead of the hidden philosophies celebrated by the twelfth-century Platonists, '[l]ifting the veil of such metaphorical language is simply to lift up skirts, to discover physical objects only'.<sup>19</sup> In her discussion of the exchange between Amant and Raison, quoted above (*RR* 7132–42), Jill Mann observes that here "integuments of the poets" are invoked only to be dismissed, banished along with Reason'.<sup>20</sup> Quilligan has argued that what occurs here is ultimately a 'deallegorization of language' or a 'perfect inversion of the normal allegorical process of metaphor'.<sup>21</sup> Rather than being projected into the abstract world of philosophical interpretation, then, the reader is ultimately brought back to a world of tenaciously physical, material objects, making the *translatio* of *fable* into *senefiance* impossible. For Simon Gaunt, '[t]he text, far from inviting us to look *through* the "literal" to the "allegorical" level of meaning, as if the literal were transparent, seems rather to take pleasure in banging our heads against the literal, as if it were a hard and opaque surface'.<sup>22</sup>

This relentless return to the 'literal', to the hard surface of the text, finally reiterates the *Rose*'s inflexible demands to be read *as a poem* and not as the expendable husk or shadow for some extrinsic reality that might transcend or outlive it. In doing so, the *Rose* constantly reasserts its own irreducible persistence, its resistance to any sort of hermeneutic unpacking or philosophical reduction to something else. And yet, despite this stubborn resistance to domesticating strategies of interpretation, the *Rose* nonetheless demands to be read allegorically, since its complete reliance on figurative, polysemous modes of representation makes a literal interpretation impossible. It thus appears to call for different kinds of interpretive strategies that acknowledge the unstable, fluctuating relation between the surface of the narrative and its possible deeper meanings, while also forcing its readers to accept that this relation is central and can never be definitively resolved or brushed aside. How – the *Rose* forces us to ask – do we make sense of this text, and how does it produce meaning when it can neither be read literally nor unpacked allegorically?



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The conclusion of the *Rose* in particular forces readers to question both the mechanisms of signification at work in this poem and our established understanding of the complex interdependence between the 'literal' and the 'allegorical'. This is well illustrated by the succession of obscene signifiers that lead up to the defloration: pillars, tower, arrow-slit, pilgrim staff, sanctuary, curtain, rosebush, relics. These 'objects' are nothing other than unsubstantial metaphors, and David Rollo's careful reading of the poem's conclusion makes it clear that the objects in the final penetration scene cannot in fact be mapped onto real body parts in a coherent way.<sup>23</sup> This raises questions about the relationship between imaginative figures and tropes and the reality they may convey, and about the mediating role of the human imagination. Rather than conquering the body of an actual woman, as Sylvia Huot observes, Amant finally 'manages to seduce and even impregnate a metaphor'<sup>24</sup> – an event that in turn enables Jean de Meun to 'inseminate . . . the whole *Roman*',<sup>25</sup> so that the process of semiosis is prolonged endlessly beyond the close of the narrative. By the end of the text, there is space neither for abstract philosophical allegory nor for actual, 'literal' sexual consummation, but only for endless metaphorical transposition, from one trope to another: not metaphor, but endless metamorphosis. Yet again the *Rose* reaffirms its identity as a dizzying, inextricable, endlessly fertile compound of figures and objects, metaphors and ideas, language and thought, matter and form, susceptible of infinite 'expansion' (cf. *espandre*, *RR* 21,690). Again, the burden of 'making sense' of this expanding hylo-morphic compound is placed solely on the shoulders of the reader.

These individual elements' resistance to any satisfactory and definitive decoding is at the very core of how the *Rose* produces thought, of how it makes speculation happen – a kind of speculation whose unstable grounding is further indicated by the narrative framing device of an uncertain erotic dream.<sup>26</sup> This instability is further amplified and even emblemized by the central moment in the plot, Amant's encounter with the Rose whose image he sees reflected in the Fountain of Love. The dream already presents itself as an instance of compromised and distorted vision, and the fountain within the dream functions as a device that further exacerbates the distortion that it insistently signals. Before going on to examine the intellectual context in which the *Rose* was composed, then, it will be useful first to look at how, through the figure of this fountain, the text represents its own multiple distortions and, by extension, how it suggests ways in which it might be read. One point of difficulty or resistance comes in the implicit comparison between Amant and Narcissus, both snared in the same trap. Yet Amant does not see his own reflection in the fountain, as Narcissus did, but perceives the

Rose, and this parallel between the two scenes of captivity heightens the uncertain nature of his 'vision'. Is what he sees in the mirror real? If he is a second Narcissus, does the Rose – the poem's central object and the prime motor of its plot – have an extrinsic existence outside his mind or, mirroring the beautiful hunter of pagan myth, does he merely fall in love with a phantasm formed by his own imagination?<sup>27</sup> 'C'est li miroërs perilleus' (this is the perilous mirror, *RR* 1569), the narrator tells us, and the *Roman de la Rose* itself is a *miroërs perilleus* whose allegorical images and ambiguous statements may or may not bear any relation to real objects or ideas external to the dream or to the mind of the dreaming Amant. It is therefore perfectly appropriate that Jean de Meun's figure of Amor gives the *Rose* an alternative title of the *Miroër aus Amoreus* (*Mirror for Lovers*, *RR* 10,621).<sup>28</sup>

The decision to identify the *Rose* as a *Miroër* brings to mind the tradition of the didactic or encyclopaedic *speculum*, culminating precisely during the latter half of the thirteenth century with works such as Vincent of Beauvais's trilogy (*Speculum naturale*, *Speculum historiale*, *Speculum doctrinale*).<sup>29</sup> Jean de Meun's textual mirror is clearly of a different nature, however. Rather than Vincent's authoritative *compendia* that sought to organize knowledge in order to make it more widely available and easily accessible through *indices*, the mirror of the *Rose* has far greater affinity with the Fountain of Love, whose images may or may not convey truth, reflecting back the thoughts and fantasies of those 'lovers' or readers who gaze on its deceptive surface. The specific reflective operations performed by the *Rose* or the *Miroër aus Amoreus* become more evident once we encounter Nature's extended discussion of mirrors, lenses, and optics. The passage explores the analogies between mirrors and dreams, and links both to how texts signify and, by implication, how the *Rose* itself signifies. During her extended discussion of the natural order and her complaint about humans' failure to abide by her rules, Nature becomes sidetracked when mentioning rainbows, and she starts to discuss the workings of mirrors and lenses (both meanings are expressed by the appropriately ambiguous term *mirouer*).<sup>30</sup> In a passage that names Alhazen's *De aspectibus* (*RR* 18,004–6) but actually draws on Roger Bacon's *perspectiva*,<sup>31</sup> she discusses how lenses can magnify (*RR* 18,014–30), shrink (*RR* 18,123–32), or provide accurate images (*RR* 18,133–6), but can also cause fires (*RR* 18,137–42), deform (*RR* 18,143–50), or cause images to appear to have real existence outside of mirrors (*RR* 18,152–68).<sup>32</sup> This final power of *mirouers*, in particular, demands to be read against Amant's vision of the Rose in the Fountain of Love and the problem of its ontological/psychological status. Significantly, however, the first detail mentioned at the beginning of this