The Romance of the Rose
From the Sacred to the Profane

REVIEW:
The Romance of the Rose is a poem in Old French, started by Guillaume De Lorris in about 1230 and completed by Jean de Meun in about 1270.
It is an allegorical dream vision
It transforms the classical inheritance of mythology into a story of courtly behavior
It transforms the Christian inheritance of devotion into a story of erotic desire

Central themes:
The nature of sight: how is sight the medium of learning and understanding? How is sight the medium of falling in love? How is desire a function of sight?

The nature of literature and the imagination: literature’s social purpose is to educate readers into ideals of courtly, civilized behavior; But, literature also is a kind of art, and like art it can be appreciated and admired by readers.
Literature is like dream: both are forms of enigmatic, or symbolic, or allegorical narrative that require interpretation.
KEY ISSUES IN THE FIRST SECTION OF THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE:

THE ARGUMENT FOR DREAMS AS MEANINGFUL

THE IMAGE OF THE GARDEN AS AN EROTIC TRANSFORMATION OF EDEN

THE USE OF THE BLAZON AS THE RHETORICAL DEVICE OF DESCRIBING THE WOMAN

THE STORY OF NARCISSUS AS A TALE OF SIGHT GONE WRONG, OF DESIRE MISPLACED, AND OF THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION OF ALL LOVE – IS LOVE, IN THE END, REALLY JUST NARCISSITIC? DO WE SEE OURSELVES IN OUR BELOVEDS, OR SEE THE BELOVED?

THE NEW, SOCIAL IDEA THAT LOVE IS A TECHNIQUE: THAT IT CAN BE TAUGHT; THAT LOVE IS A METHOD WITH A CLEAR SET OF GOALS; AND THAT SOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN THE COURT AND OUTSIDE THE COURT (COURTESY AND CHIVALRY) CAN BE LEARNED.

PART OF THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE IS THUS A MANUAL OF BEHAVIOR FOR A NEW COURTLY WORLD
The transformations of the journey

The epic, heroic journey of the founding of a city (*Aeneid*)
The religious, salvational journey of the founding of Christianity (*New Testament*)
The spiritual journey of the scholar who becomes a true believer (*Confessions*)
The intellectual journey of the public man who becomes a spiritual being (*Consolation*)

The *Romance of the Rose*:
Love is a journey: it is a struggle towards attainment of desire
Love is a CRUSADE: it fights against potential figures of invasion or control in order to recapture something holy
Love is also, now, a PILGRIMAGE

PILGRIMAGE: THE MEDIEVAL PRACTICE OF TRAVELING TO HOLY SITES, OFTEN TO VISIT RELICS OF SAINTS, IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE HEALING OR BLESSING.

THE PILGRIMAGE IS THE PERSONAL VERSION OF THE CRUSADE: THAT IS, IT IS SOMETHING THAT ANYONE CAN (AND AT SOME POINT) SHOULD DO IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE. IT IS NOT A BATTLE; IT IS A QUEST.

THE GOAL OF THE QUEST IS LIFE – NOT LITERAL IMMORTALITY, BUT A SENSE OF THE TRUE MEANING AND VALIDATION OF LIFE THROUGH THE ENCOUNTER WITH HOLY OR SACRED OBJECTS OR PLACES
THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE TAKES THESE MEDIEVAL TRADITIONS AND PRACTICES AND TURNS THEM INTO EROTIC NARRATIVES

THE QUEST IS NOW THE ATTAINMENT OF THE BELOVED, IN PARTICULAR, THE BODY OF THE BELOVED.

THE BODY OF THE BELOVED BECOMES A KIND OF HOLY OBJECT

THE BODY PARTS OF THE BELOVED ARE LIKE RELICS

THE BLAZON BECOMES THE TECHNIQUE OF BREAKING UP THE BODY INTO BEAUTIFUL PARTS – OBJECTS NOT OF WORSHIP BUT OF DESIRE.

THE MALE LOVER BECOMES A KIND OF PILGRIM OR CRUSADING KNIGHT

BECAUSE THE GOAL IS NOW THE PHYSICAL FULFILLMENT OF EROTIC DESIRE, THE STORY MUST BE TOLD ALLEGORICALLY RATHER THAN LITERALLY.
ORIENTALISM: Orientalism is the term used by cultural critics to describe the Western practices of imagining Asian or Middle Eastern societies, often through caricature or exaggeration, in order to privilege Western values: BUT also, at the same time, to make the Asian or Middle Eastern world a place of sensuous, erotic, or tempting desire. Orientalism in the Romance of the Rose: many passages in this work use images of Asian or Middle Eastern places, people, and societies to distinguish Christian and Non-Christian values.

p.10: “no woman from here to Jerusalem had a finer neck”
p.11: “trees brought here from Alexander’s lands” [some manuscripts have “Saracen”]
p.15: God of Love has two “Turkish bows”
p.19: Largesse wears a purple robe “from the Orient”
p.21: The list of spices at the end

p.36: The God of Love says to the dreamer, remarking on how desire for his beloved will inflame him: “I assure you that the sight will cause your heart to burn and sizzle and that the raging fire will be fanned continually as you gaze. The more a man gazes on what he loves, the more he sets fire to his heart and bastes it with bacon fat.”

p.323: The story of Pygmalion, dressing up his statue: “Sometimes he would attire her in a wimple, with a kerchief to cover the wimple and the head, but not the face, for he had no wish to imitate the habit of the Saracens, who are so full of jealous fury that they cover the faces of their women with cloths whenever they go into the streets, so that no passer-by will see them.”
The broader question of love as a Crusade

The conquest of the rose becomes an allegorically displaced story of the crusader mission: to retake the “holy” sites from the Islamic world

Behind the eroticism of the poem lies a profoundly political and social argument
The Conquest of the Rose:
This is the final portion of the poem, written by Jean de Meun. The lover is about
to mount an attack on the castle that is keeping the Rose. BUT, before we get there,
he tells the story of Pygmalion (pp.321-327). WHY does he delay our reading by
telling this story? WELL, remember Virgil in Book IV of the Aeneid deferring the
consummation of Dido and Aeneas. Remember Augustine in Book VIII of the Confessions
deferring his ultimate conversion in the garden by telling stories of reading.

So, the lover/narrator defers, delays, and dilates the narrative to get us even more
Impatient.

The story of Pygmalion: the classical sculptor who fell in love with his sculpture; he
dresses her up; he goes to bed with her; he is obsessed with her. Finally he prays to
Venus and she grants life to the sculpture.

Pygmalion and Narcissus: both individuals who fall in love with an image
BUT, Pygmalion’s image is made by him; Pygmalion is a kind of false God, or false
Creator: God makes man in his own image; Pygmalion makes his statue (Galatea) in
the image of desire he wishes.

The theme: art has the ability to move and arouse us; what does it mean to be moved
By a work of the imagination? How does literature make something come to life?
How does literature revive the dead? How does literature make blood flow into . . . . . .
The actual attaining of the Rose:
The language of crusade and pilgrimage; the language of military conquest
“Love conquers all” – how is this a comic, parodic, or just simply crazy misinterpretation
of a classical ideal? (pp.328-29)?

FOOD FOOD FOOD: Now, the spiritual nourishment is transformed back into physical
sensation:
p.332: “Whenever he can get into the kitchen, the epicurean connoisseur of delicious
morsels tries meats of various kinds, whether boiled in a pot or roasted, marinated
or in a pastry crust, fried or in a galatine.

RELIGION RELIGION RELIGION: Now, the idea of the holy relic is transformed into
the physical part of the woman’s body

p.332: “I longed to touch the relics with my harness . . . . . “

This entire passage is an allegory of . . . .

p.334: “While I was in this cramped position . . . I grasped the branches of the rose
tree . . . I scattered a little seed there . . . The rose-bud swelled and expanded . . . .”
E t le couche entre les mignonettes
The Lover and the Rose.
Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Roman de la Rose, c1400-1500.
British Library MS Harley 4425 f. 184v.
And so I won my bright red rose. Then it was day and I awoke.

Seth with Rosario Dawson, UCSD, May 2016
For next week

Dante Vita Nuova

Handout has been posted on the course website

Read through section XIX for Tuesday