

## Section 1. History

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### **DISCURSIVE READING OF JEAN DE MEUN'S CONTINUATION OF *LE ROMAN DE LA ROSE*: MEDIEVAL MISOGYNY IN LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN**

#### **Introduction**

“*Le Roman de la Rose*” (“*The Romance of the Rose*” – eng.) seems to be one of the most well-known yet notorious medieval poems composed in the High Middle Ages. While being widely acknowledged and read in the medieval times, it also became a so-called encyclopedia of courtly life (*and love*) for historians and other researchers. However, despite the romance’s obvious merits (such as literary style, variety of social and cultural subjects touched in the narrative, interesting allegories, etc.), there is one problematic feature of the text which continues to provoke heated debates in the fields of literary studies, history, gender studies, linguistics, etc. This feature is, evidently, misogynistic nature of narration in the continuation of the romance written by Jean de Meun. In this article I would like to perform a discourse analysis of literary representations of women in Jean de Meun’s continuation.

*Le Roman de la Rose* was written as a dream vision (*as narration’s structuring device*), and both authors (*Guillaume de Lorris, the author of the original text, and Jean de Meun, the author of notorious continuation*) used allegorical personifications as characters, making the *Rose* memorable, bright, and catchy. As Hult writes in the Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing<sup>2</sup> (2013, ed. by David, Dinshaw and Wallace), “at the turn of the fourteenth century, the *Rose* was quite simply the most admired and most sought-after work composed in French, a fact which is all the more striking because of the work’s convoluted genesis”. Here, he points to an important detail: the

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<sup>1</sup> De Lorris G. et al. *The romance of the rose.* – Princeton University Press, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> David W. et al. (ed.). *The Cambridge companion to medieval women’s writing.* – Cambridge University Press, 2003.

*Rose* was apparently so popular due to the fact that it was written in the vernacular (*in Old French*) instead of Latin, making it accessible for a wider audience. Latin was one of the instruments of exclusion of entire social groups from participation in literary activities. Obviously, the group that had the privilege of writing and reading in Latin was composed of men from nobility. Women and other marginalized lay social groups had fewer opportunities to learn Latin (*although, there are notable exceptions*). The appearance of literature in the vernacular, such as the *Rose*, seems to be a prerequisite of wider inclusion of people other than noble men into textual activity. In the High Middle Ages the selection of books available in the vernacular was not sizable. Women obviously read the *Rose* (*for example, according to Lett<sup>1</sup> (2013), the queen of France Clementia of Hungary had the Rose among 41 books in her personal possession*) given that there was not a plethora of other options available, even if the content of the book was not flattering for them. The fact that women did read the text makes it relevant and important to analyze it in terms of its content in relation to female figures and discourse behind it.

The ritual marginalization of women forms a cultural constant of history, encompassing literature and other forms of art, social life, politics, economical situation and etc. At the same time, as Bloch<sup>2</sup> (1987) writes, “like allegory itself, to which (*for reasons we do not have time to explore*) it [misogyny] is peculiarly attracted, antifeminism is both a genre and a topos, or, as Paul Zumthor<sup>3</sup> might suggest, a “register” – a discourse visible across a broad spectrum of poetic types”. Thus, the history of interpretations of the *Rose* (*being an example of misogynistic dream vision allegory*) as well as discourse analysis of it may give a key to the understanding of misogyny of the High and Late Middle Ages, and form a relevant context through which gender discrimination could be historicized.

### **Discursive reading of Jean de Meun’s Continuation of *Le Roman de la Rose***

Around the year 1270, Jean de Meun wrote a continuation of Guillaume de Lorris’s *Rose*, adding 17000 lines to initial 4000. According to Hult<sup>4</sup> (2013), “in satirically unmasking the solipsistic and disingenuous tactics of the courtly tradition, Jean de Meun compiled an encyclopedic array of discourses focusing upon love as a universal human predicament, delving into such topics as procreation, celibacy, friendship,

<sup>1</sup> Lett D. Hommes et femmes au Moyen Âge: Histoire du genre XIIe-XVe siècle. – Armand Colin, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Bloch R. H. Medieval misogyny // Representations. 1987. – T. 20. – C. 1–24.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Zumthor P., Yeomans F. Narrative and Anti-Narrative: Le Roman de la Rose // Yale French Studies. – 1974. – №. 51. – C. 185–204.

<sup>4</sup> David W. et al. (ed.). The Cambridge companion to medieval women’s writing. – Cambridge University Press, 2003.

marriage, prostitution, homosexuality, and obscene language". Importantly, Meun's *Rose* ended with a metaphorical sexual intercourse which can be considered a rape. Throughout the text, women are branded "with the vices of unfaithfulness, deceptive behavior, vanity, loquaciousness, and lubricity" (Hult<sup>1</sup>, 2013).

When analyzing the text of Meun, an important dilemma occurs: what can be considered misogyny and what cannot. This is connected to the questions of authorship and voice in the text. There are words that are spoken by the author directly, from his own name. But, there are also words that are put in the mouths of the characters of the literary piece. Can their misogynistic words be considered an evidence of author's misogyny? Or, only the words that are spoken on behalf of the author directly may be considered his or her official position/view on the matter? This is a complicated question, and there seems to be no academic consensus on this topic. In relation to the study of medieval misogyny, Bloch<sup>2</sup> (1987) argues the following: "The misogynist speaks of the other in terms that bespeak otherness, and thus through the voice of the other. This defining tautology emphasizes the elusiveness of misogyny as well as the pertinence of the question of reading". It means that women-hating words that are spoken by characters and not the author himself are still considered part of a misogynist discourse. I am still in process of elaborating my own position with regard to that, but in the analysis of Meun's text I adopt the following method: when misogynist words are spoken on behalf of the author, it is misogyny; when misogynist words are spoken on behalf of characters of the poem and are not disproved or criticized, it is misogyny; but when misogynist words are spoken on behalf of characters of the poem and are subsequently refuted and challenged, it is not a clear example of misogyny (*although it is still debatable*). This is a useful distinction due to the fact that the debate regarding the Meun's *Rose* tends to focus on the chapters with the tirades of Jealous Husband (*which are extremely women-hating*), and what Meun's defenders simply have to do to vindicate the author is to argue that these chapters are written on behalf of Jealous Husband (*who is apparently suffering because of his wife's betrayal and therefore is aggressive and unrestrained in his speech*) and this is not what Meun thinks of women himself. However, here my distinction is useful: after the chapters of Jealous Husband (pp. 186–191; 199–220), there is a chapter called "Friend condemns jealousy, praising equality in marriage" (pp. 220–223), where Jealous Husband is metaphorically criticized and denounced. Therefore, this is not the best example of misogyny, and it is too simple to defend Meun's writing with regards to the case of Jealous Husband chapters. What is needed is to analyze the rest of the text, looking for examples of

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<sup>1</sup> David W. et al. (ed.). *The Cambridge companion to medieval women's writing*.– Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Bloch R. H. *Medieval misogyny // Representations*. 1987.– T. 20.– C. 1–24.

misogyny which are not criticized and debunked by Meun, but instead proved and praised by the author in his own words. These are true examples of misogyny that can assist in understanding depth and configuration of Meun's *Rose's* misogyny.

There are a plethora of vices that Meun attributes to women. To start with, he equals women with riot. As Bloch<sup>1</sup> (1987) argues, "woman as riot is a topos in medieval literature and has a special sense in Old French". The word "riote" in French in its meaning is close to "chaos" or "upset", suggesting a link between women and being chaotic, irrational, and emotional. Also, it is often mentioned by Meun that it does not really matter whether a woman is beautiful or ugly – anyway, she will in the end deceive her husband. If a woman is pretty, all men would desire her, and therefore she cannot be trusted by her husband; if she is not beautiful, she would "need all the more to please and, again, will eventually betray" (Bloch<sup>2</sup>, 1987). She is always overdetermined and she perpetually signifies her desires, consequently, men are at risk of being fooled. The language that Meun uses reflect this constant threat that men are subject to. Moreover, the author uses the language of suspense and stress while describing women – he constructs an image of an uncontrollable fury who is always dissatisfied and capricious. Bloch<sup>3</sup> (1987) summarizes this: "Women are contentious, prideful, demanding, complaining, and foolish; they are uncontrollable, unstable, and insatiable [in the Meun's *Rose*]". Lastly, there are two nouns which women are compared to – a horse and a midden – which is representative enough. This is a general overview of female portraits in Meun's *Rose*, and now I will proceed to a detailed discourse analysis. I will not discuss the chapters that are written on behalf of Jealous Husband, because Meun's defenders use the character as a way vindicating Meun's in relation to accusations of misogyny. There is a chapter called "Equality condemns jealousy praising equality in marriage" (pp. 220–223) which is used to criticize the words of Jealous Husband, that is why I decided not to engage in the analysis of the discourse of these chapters, because it can easily be suggested that Meun does not agree with Jealous Husband given that he later denounces him. I will therefore analyze the lines that are more problematic in terms of author's misogyny.

I selected the chapters and lines that are most representative in terms of authors treatment of women, and I will start by those words and opinions that are not hidden by placing them in the mouses of fictional or real characters. To begin with, there appears to be three women that the author praises – Lucretia, Penelope, and Heloise. However, in the corresponding chapters he still demonstrates misogyny despite giving these women some credit. Lucretia and Penelope seems to have earned Meun's respect due to being perpetually loyal to their husbands, while Heloise is praised because she

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<sup>1</sup> Bloch R. H. Medieval misogyny // Representations. 1987.– T. 20.– C. 1–24.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

did not have a willingness to become Abelard's wife (*Meun criticizes marriage a lot, so the fact that Heloise did not try to seduce Abelard into marrying her is a thing that author respects*). In the chapter "Of Lucretia's fate, and of women in general" (pp. 191–196) Meun shows his dissatisfaction with the phenomenon of marriage (*attributing the fault for unsuccessful marriages to women*):

Thus I know, and most certainly,  
**No man, no matter how prudently**  
**She acts, can to marriage assent,**  
**Other than fools, and not repent.**

In the same chapter, he argues that although Lucretia and Penelope are good women, there are no such women in real world:

And yet there is no Lucretia,  
 No Penelope as in Homer,  
**Not one honest woman in sight,**  
 If one knows how to ask aright.  
 So said the pagans, who were wise;  
**And none ever found it otherwise.**  
**If women lack suitors for a day,**  
**Then they give themselves away.**

He also provides an example of men who are aware and unaware of the risk that marriage possesses:

Valerius who was sorely grieved  
 When his friend Rufinus conceived  
 The idea that he should marry,  
 Spoke thus to Rufinus, sternly:  
 "May all-powerful God, my friend,  
 From falling into her snare defend  
 You; **that woman who, with her art,**  
**Will ruin all, and break your heart."**

The next chapter to consider is "Of Abelard and Heloise" (pp. 196–199). Here, Meun argues that the process of learning may assist women in fighting their human nature which is irrational and foolish. He praises Heloise because she had become "better" than other women due to her education. The arguments of women being

naturally vice and silly and needing studying as a way of conquering the natural are representatively misogynist ideas. This is what Meun writes:

Yet, upon my soul, I think never  
 Lived such a woman as her ever.  
**I believe her learning placed her  
 In such a position that thereafter,  
 She was better able to conquer,  
 And subdue, a woman's nature.**

After the chapters on Jealous Husband, there is a chapter that is written on behalf of the author and not Jealous Husband. Therefore, this chapter ("*The jealous husband beats his wife*", pp. 217–220) is subject to the analysis, because this is the voice of the author and not the character. Although he introduces the opinion of *Valerius*, Meun still speaks his own words. This is what he writes:

**Women lack all honour and shame,**  
 When they choose to play a game,  
 For here's the truth: though full of sense,  
**They have not an ounce of conscience**  
 Where love or hatred are concerned;  
 Valerius himself discerned,  
**That women are bold and clever  
 In doing harm,** studious ever.

Moving further, there is a chapter called "Woman's natural freedom" (pp. 393–396). In this chapter, Meun suggests that there is no good in female freedom:

They'll act freely, if they can do so,  
 From which **many an ill must flow,**  
 And does flow, and has flowed before.

Then, in the chapter "How young men should behave towards their lover" (pp. 230–240), Meun argues that women do not know their hearts and minds, and that it is impossible to control them. Once again, he tries to convince the reader that women are irrational, foolish and prone to riot which is perceived in a bad, chaotic way. Meun writes:

**No woman knows her own mind so,**  
 Nor so constant a heart doth show,

Nor proves so true and serious,  
 That a man can be certain thus  
 Will he hold her, however he strain,  
 No more than if he, in the Seine,  
**Held a wriggling eel by its tail;**

Proceeding further, there is a chapter “The authors apology to the ladies” (pp. 444–447). These chapter is of high importance due to the fact that it is one of a few chapters where the narrator adopts a direct voice of “The Author”, and therefore all the words that are written in these chapters can be considered real opinions of Jean de Meun. That is why the analysis of this chapter will be detailed. Meun provides a sincere apology “to the ladies” and defends himself by saying that is he wrote something offensive, it was due to emotions (“In drunkenness, or yet in anger, Hatred, or envy”). Yet still, misogyny is evident throughout his writing of this chapter. For example, he claims that the *Rose* was written for “your [women’s] enlightenment”. This is condescending and arrogant enough in terms of language usage and words choice, because it suggests that men do not need the *Rose* as a source of education, while women should perceive it as an instance of truth and knowledge. Consequently, all the misogynist arguments made by Meun should be considered by women as sources of verity, which is continuously misogynist and discriminatory. Moreover, Meun argues that all the “stories” about women that he has told are true. Some of them were written by him, some of them – by other authors (*whom he respects and trusts*), but these stories are not lies, and if women are not hypocrites, they should admit that these stories are true and should not be upset with Meun’s writings. Here is an extract from the chapter:

Besides, honourable ladies,  
 If you think I tell mere stories,  
**Never take me for a liar,**  
 But those Authors who’s entire  
 Works I’ve read so I may write  
 The words that they did there indite,  
**Such words as I may write again;**  
**No lie will issue from my pen**  
 As long as never a lie they told,  
 All those who wrote the books of old.  
**All, I judge, were of one accord,**  
 Who did feminine ways record,  
**Nor were they foolish or drunken**

When in their books all was written.

Now, I will present three chapters that are written on behalf of “Nature” and “Genius” and not on behalf of the “Author”. Although the misogynist words appearing in these chapters cannot be directly attributed to Meun, because he hides it behind the allegorical characters of Nature and Genius, he makes no apology for it as he did with the chapters written on behalf of Jealous Husband, so, these words may be considered misogyny. To start with, there is a chapter called “Nature seeks to make her confession” (pp. 490–493). Here, Meun claims that there is much vice in women, and also accompanies the narration with the reference to Livy. Moreover, he once again suggests that women are untrustworthy *by nature*. In short, **there’s so much vice in woman,**

None can recount all her perverse  
 Ways in prose, or yet in verse,  
 And so says Livy who well knew  
 All the manners of women too,  
 For he states that **a woman is**  
**So easily deceived and foolish,**  
 That in her case plain entreaty  
 Avails far less than flattery;  
 And claims **she’s fickle by nature.**

Moving further, in the chapter “Genius on women’s inability to keep a secret” (pp. 493–495) further expands on the idea of female unreliability. He argues that only a fool would share secrets with a woman, because she is allegedly talkative and gossipy:

For no man born of woman ought,  
 If he’s not mad or drunk, in short,  
 To **tell his secrets to his wife,**  
 If he’d retain a private life,  
 And not hear all from another,  
 However loyal she is, by nature.  
**Rather he should flee the country,**  
**Than swear woman to secrecy.**  
 He should do naught secret in fact.  
 If she might catch him in the act,  
**Even in the face of bodily danger**  
**She will tell it to some stranger.**

The last chapter to consider is the once called “Genius on the role of women” (pp. 503–507). It is suggested there that men should “improve them all [women]”, bringing the idea that men are at a higher position and have the power to educate and refine women who are imperfect *by nature*. Moreover, there is the idea of unreliability of women again:

But **never such faith in women hold**

As to tell what must not be told.

...

But keep silence, **silence bliss is.**

Think on it, and hold your tongue,

For nothing to fair end will come,

If they're a party to your secret,

**So proud and haughty are they yet;**

**For their tongues are so corrosive,**

**Venomous; and truth's explosive.**

Moreover, Meun mentions female inclination towards having lovers and using natural charms (*which are presented as something bad and satanic*). The author uses the word “capture” in relations to female charms – he constructs an image of a fury who lures men, plays with them, and keep them imprisoned:

But when fools come to their arms

And are **captured by their charms,**

And they kiss them and embrace,

And their games with pleasure grace,

Naught from them can ever be hidden;

Meun continues the discourse of female cunning by providing the example of Delilah and Samson. He further highlight female devilment and the risk that men are subject to when trusting a woman: woman is presented as a vicious seducer who behaves obsequiously and alluringly up to the point when a man fell into her trap. Then, she turns to be a fury with no mercy:

**Delilah, that malicious woman,**

**With flattery, all full of venom,**

Cut off Samson's locks as she

Held him in her arms, all gently,

Sleeping there, against her lap,

**Caught the valiant in her trap,**  
 The strong, and noble, to his cost,  
 For all of his great strength was lost,  
 As she sheared away his hair,  
**And told his secrets to the air,**  
**All that the fool to her did bring,**  
**Not knowing how to hide a thing.**

Furthermore, there is an argument regarding women's alleged riot and uncontrollability. Again, the author deploys the language of *risk* and *fear* of female power. He presents the relationship of man and woman as a struggle for power. A rightful relationship is the one where man holds the power, but if he is not precautious, if he tells woman too much and gives away his power, he would end up in a situation where woman is in power, and this situation is shown as a dangerous one:

**But if you grant them too much power,**  
**Losing yours,** you'll rue the hour;  
 Too late regretting your mistake,  
 When **their malice doth you rake.**  
 If woman has the mastery,  
 Scripture claims, she's contrary,  
 And **will oppose her husband too,**  
 In all that he would say or do.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The continuation of the *Rose* written by Meun continues to be criticized by scholars on the grounds of its most straightforwardly women-hating passages (*those written on behalf of Jealous Husband*). Moreover, there is a focus on the concluding allegorical description of sexual intercourse which is considered indecent. However, defenders of Meun's *Rose* could simply claim that Jealous Husband's position is not author's opinion, because he makes an apology for these chapters and even argues in favor of equality in marriage. Along the same lines, one may say that the allegory in the end of the poem was simply misunderstood by the readers and does not symbolize a rape. However, there are other problematic aspects of Meun's writing. As Christine de Pizan noted in the debate on the *Rose*, the poem may be criticized on the grounds of "the negative portrayals of women, which tended to treat them as a group and not as individuals, thereby making their 'vices' natural and universal; the work's ambiguity, the absence of a clear authorial voice and intention which would serve as a moral guide to

susceptible or ignorant readers” (Hult<sup>1</sup>, 2013). Christine not only highlighted morally unacceptable representations of women, but also discussed the problems of interpretation and “readerly competence” (Hult<sup>2</sup>, 2013) with her opponents in the debate. In this article I made an attempt to follow Christine’s way of thinking, and analyzed misogynistic portraits of women with regard to the voices of authorship via a framework of literary misogyny that I constructed for the article and discussed earlier. I avoided the notorious chapters written on behalf of Jealous Husband, and focused on those passages that could be attributed to Jean de Meun *himself*. The conclusion I would like to make is the following: even if one decides to ignore the passages written on behalf of Jealous Husband as well as the allegorical rape in the end of the poem, there is still a plethora of evidence of Jean de Meun’s misogyny which is a part of widespread ritualistic medieval tradition of discrimination of women. Meun presents women as cunning, overdetermined, irrational, uncontrollable, emotional, unwise, and vicious. Given that the *Rose* was exceptionally popular among both men and women in the Middle Ages, it’s discursive reading may assist in establishing patterns and modes of women-hating in Medieval Europe.

### References:

1. Bloch R. H. Medieval misogyny // Representations. 1987.– T. 20.– C. 1–24.
2. David W. et al. (ed.). The Cambridge companion to medieval women’s writing.– Cambridge University Press, 2003.
3. De Lorris G. et al. The romance of the rose.– Princeton University Press, 1995.
4. Lett D. Hommes et femmes au Moyen Âge: Histoire du genre XIIIe-XVe siècle.– Armand Colin, 2013.

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