The Romance of the Rose by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun

Ed.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995. Prose trans. by Charles Dahlberg. ISBN: 9780691044569

Meeting Summary, Session 2 of 4, September 21, 2025

Quick recap

The meeting began with administrative changes and brief personal updates before transitioning into a detailed discussion of medieval texts focusing on love, reason, and fortune. The group explored various philosophical perspectives on love and reason, examining how different authors approached concepts of love, fortune, and political hierarchy while analyzing specific passages and allegorical figures. The conversation ended with a discussion of challenging themes in medieval literature, including friendship, marriage, and the portrayal of love, with particular attention to the contrasting perspectives between different authors and the sociocultural context of their works.

Attendees (6 of 7):

DavidJ; PeregrineB; ElizabethL; ShaneP, AndreaB; YannG

Next steps

- All participants: Continue reading *The Romance of the Rose* using the Dahlberg translation
- All participants: Consider Andrea's shared perspective on the text's contrasting discourses when analyzing the Romance of the Rose
- Andrea: Share details about the lecture on Nature's Discourse when the group reaches that section of the text
- Peregrine: Update the group on how to manage Chaucer discussions given his upcoming work commitments
- Peregrine: Inform the group when his horse jumping documentary gets a network and air date

Summary

Chaucer and Translation Challenges

The group discussed the challenges of studying Chaucer and *The Romance of the Rose*, with Peregrine noting a significant drop-off in available commentary compared to Dante. The group briefly discussed translation approaches to *The Romance of the Rose,* with David reading an example of the Robbins 1962 verse translation. Andrea shared insights from a lecture about the text's complex nature, explaining how its meaning emerges from the interaction of diverse and competing discourses, which helps explain the apparent contradictions in the text.

Love and Reason Analysis

The group discussed their analysis of a text about love and reason, focusing on the dual objectives of freeing Fair Welcome and obtaining the rose. They explored the concept of Fair Welcome as a strategy to access the beloved, and debated the nature of evil in the context of the text. The discussion touched on the lover's self-reflection and submission to love, as well as Reason's paradoxical/oxymoronic statements about love. The group also noted the idea that the lover had chosen to subject himself to love, rather than reason, and considered the implications of this choice.

Love's Paradox and Deconstruction

The group discussed the paradoxical nature of love in the text, with Yann connecting it to deconstructionist ideas of difference and deferred meaning. They explored how the text subverts traditional medieval notions of love and reason, with Peregrine and Andrea highlighting the linguistic and analytical dimensions of the passage. The discussion concluded with a consideration of how the text presents different ways of loving, with Reason attempting to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate expressions of love.

Cicero's Perspectives on Love

The group discussed Cicero's views on love, focusing on the distinction between love for reproductive purposes and love for lustful or monetary reasons. They examined how the text addresses different forms of love, including prostitution and homosexuality, with Andrea suggesting that the focus is on the purpose of sex rather than the moral judgment of the act itself. David and Peregrine noted the presence of allegorical figures like Genius and Nature, which are linked to the concept of staying on the right path. The discussion also touched on the idea of love being free from covetousness and the importance of a pure heart in love, as expressed by Reason.

Love, Fortune, and Medieval Philosophy

The group discussed a text that explores the nature of love and fortune, with a focus on the philosophical arguments presented. They analyzed the author's views on love conditioned by reason, the dangers of relying on fortune, and the surprising positive perspective on poverty. The conversation touched on medieval attitudes towards wealth, sin, and friendship, with particular attention to Dante and the use of humor in the text.

Boethius's Philosophy and Christian Thought

The group discussed Boethius's work and its intersection with Christian and classical philosophy, particularly focusing on the concepts of fortune and providence. They examined how medieval thinkers like Aquinas were grappling with reconciling classical ideas with Christian beliefs. The conversation also touched on specific passages from the text, including a debate between love and justice, and a discussion about the use of euphemisms, with particular attention to a passage about Saturn and testicles.

Medieval Text on Fortune and Power

The group discussed a medieval text that explores themes of love, fortune, and political hierarchy. They analyzed how the author presents a complex view of fortune, using detailed metaphors and references to classical figures like Nero and Seneca. Yann suggested that the lengthy discussion of fortune might reflect its recent introduction as a concept, potentially influenced by Italian thought. The conversation also touched on the text's treatment of human nature and the role of kings and princes, with Yann noting that the author views them as a lesser evil in a fallen world. David raised the point that natural inequalities in human ability could justify leadership roles, though this was left as a topic for further discussion.

Rape Culture in Textual Analysis

The group discussed a passage in their text that appeared to promote non-consensual behavior, with Yann and Andrea expressing concern about its portrayal of rape culture. They noted a significant shift in the text from an initial focus on fair and welcoming love to a more manipulative and coercive approach. Peregrine and David suggested that this passage was part of a larger sociological commentary on human behavior, showing different strategies for achieving love and highlighting the dangers of jealousy and abuse. The group agreed to continue their discussion of this challenging passage.

Friendship and Love in Medieval Texts

The group discussed themes of friendship, love, and marriage in medieval literature, focusing on how friendship and love transcend mortality. The discussion highlighted the contrast between Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's perspectives, with the latter presenting a more misogynistic view. They also examined the audience and context of the text, noting its elite nature and the different target audiences for each section. The conversation ended with a brief overview of upcoming chapters that would cover assaults on the castle.

Meeting Summary, Session 1 of 4, September 7, 2025

Quick recap

The group conducted a detailed analysis of *The Romance of the Rose*, a medieval text that served as a foundation for the Romantic movement, examining its allegorical figures, dream framework, and symbolic elements. They explored various themes including courtly love, the transition from feudal to chivalric ideals, and the complex interplay between Christian and pagan elements in the text. The discussion concluded with plans to continue their analysis of other medieval texts like Chaucer's works, focusing on themes of love, courtship, and the psychological dynamics between characters representing virtues and vices.

Attendees: ShaneE; DavidJ; AndreaB; ElizabethL; PeregrineB; YaanG

Next steps

- David: Organize a field trip to the Huntington Library on a free Thursday to see the Chaucer manuscript
- All: Review Andrea's shared links about medieval manuscripts and *Romance of the Rose* illustrations

Summary

Medieval Text Analysis Discussion

1. The group discussed their study of *The Romance of the Rose*, a medieval text that predates Dante and serves as a foundation for the Romantic movement. The group shared resources, including links to lectures and digital libraries, and discussed challenges in reading the Old French version. Yann demonstrated his ability to read the Old French text, and the group considered a potential field trip to the Huntington Library to see a *Canterbury Tales* manuscript.

Dreams in Medieval Literature Framework

2. The group discussed the dream framework in medieval literature, focusing on how it served as both a protective literary device and a means to explore abstract concepts. They examined how Guillaume used the dream vision to externalize the psychological stages of love as allegorical encounters, while also drawing parallels to religious and biblical tropes. The discussion highlighted how dreams were viewed across centuries as potentially truthful communications from gods or as a reworking of recent past experiences, with modern neuroscience suggesting dreams function as a learning mechanism by replaying the day's events.

Medieval Allegories in the Garden

3. The group discussed the allegorical figures in a walled garden, noting their similarity to scenes in Dante's Divine Comedy and Chaucer's works. They explored the medieval concept of a fallen world and the association between physical beauty and moral goodness. The discussion touched on the punishment of envy, highlighting its self-consuming nature, and the theme of sinners being punished by their own sins.

Allegorical Garden of Delight

4. The group discussed the concept of the Garden of Delight, exploring its allegorical significance as an earthly paradise that embodies courtly love while excluding elements of medieval life that threaten its idealized state. Andrea provided historical context about the transition from feudal to chivalric ideals in the 11th century, noting how the Church promoted virtues of loyalty and mercy to counteract destructive behaviors. The discussion touched on the influence of Islamic scholarship and the encyclopedic approach of the time, with Peregrine inquiring about the dates of other chivalric romances and the extent to which literary representations reflected actual social norms.

Symbolic Garden Dance Analysis

5. The group discussed a literary passage about a garden with a protective square perimeter containing a sacred circular dance of people led by the Virgin Mary, with Yann explaining the symbolic significance of the square representing terrestrial existence and the circle representing divine presence.

Narcissus and the Symbolic Fountain

6. The group discussed the narrative of Narcissus and his encounter with the rose, focusing on the symbolic significance of the fountain and its connection to Christ. Yann explained that the fountain represents Christ within the body of the Holy Virgin, contrasting with Narcissus as a pagan parody embodying self-love rather than love for others. David analyzed how the myth illustrates the transition from innocent observation to active participation in love's drama, highlighting the necessary element of self-love and projection in falling in love. The discussion concluded with an examination of the God of Love's arrows, emphasizing the progression from visual desire to deeper emotional impact.

Medieval Love and Christian Themes

7. The group next focused on the complex blend of Christian and pagan themes, particularly the use of Cupid's five arrows which Yann noted directly referenced the five wounds of Christ, creating tension between erotic love and Christian charity. Peregrine, who had studied Dante, acknowledged the poem's literary depth and its connection to Ovid's work, while Andrea highlighted the violent imagery of love as a battle and its philosophical questions about beauty and different types of love. The discussion concluded with David suggesting a revival of the history of ideas symposium focused on the philosophy of beauty.

Medieval Homage Ceremony Discussion

8. The group discussed a medieval text, focusing on a passage describing a knightly ceremony known as homage, where a vassal would pledge loyalty to his lord through a ritual that included kissing on the mouth. Andrea highlighted the intense nature of the submission process, while Yann explained that this was a significant feudal ceremony. The discussion also touched on the translation of a phrase describing someone as not being a boy, which Peregrine found intriguing.

Medieval Romance and Gentlemanly Conduct

9. The group discussed the origins of the term "romance" in literature, tracing it back to the medieval period when Latin was the language of the elite, and the term evolved from "romance languages" like French. They then explored the 10 Commandments, which focused on personal presentation and behavior for gentlemen, emphasizing elegance, proper attire, and avoiding villainy, with specific instructions about dress, grooming, and social conduct. The discussion concluded with a comparison to Polonius's famous speech in Hamlet, noting the similarities in advice about personal conduct and presentation.

Exploring Idealized Young Love

10. The group discussed a passage about love and its effects, focusing on the dramatic and idealized nature of young love. David read a section about the physical and emotional toll of unrequited love, including sleepless nights and secretive visits to a beloved. Peregrine and Andrea noted the resonance of these feelings with their own youthful experiences, while Andrea highlighted the text's shift to suggest solutions like hope and sweet talk as balm for love's pain.

Medieval Courtship Allegory Discussion

11. The group discussed their reading of an allegorical text, focusing on its depiction of medieval courtship and the psychological dynamics between characters representing virtues and vices. David explained how the text externalizes a young woman's internal conflict between natural affection and social constraints, with characters like Fair Welcome and Danger representing different aspects of her experience. The group agreed to continue their discussion in three more sessions, dividing the remaining 17,000 lines among them, with the next session in two weeks.

Chat

11:04:53 From Andrea B to Everyone:

Romance of the Rose links

University of Chicago notes & resource list: https://blogs.ubc.ca/mdvl301a/2016/09/20/romance-of-the-rose/
Lecture – The Allegory of Nature in the Romance of the Rose & The Plaint of Nature: [2024, 79']

Great conversations lecture: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_IRYlfDDMg [2022, 22']
John Hopkins Digital Library of Medieval Manuscripts: https://dlmm.library.jhu.edu/#rose
Overview of manuscript: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dPI1hW7mrM [2014, 5']
Getty Collection illuminated manuscript: https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103RVZ
Chaucer translation: https://archive.org/details/romauntofroseren00chauuoft/page/n5/mode/2up [204 pp.]

11:29:17 From Yann Garcette to Everyone:
they're probably apotropaic figures as well

11:47:57 From Yann Garcette to Everyone:
the French term for jardin is vergier in the old French

11:48:30 From Yann Garcette to Everyone:
vergier is cognate with verge : the male member and vierge or virgin

Andrea B: 👍

11:50:59 From Yann Garcette to Everyone:
papelardie

12:33:37 From Yann Garcette to Everyone:
hommage

12:52:10 From Yann Garcette to Everyone:
It draws back to psychomachia, I believe

Discussion Topics: *The Romance of the Rose* (First 4000 Lines)

1. The Dream Vision Framework and Medieval Literary Convention

Topic: How does Guillaume de Lorris employ the dream vision as a literary device, and what does this reveal about medieval attitudes toward love and knowledge?

Response: The dream vision serves as both a protective literary framework and a means of accessing deeper truths about love. By situating his allegory within a dream, Guillaume creates a space where abstract concepts can become tangible characters and experiences. This framework was particularly important in medieval literature as it allowed poets to explore potentially controversial or deeply personal topics while maintaining some distance through the fictional nature of dreams. The dreamer's journey becomes a universal experience of young love, where the psychological stages of attraction, desire, and courtship are externalized as encounters with allegorical figures. The dream also suggests that understanding love requires a kind of vision beyond ordinary waking consciousness—a theme that resonates with medieval Platonic traditions about the relationship between earthly and divine love.

2. The Garden of Delight as Paradise and Exclusion

Topic: Analyze the significance of the walled garden setting and the figures carved on its exterior walls. What does this space represent in terms of medieval social and spiritual ideals?

Response: The Garden of Delight functions as an earthly paradise that embodies the idealized courtly world, yet its very existence depends on exclusion. The negative allegorical figures carved on the exterior walls—Hate, Felony, Villainy, Covetousness, Avarice, Envy, Sorrow, Old Age, Hypocrisy, and Poverty—represent everything that threatens the refined world of courtly love. This exclusion reveals the inherently elitist nature of courtly culture, which defined itself not just by what it embraced but by what it rejected. The garden becomes a space where time seems suspended, youth eternal, and social harmony perfect. However, this perfection is artificial and fragile, dependent on keeping out the harsh realities of medieval life. The wall simultaneously protects the garden's inhabitants and imprisons them within a limited worldview that cannot ultimately sustain itself against life's complexities.

3. Narcissus and the Perilous Mirror: Self-Knowledge and Desire

Topic: Examine the role of the Narcissus myth and the fountain's mirror in the protagonist's awakening to love. How does this episode function within the larger allegorical structure?

Response: The Narcissus episode serves as both warning and inevitable fate for the dreamer-protagonist. When he gazes into the fountain's crystal mirrors, he experiences the same fatal attraction that destroyed Narcissus, yet this self-destructive impulse becomes the necessary catalyst for his entry into love's domain. The mirrors reflect not just the rose garden but the protagonist's own capacity for desire—they reveal that love always contains an element of self-love and projection. This moment represents the transition from innocent observer to active participant in love's drama. Guillaume uses the myth to suggest that falling in love involves a kind of necessary blindness or delusion, where the lover sees his own desires reflected in the beloved rather than the beloved's true nature. The fountain thus becomes a site of both knowledge and ignorance, where self-awareness paradoxically leads to self-forgetting.

4. Allegorical Characterization: The Psychology of Courtship

Topic: How do the allegorical figures (Fair Welcome, Danger, Shame, Fear, Jealousy) represent different aspects of the courtship process and the beloved's psychology?

Response: Guillaume's allegorical figures brilliantly externalize the complex emotional dynamics of medieval courtship, particularly from the perspective of a young woman navigating social expectations and personal desires. Fair Welcome represents the beloved's natural inclination toward kindness and her genuine interest in the suitor, while Danger embodies her need to maintain proper social distance and protect her reputation. Shame and Fear reflect her internalized awareness of social judgment and the potential consequences of improper behavior. Jealousy represents the broader social forces—family, community, social norms—that monitor and control female sexuality. These figures are not static opponents but dynamic aspects of a single consciousness torn between desire and propriety. Their interactions reveal how courtly love, despite its idealization of the beloved, actually creates a psychological battlefield within her, where natural affection must constantly struggle against social constraint. The lover's task becomes not just winning the beloved's heart but navigating and sometimes manipulating this complex internal landscape.

5. The God of Love's Authority and the Religion of Love

Topic: Discuss the presentation of the God of Love as a feudal lord and the implications of love as a form of religious devotion in Guillaume's allegory.

Response: Guillaume presents the God of Love with all the trappings of feudal authority—he demands homage, grants privileges, and expects absolute loyalty from his vassals. This fusion of erotic and feudal imagery reflects the medieval tendency to understand new experiences through familiar social structures. By casting love as a form of feudal service, Guillaume both elevates romantic passion and subjects it to codes of honor, duty, and service. The lover becomes a knight in Love's army, bound by specific obligations and entitled to certain protections. This religious dimension of love creates a parallel devotional system that both complements and potentially competes with Christian worship. The God of Love's commandments echo Christian moral teaching while transforming it—humility becomes service to the beloved, charity becomes generosity toward other lovers, and faith becomes unwavering devotion despite obstacles. This "religion of love" legitimizes courtly passion by giving it institutional structure and moral weight, yet it also reveals the potential tension between earthly and divine love that would become central to medieval debates about the spiritual value of romantic devotion.

6. Social Class and Access to Refined Love

Topic: How does Guillaume's portrayal of courtly love reflect and reinforce medieval class distinctions? What role does leisure play in the capacity for refined emotion?

Response: Guillaume's Garden of Delight is fundamentally an aristocratic space where the capacity for refined love becomes a marker of social distinction. The figures excluded from the garden—particularly Poverty—suggest that true courtly love requires not just noble birth but economic security and leisure. The inhabitants of the garden are freed from labor and material concerns, allowing them to dedicate themselves entirely to the cultivation of refined emotions and

aesthetic pleasures. This leisure-based conception of love implies that peasants and working people, consumed by survival needs, cannot achieve the same emotional sophistication. The allegorical framework thus naturalizes class distinctions by suggesting that social hierarchy reflects spiritual and emotional hierarchy. The lover's ability to spend time in elaborate courtship rituals, to suffer beautifully for love, and to compose poetry about his feelings all depend on freedom from economic necessity. Guillaume's romance, while celebrating individual emotional experience, ultimately reinforces the medieval notion that nobility of feeling requires nobility of birth and circumstance. This exclusivity helps explain why courtly literature was both revolutionary in its focus on individual interiority and conservative in its social implications.