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Irrepressible Malebouche: voice, citation and polyphony in the Roman de la rose

Abstract: The Roman de la rose demonstrates the complexity and versatility of voice in Old French narrative. The « losengier » figure of Malebouche, who appropriates and transforms other people’s discourse, illustrates how utterances in the text function. As Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia suggests, the voice of each speaking subject is constituted by the citation of other voices, but the « entencion » and context of each utterance make it unique. Bakhtin’s related concept of polyphony leads us to investigate the ethical significance of speech acts, since different voices in the romance possess authority to varying degrees. Although women’s voices are denied authority in the text, the authority of Jean de Meun’s narrator and of other anti-feminist voices is also undermined. While women are accused of misusing language in the same manner as Malebouche, the resemblance of male figures to Malebouche contradicts this essentialist view of gender.

Résumé: Le Roman de la rose démontre la complexité et la polyvalence de la voix dans le récit en ancien français. Malebouche, personnage du « losengier » qui s’approprie et transforme les discours des autres, illustre la façon dont fonctionnent les énoncés dans le texte. Comme suggère la théorie de l’hétéroglossie de Mikhail Bakhtine, la voix de chaque sujet parlant se constitue à travers la citation des autres voix, mais l’« entencion » et le contexte de chaque énoncé le rendent unique. La notion liée de polyphonie chez Bakhtine nous amène à examiner la portée éthique des actes de parole, car les différentes voix du roman possèdent des degrés divers d’autorité. Bien que les voix féminines soient dépourvues d’autorité, l’autorité du narrateur de Jean de Meun et des autres voix anti-féministes est également remise en question. Les personnages masculins qui accusent les femmes de ressembler à Malebouche lui ressemblent eux-mêmes, ce qui dément leur représentation essentialiste de l’identité sexuelle.

The relationship to another’s word was [...] complex and ambiguous in the Middle Ages. The role of the other’s word was enormous at that time: there were quotations that were openly and reverently emphasized as such, or that were half-hidden, completely hidden, half-conscious, unconscious, correct, intentionally distorted, deliberately reinterpreted and so forth. The boundary lines between someone else’s speech and one’s own speech were flexible, ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused. Certain types of texts were constructed like mosaics out of the texts of others.¹

Je n’i fais riens fors reciter.²


² Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la rose, ed. by Armand Strubel, Paris, Librairie générale française, 1992, v. 15238. Subsequent references to the Rose will be incorporated in the text.
Introduction: The Voice of the Speaking Subject

The notion that voice in medieval literature, and particularly the voice of the first-person narrator, should be understood as conveying the point of view of an individual human being is one that scholars have greeted with considerable scepticism. Paul Zumthor, who emphasised that medieval poetic voice was grounded in a tradition of oral performance, famously argued that literary convention and formal constraints made the idea of authorial voice anachronistic: «L’auteur a disparu : reste le sujet de l’énonciation, une instance locutrice intégrée au texte et indissociable de son fonctionnement : ‘ça parle’». Michel Zink and Sarah Kay, in seminal studies of medieval literary subjectivity, responded by pointing out that subjectivity is inevitably expressed through language, and should not therefore be seen as incompatible with the strict formal demands that define (for example) medieval love lyric. As Kay writes, «To speak of desire and subjectivity as positioned relative to language is to say that the ‘I’ of the text, its first-person subject, is produced within language (rather than that language ‘expresses’ a pre-existing self) and that the desires voiced by this ‘I’ are subject to language rather than springing, in some original and natural way, from the self».

Certain more recent critical works, however, have expressed discomfort even with the notion of the speaking subject. A. C. Spearing, rightly noting that narrators of medieval texts are not necessarily coherent or «ontologically consistent» by modern standards, nonetheless goes so far as to conclude that subjectivity in medieval narrative is «subjectless».

Daniel Heller-Roazen, in a sensitive analysis of first-person narration in the Roman de la rose, underscores the multiple and fractured nature of the «je» in that text: «By virtue of its bipartition, the romance constitutes a literary text in which the single term je is necessarily capable of referring, at the very least, to two distinct poetic voices». Nevertheless, he takes Sarah Kay to task for her inability «to define the meaning of subjectivity without recourse to the term subject itself».

That the Roman de la rose is polyphonic, a text with different voices, is virtually axiomatic. It is a romance characterized by notoriously different narrators – the creations of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, who are separated by a historical time gap of forty years – and by an enormous variety of discourses. Its canonical status within its own time thus makes it a fascinating test case for the

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4 Kay, art. cit., p. 213.
7 Ibid., p. 30.
study of voice in Old French narrative, and supports Spearing’s contention that medieval readers did not perceive a unified narratorial voice to be a prime criterion for judging texts. The specific historical and material conditions in which medieval texts were produced doubtless play an essential role in the flexibility and versatility of medieval conceptions of narrative voice. « Jongleurs » (those who perform a text or read it aloud to an audience), scribes, patrons and illuminators contribute in varying degrees to the production of the medieval narrative, and ensure that its voice is not one. The « author » of a given narrative (often described in romances as a « conteur ») is frequently represented as « retelling the tale », crafting his or her own version of it, rather than devising it independently. Furthermore, not only is each individual manuscript made up of multiple « voices », but in the case of the Rose, over 320 manuscripts are extant, no two of them identical.

It is therefore important to recognise two points: firstly, that « coherence » is not a particularly useful category for the analysis of medieval narrative voice; and secondly, that there is a plurality of voices in the medieval text, a plurality not necessarily compatible with the inclination of much modern criticism to privilege the perspective of a single narrator-persona. On the other hand, we need not for these reasons embrace a principle of « subjectless subjectivity »: the evidence suggests that medieval readers and listeners did interpret works of literature as the utterances of first-person speaking subjects. The « I » in Old French literature may constitute a shifting position, as the tradition of oral performance implies (that is, the position may be transferred from individual to individual), but an individual speaking subject is still understood to be occupying it. Again, the Roman de la rose offers a paradigmatic example. Although the voices in the text intersect and overlap in extraordinarily complicated ways, it is not only language itself that is at issue, but the agency of individual speakers, and the impact of discourse as it is uttered or cited by different figures.

While the topic of voice in the Rose could be approached from a vast number of angles, my analysis will pay special attention to the character of Malebouche, and will borrow some key concepts from the work of the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Most of the main characters in the Rose are associated with a particular kind of discourse: Amors, for example, is often said to command (« commander »); Raison instructs or corrects (« chastier ») and gives sermons (« sermonner »); Dangier forbids (« escondire »); the narrator-as-lover promises (« promettre ») and complains (« se plaindre »); the narrator-as-poet recounts (« retraire », « deviser »); and so on. Malebouche, as his name suggests, is the slanderer or « losengier » figure so common in the courtly world, yet what also makes him interesting for a study of voice, as we shall see, is that he recycles discourse: he retells others’ stories in a different context. As for Bakhtin, his famous notions of polyphony and heteroglossia offer ways of conceptualising narrative voice that insist upon « the author’s freedom from a unitary and single language ». Nevertheless, he also views

11 Bakhtin, « Discourse in the Novel », op. cit., p. 314. I would like to thank Sophie Marnette for suggesting Bakhtin’s relevance to the Roman de la rose. My study is indebted to her observations on polyphony; cf. S. Marnette, Speech and Thought Presentation in French :
language as first and foremost a communicative phenomenon: «every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates»12. Bakhtin’s theories of narrative voice do not therefore rely on narratorial coherence, but they do retain the idea that voices are fundamentally connected to individual speaking and listening subjects, to communication and to the body.

Voices in Dialogue: Juxtaposition and Intermingling

As is well-known, Bakhtin singles out the novel among literary genres as a type of narrative where all sorts of different discourses proliferate and interact with one another. As the critic Michael Holquist puts it, Bakhtin sees the novel as «flaunting or displaying the variety of discourses, knowledge of which other genres seek to suppress»13. Bakhtin states in his essay «Discourse in the Novel», «Authorial speech, the speech of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized) »14. Such a description seems uncannily apt for the Rose, which is hybrid not only in the sense that it is two texts soldered together, but also in the sense that each part of the text is composed of so many different voices. The opening lines of the portion of the romance attributed to Guillaume de Lorris evoke a startling number of varying discourses, oral and written, spoken and thought and sung. These include the impersonal discourse of the dream itself («Si com li songes devisoit», v. 30), which is said to signify «coverturement» (v. 19) but truthfully; the «auctor» Macrobius (v. 7) who writes down the dream of Scipio (v. 9); the imagined voice of the reader, who may think or say that it is mad to believe dreams (v. 11), and who may ask what the romance is called (v. 34); the narrator, who dreams in the past and composes poetry in the present («rimoier», v. 31); Amour, who begs and commands the narrator to write (v. 33); and many birds, identified by name, whose singing clearly recalls the genre of courtly love lyric. Then, in rapid succession, we encounter «escritures» on the wall of an orchard (v. 133), and a host of allegorical figures who are described as using language in positive or negative ways. Although these voices do not necessarily clash with one another, the interplay among them creates many effects that Bakhtin might term «dialogic». There is interplay between orality and literacy; between the genres of lyric and romance; and among the different incarnations of the first-person narrator, who is famously split into a writing self, a younger dreaming self, and a lover-hero within his own dream15.

12 Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 280.
14 Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 263.
If we turn to Jean de Meun’s part of the poem, the multiple voices are more plentiful still. Over eighty written authorities are named in his text. Most of the text is made up of direct discourse from the mouths of characters; their dialogue gives the narrative a theatrical nature, and the dialogic genres of scholastic argumentation and religious confession also play a part. An oft-cited passage near the end of the romance states the principle that a phenomenon can be understood only when juxtaposed with a different, contradictory thing:

Ainsi va des contraires choses :
Les unes sont des autres gloses ;
Et qui l’une en veut defenir,
De l’autre li doit souvenir,
Ou ja par nulle entencion
N’i metra diffinicion ;
Car qui des .ij. n’a connoissance,
Ja n’i connoistra differance,
Sanz coi ne puet venir en place
Diffinicion que l’en face (Rose, v. 21577-86).

The acquisition of truth is depicted here as inherently dialogic. The plurality of voices in Jean’s text is not confined to dialogue between characters. Individual figures themselves can be disconcertingly multi-voiced, with Faux Semblant and Nature being prime examples. Direct discourse can be embedded in direct discourse (that is, speeches can be framed by other speeches) and that discourse can contain more speeches still: Ami, for instance, reports the words of a jealous husband (le Jaloux), who reports the words of pagan misogynistic authorities (v. 8565sq.). Moreover, as David Hult points out, it can be difficult or impossible to tell when discourse by one speaker stops and another begins. Strikingly, it is only 6,000 lines into Jean’s continuation of the romance that the reader learns of the earlier break in voice between Guillaume and Jean; the rupture

For an overview of critical literature on Guillaume’s narrator, see Heller-Roazen, op. cit., p. 42-45, 156-57.


is reported retrospectively with a citation (v. 10559-64). Elsewhere, a speech against women (v. 16327sq.) is sometimes attributed to the narrator, sometimes to Genius19.

Modern readers are not the first to puzzle over instances of unclear demarcation of voice in the Rose. Sylvia Huot, in a fascinating study of rubrication in Rose manuscripts, shows how medieval editors sought to distinguish and label the text’s different voices, most notably in the case of the narrator, as rubricators identified the «je» of the romance under the varying tags of «l’Amant» and «l’Auteur»20. «[T]he manuscript tradition», writes Huot, «clearly demonstrates that the question of voice in the Rose was of profound interest to medieval readers of the poem». Huot argues that the rubrics, by trying to sort out the voices that the narrative intermingles, both «clarify and violate» the text21. While ambiguity is present, so is the attempt to efface it. Medieval readers both recognise that the narratorial voice of the text is split, and endeavour to separate out its different subjective stances. Similarly, the point in the text where Jean de Meun’s continuation takes over from Guillaume’s original romance is also indicated by the scribe in most manuscripts, although the words of the poem itself at that point do nothing to signal the shift22.

Heteroglossia and Citation: The Dubious Discourse of Malebouche

On one level, Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as the coexistence of varied discourses within a narrative; he describes the novel, where heteroglossia comes into its own, as «a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized»23. On a further level, however, Bakhtin’s definition of heteroglossia incorporates an even more radical principle: the notion that no one can entirely own their own voice, because language is inevitably shot through with an «otherness» constituted by pre-existing meanings. The innumerable contexts which lie behind any single speech act both make communication possible and obfuscate it. As Bakhtin puts it, «Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel ... is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way»24.

The Rose renders the operation of heteroglossia strikingly visible, as practices of citation and of repeated discourse become recurring themes. The text first names the author figure of Jean de Meun by naming another writer, Guillaume de Lorris, and citing passages from this writer word for word. Language in the romance (words, themes, allegorical characters) is repeatedly recycled in a different context. Examples of citation that are represented as positive within the romance include the lover’s word-perfect recitation of Amour’s earlier promises and commandments (v. 4177-82, 10400-18), and Genius’s transcription and reading out

21 Ibid., p. 45.
22 Heller-Roazen, op. cit., p. 46.
23 Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 262.
24 Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 324.
Irrepressible Malebouche

of the speech of Nature to the assembly of Amour’s barons (v. 19410sq.). However, the « entencion » of the speaker who repeats the discourse, and the new audience whom she or he addresses, can dramatically change the import of the utterance. One character crucial to understanding the function of heteroglossia as recycled language, and thus the way that voice operates within the Rose, is the « losengier » figure of Malebouche.

Although the language of « losengiers » is traditionally represented as the opposite of courtly discourse, critics of courtly love lyric have noted that the « losengier » and the poet-lover are in a sense doubles of each other: both manipulate and circulate language, and each slanders the other\(^2\). In Guillaume de Lorris’ Rose, Malebouche and the narrator are first depicted as implicitly contrasting figures. Malebouche, who is introduced as one of the four guardians preventing access to the Rose, along with Dangier, Honte and Peur, first appears in the text as « Male bouche le jangleor » (v. 2833): one who misuses language and does not know how to keep silent (v. 3514). The narrator, on the other hand, boasts that he does know when to keep silent (« taire », v. 1410). We next encounter Malebouche in the speech of Raison, who complains that he recounts events even before they have happened: « Avant que la chose soit faite, / L’a ele ja en .c. ieus retraite » (v. 3033-34). This disdain for chronology on Malebouche’s part is a detail that Jean de Meun echoes later in the Rose (« ... male bouche, qui controuve / Les choses ainz que faiies soient », v. 18396-97), and it suggests already that his discourse resembles the omniscient narration of the poet\(^2\), which needs not unfold in linear fashion.

Malebouche is accused at various points of lying (v. 3568, 7345, 12201), but in fact his « crime » clearly consists of passing on information: putting language into circulation and thus propelling the narrative along. The key scene where he appears in Guillaume’s Rose, one frequently illustrated in manuscripts, is that where he awakens Jalousie with his frenzied reports of improper relations between Bel Accueil and the lover. He backs up the accusation with a dramatic reference to his own body: « Et dist qu’il i metroit son oeil, / Qu’entre moi et bel acueil / Avoit mauvais acomtement » (v. 3521-23). The narrator recounts Malebouche’s words in indirect discourse; however, Jalousie once awakened rushes furiously to Bel Accueil and delivers a tirade in direct discourse, so that the dramatic effect of the speech as it is transferred from voice to voice is intensified. Peur and Honte then relay the information to Dangier, awakening him in turn, and Dangier appropriates the discourse most dramatically of all, declaring that he would rather be burned alive or have his body pierced with stakes rather than grant anyone access to the Rose (v. 3729-52). The narrator then famously intervenes to claim that the chain of events has had a crucial impact on the narration itself: « Des or est mout changiez li vers » (v. 3759). He thus reminds us of his own role as a transmitter of discourse. He utters an impassioned curse against Malebouche: « Malebouche soit maleoiz : / Sa langue dolereuse et fausse / M’a porchacie ceste sause » (v. 3792-95), before taking up the


\(^2\) Cf. Heller-Roazen, op. cit., p. 1-28, where he defines poetic language as the « language of contingency », describing events that may or may not come to pass.
narrative again with a reference to his own speech act: « Des or est tans que je vos die / La contenance jalousie... » (v. 3796-97). Not only in this instance, but at many points elsewhere throughout the *Rose*, the mention of Malebouche’s name (whether by the poet or by another character) is accompanied by a curse on the part of the speaker. Therefore, even as the harmful language of Malebouche is evoked, the speaker himself becomes a type of Malebouche, ironically borrowing and reproducing his discourse of slander (see v. 3887, 7387-88, 7870, 12624, 14602-3). In the case of the poet-narrator, the similarity also works the other way round, for tellingly, Guillaume’s final representation of Malebouche describes him as a singer of songs. On his night watch as guardian of the chateau where the Rose is imprisoned, he plays instruments and sings tunes of his own composition: « Une foiz dist lais et descorz / Et sons noviaus de controvaille / Aus chalemiaus de Cornuaille » (v. 3896-98). The conclusion of Guillaume’s text finds the poet-lover lamenting the powerful role of the « losengeor » (v. 4042), and insisting to Bel Accueil that he himself is the soul of discretion (so the very opposite of a Malebouche figure): « C’onques par moi ne fu retraite / Chose qui a celer feïst » (v. 4030-31). Yet the vocabulary of the romance suggests otherwise; as slanderers, as makers of verses, and above all as reporters of other people’s speech, Malebouche and the poet-narrator resemble each other.

Jean de Meun, ever an attentive reader of Guillaume, makes the issue of heteroglossia (« another’s speech in another’s language ») even more explicit, by taking up the figure of Malebouche and resituating him in new contexts. The key scene featuring Malebouche in Jean’s *Rose* is that where Faux Semblant and Abstinence Contrainte, new allegorical characters introduced by Jean, confront Malebouche and ultimately kill him by strangling him and slicing off his tongue. In a statement to which we will return, Malebouche vainly defends himself by declaring that he has only passed on discourse that he has heard from someone else: « C’on me le dist et je le dis » (v. 12270). Yet Malebouche is clearly out of his depth, as he fails to recognize the language of his attackers as deceitful. He has identified « Astinance » and « Samblant », as the text tells us, but missed the fact that Abstinence is « contrainte » and Semblant « faux » (v. 12110-28). The smooth-talking pair convince him to abandon the discourse of slander for an act of confession, and he is killed while confessing. Thus, although the narrator describes him as truly contrite (« verois repentanz », v. 12367), Malebouche is in a sense true to his character to the last; he is still retelling his story, as he indignantly asserted earlier that he would do: « Par Dieu, jel dis et rediré » (v. 12275). He is, however, retelling it in a context whose full implications he has not grasped.

It is no accident that this confrontation between Malebouche and Faux Semblant occurs in the text shortly after the passage where Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris have been named as the authors of the romance. The murder of Malebouche and his silencing, graphically represented by the ripping out of his tongue, suggest in part that the realm of courtly language, to which Malebouche and Guillaume de Lorris belong, has been supplanted by the monastic Faux Semblant and Jean de Meun’s broader world of religion, politics and history. One type of voice has been definitively replaced by another. Certain manuscript illustrations of

27 *Cf.* Brownlee, art. cit., especially p. 256-57, 266.
the scene reinforce the contrast, as Malebouche is generally portrayed lounging in elegant courtly dress (a smart red coat) as he is greeted by two figures in sombre religious garb26.

Nevertheless, the two types of voice are not as distinct as they might initially appear: the discourse of Faux Semblant, and of the narrator Jean de Meun, remains uncannily similar to that of Malebouche. Ami, in a long rant against Malebouche, has earlier explained that such a trickster can only be defeated by his own weapons: « Si sachiez que cil font bonne œuvre / Qui les deceveors deçoivent » (v. 7344-45). Faux Semblant is also a double of Malebouche in that he is a master of speaking other people’s discourses: « Et sai par cuer trestouz langages » (v. 11200)27. Most importantly, Malebouche’s resemblance to the poet-narrator of the romance, already evident in the verses of Guillaume de Lorris, is invested with heightened significance in the case of Jean de Meun. According to La Vieille, Malebouche’s discourse is made up both of recycled facts and invented material: « Cil brait et crie sans deffense / Quanqu’il set, voire quanqu’il pense, / Et contrueve neïs matire / Quant il ne set de cui mesdire » (v. 12457-60). The verb « controver », which means to invent or imagine, is used again of Malebouche by La Vieille some lines later (v. 12663), and echoes the word « controvaill » in Guillaume de Lorris’s description of Malebouche (v. 3897). Elsewhere, Jean de Meun’s narrator reaffirms La Vieille’s claim that Malebouche simultaneously repeats and invents discourse: « Mais de ce trop grant tort avoit, / Qu’il disoit plus qu’il ne savoit / Et touz jors par ses flasteries / Ajoustoit as choses oïes » (v. 14581-84). There is a crucial ambiguity as to whether Malebouche invents stories or reports them; as the definition of heteroglossia implies, the tales he tells are at once other people’s and his own.

Malebouche’s protest of self-defense, « C’on me le dist et je le dis » (v. 12270), therefore only captures part of the truth of his rhetoric of citation. The protest is highly reminiscent of Jean’s own claim when defending himself against charges of misogyny, namely, that he only recites other people:

D’autre part, dames honorables,  
S’il vous semble que je di fables,  
Pour menteur ne m’en tenez,  
Mais as auteurs vous en prenez  
Qui en leur livres ont escrites  
Les paroles que j’en ai dites  
Et ceulx avoec que j’en dirai (Rose, v. 15219-25).

Nevertheless, by his own ironic admission, he adds a word or two of his own to the « matire » he reports:

Par coi mieux m’en devez quiter :  
Je n’i fais rienz fors reciter,  
Se par mon geu qui poi vous couste,

26 See for example Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 1559, fol. 100v, and Bodleian Library, MS Douce 195, fol. 89r.  
It is worth recalling that the subject matter of Malebouche’s songs (the only words of Malebouche to be relayed in direct discourse in Guillaume’s portion of the *Rose*) is also slander against women (v. 3899-908). Jean de Meun’s narrator, in his apologetic address to «dames», acknowledges that his own written words may be «... mordanz et chenins / Encontre les meurs feminins» (v. 15203-4). Like Malebouche in the act of confession, he asks for pardon (v. 15175), yet his protest that he is «only» repeating other people’s discourse («Je n’i fais riens fors reciter») is clearly a half-truth30.

This narratorial protest about the innocence of citation appears all the more disingenuous given that Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Rose* displays a strong preoccupation throughout with the context of reported statements, and their consequent ethical impact. It is not only the words themselves that are shown to matter, but the «entencion» of the speaker. The lover, for example, may know a discourse («leçon») well enough to recite it to other people, but be utterly unable to understand it himself (v. 4360-66). Raison may denigrate preachers who preach good sermons, if their preaching is done with «male entencion» (v. 5110). The lover may exculpate himself from violating Amour’s commands and uttering the uncourtly word «coilles», provided that he is citing it for the purpose of criticism: «Mais puis que je n’en fui faisierres, / J’en puis bien estre recitierres ; / Si nommerai le mot tout outré: / Bien fait qui sa folie moustre / A celui qu’il voit foloier» (v. 5713-17). In the world of the *Rose*, the citation of other people’s utterances may or may not be ethically justifiable, but there is nothing *inevitably* innocent about borrowed discourse. As Sophie Marnette observes in her study of reported discourse, «It is always a construction, never a duplication»31. The figure of Malebouche stands as a symbol in the *Rose* of citation’s power to harm. The lover calls him his worst enemy (v. 7262-64); Ami declares that while the effects of other crimes can be remedied, Malebouche’s «jangle» is impossible to «estaindre» (v. 7377-78, 7840). His discourse, already stolen from others, will continue to circulate from voice to voice.

**Voice, Polyphony and Authority in the Roman de la rose**

For Bakhtin, the concept of voice has ideological implications; the notion of the speaking subject plays a crucial role in politics, ethics and law32. Discourse is never neutral, but is invested with varying degrees of power and authority. Bakhtin suggests that some discourses, which he dubs «centripetal», reinforce existing

30 The character Malebouche also appears in the fifteenth-century literary debate known as the *Querelle de la Rose*, where he is implicitly equated with an antifeminist Jean de Meun. See H. Swift, *Gender, Writing, and Performance: Men Defending Women in Late Medieval France (1440-1538)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 65, 236.


power structures, while other, «centrifugal» discourses undermine the status quo\textsuperscript{33}. In practice, this opposition is far from clear-cut, for as the principle of heteroglossia implies and the \textit{Roman de la rose} illustrates, voices are never single: rather they are refracted through other voices, and one voice oftenironises another. Questions of responsibility and ethics can therefore remain murky. Nevertheless, certain voices in the text do emerge as possessing authority, whereas others, in contrast, are silenced. Again, we are reminded that subjectivity is not subjectless: what is paramount is always the question of who is speaking and to whom. Unless voice is understood as the discourse of a speaking subject, uttered in a particular context, it is difficult or impossible to assess a voice’s agency (or lack of it) and specifically to investigate questions relating to gender, class or social status. Tellingly, the work of those critics who perceive voice in medieval narrative to be impersonal and disembodied remains almost entirely free of attention to such questions\textsuperscript{34}.

Sometimes a discourse acquires authority precisely through the process of citation: through being transferred from one character to another. For example, although the hierarchical relation between Nature and Genius is complicated, as Sylvia Huot notes, with Genius being at once Nature’s «confessor» and her messenger, Nature’s «feminine» discourse clearly gains force when it is transmitted by Genius to an audience of male barons\textsuperscript{35}. Addressing the barons, Genius duly invokes the joint authority of Nature and himself, and instructs them to learn the sermon «mot a mot» (v. 19912) and go round preaching it themselves in every conceivable place. Similarly, the discourse of one Jean de Meun, or «Jean Chopinel», acquires authority when Amour extravagantly proclaims him a chosen ambassador:

\begin{quote}

\begin{verse}
Je l’aflublerai de mes eles 
Et li chanterai notes teles 
Que puis qu’il sera hors d’enfance, 
Endoctrinez de ma sciance, 
Si fleüstera noz paroles 
Par carrefors o par escoles, 
Selone le langage de France (Rose, v. 10641-47).
\end{verse}
\end{quote}

In a dizzyingly self-referential move, a character in the romance thus identifies the romance narrator as his future mouthpiece. Moreover, the character himself is a reporter of discourse, for in the same speech, Amour has cited the closing verses of Guillaume de Lorris from earlier in the romance (v. 10559-64). The assumption and conferral of authority here, however tongue-in-cheek, are doubly associated with practices of citation\textsuperscript{36}.

\textsuperscript{33} Bakhtin, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 270-75.
\textsuperscript{34} Cf. Zumthor, \textit{op. cit.}, Heller-Roazen, \textit{op. cit.}, and Spearing, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{35} Huot, «Bodily Peril», p. 56.
Polyphony, as defined by Bakhtin, is intimately linked to the problem of authority. Although the terms «polyphony» and «heteroglossia» are sometimes used synonymously by critics, the words in Bakhtin’s work designate phenomena that are related but distinct. While heteroglossia refers to the «multi-voicedness» that characterizes all linguistic utterances, polyphony, a concept that Bakhtin introduces in his early study on Dostoevsky, is specifically concerned with the relation between the narrator and characters of a text\textsuperscript{37}. According to Bakhtin, only a narrative in which the voices of the characters convincingly stand against the claims of the author, rather than being reduced to the voices of «mere others», is truly polyphonic\textsuperscript{38}. Sophie Marnette, in her linguistic study of speech and thought presentation in Old French narrative, argues that verse romance is precisely the Old French narrative genre that gives most «room to the characters’ own perspectives». The reporting of thoughts, and the frequent use of free direct and free indirect discourse, result in vivid character depictions and in the blurring of boundaries between the perspectives of characters and narrator\textsuperscript{39}.

Can the Roman de la Rose be considered polyphonic in the sense that the ideological perspective of the author does not dominate the narrative\textsuperscript{40}? Noah Guynn, in a provocative article on authorship and sexual violence in the Rose, acknowledges that Jean «submerges his own voice into an intricate polyphonic composition in which there can apparently be no single, authoritative pronouncements, only a dialogic relationship between voices»\textsuperscript{41}. However, Guynn argues that the poem is in fact repressive from the perspective of gender politics: «the poem’s fascination with its own lack of unity [...] may actually serve to privilege antifeminist and heteronormative ideologies and shield them from attack»\textsuperscript{42}. Focusing at length on the passage where Jean excuses his anti-feminist rhetoric by attributing it to other «aucteurs» (v. 15222), Guynn concludes that Jean de Meun’s abdication of authority serves paradoxically to promote his own heterosexual male clerical subject position, and to silence and exclude the voices of women. From this point of view, the polyphony of the text is illusory rather than actual: «the excusation is a kind of ruse whereby the proliferation of alternate voices and the abolition of authorial agency serve to disguise strategies of rhetorical coercion»\textsuperscript{43}.

It is undeniable that female silence is a motif which runs through the Rose from beginning to end. From the rose itself, which is conflated with Guillaume’s

\textsuperscript{37} M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, ed. and trans. by C. Emerson, Minneapolis/London, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 5-46.
\textsuperscript{38} Holquist, op. cit., p. 34.
\textsuperscript{39} Marnette, op. cit., p. 205-15, especially p. 212.
\textsuperscript{40} While the Rose possesses the form of a verse romance, its genre is not unproblematic; it is also a dream allegory and (in its second portion) a kind of scholastic compendium.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 643.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 648. My interpretation of the Rose arrives at conclusions that differ from those of Guynn, but shares his interest in the relationship between voice and authority in the romance.
female dedicatee (v. 41-44), to the «tables» of female bodies, which men are repeatedly enjoined to write upon (v. 19568 sq.), women are depicted in the text as mute and their desires are given short shrift. However, Jean’s protest of innocence («Je n’ï fais rien fors reciter ») is as much a self-indictment as a disavowal of responsibility. The rhetoric of misogyny, as Sarah Kay and R. Howard Bloch point out, is indeed a discourse that relies overtly on citation: women are posited as ahistorical beings, unchanging and uniform in nature, and anti-feminine pronouncements from diverse historical contexts are recycled as fodder for each new misogynistic utterance. Yet the Roman de la rose as a whole consistently exposes the perils of citation, as we have seen. When Christine de Pizan and later participants in the «Querelle de la rose» cast Jean de Meun as a type of Malebouche, they emphasize a parallel that is already apparent in the poem itself. Jean’s «excusasion » borrows the discourse of Malebouche, and therefore resonates with guilty irony.

Alongside its representations of silent female figures, the Rose exhibits a marked anxiety about the circulation of women’s speech. Women are in fact portrayed as possessing the same vices as Malebouche: they do not know when to keep silent, and cannot be prevented from repeating discourse in the wrong context. The Jaloux is tormented by the possibility that his wife will repeat his words to other men: « Si faz je fol de ce dire / Car je sai bien que tire a tire / Mes paroles toutes direz, / Quant de moi vous departirez » (v. 9211-13). Genius expounds at length on women’s inability to keep secrets (v. 16351 sq., 16634 sq.), and on their Malebouche-like tongues: « ... taut ont les langues cuisanz, / Et venimeuses et nuisanz » (v. 16669-70). That there is something inherently feminine about Malebouche’s qualities is reinforced by the fact that the name Malebouche is grammatically feminine, although the character is consistently gendered masculine in the text. Manuscript illuminations of Malebouche are intriguing in this regard, for in a substantial minority of manuscripts, he is depicted as a woman. Nevertheless, much as the romance at once silences female voices and draws attention to the troubling aspects of this silencing, so it simultaneously offers an essentialist portrait of women as « médisantes » and undermines this representation. While various characters in the text insist that women, as sexed bodies, produce a particular kind of discourse, the slanderous citational discourse of Malebouche is by no means confined to women: rather it spreads from figure to figure in the text, without sparing the narrator. What we might call the paradox of Malebouche inevitably comes into

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47 I would like to thank Helen Swift for informing me of this point. Manuscripts featuring a female Malebouche in the illuminations include Bibliothèque municipale de Châlons-en-Champagne, 270, Bibliothèque municipale d’Arras, 897, Bodleian Library, MS Douce, 332, and Bibliothèque de l’Assemblée nationale, 1230.
play: it is impossible to slander him without borrowing his discourse, and so the male figures who complain about female speech are rendered Malebouche types themselves.

Ultimately, whether it is represented as masculine or feminine, the figure of Malebouche reminds us of two crucial aspects of voice in the *Rose*: its citational nature, and its dependence upon the notion of an embodied speaking subject. The «bouche» in Malebouche’s name, like his strangled «gorge» and severed «langue», evokes images of a speaking human body. On the one hand, the concept of voice cannot be strictly limited to the discourse of an individual speaking subject; the term «voice» is often employed as a metaphor. In the *Rose*, for example, a dream or a romance can narrate («deviser») as well as the poet-lover. On the other hand, the contrast between the term «voice» and a more generic, depersonalized term such as «sound» illustrates the link between voice and speech. Even when used metaphorically, the notion of voice derives its power from its association with a speaking subject. The genre of allegory itself reinforces this idea, for however conventional an allegorical persona may appear, the trope of personification is still at work. Ideas are cast as spoken discourse, and there is a notion of personhood and agency, even if fictional.

Nevertheless, the citational nature of voice means that the discourse of the speaking subject, like that of the text as a whole, is multi-voiced and mosaic-like. In this sense, Malebouche’s speech is a microcosm of the *Roman de la rose* itself. While the voice of the speaking subject cannot be understood as utterly disembodied and depersonalized, neither can it be interpreted as the utterance of an autonomous and coherent subject, who is in possession of an «entencion» that is fully transparent to either self or others. Dialogism involves voices in conflict within the subject, as well as voices of conflict between subjects. Both types of conflict are evident in the climactic scene of Malebouche’s encounter with Faux Semblant; not only does Malebouche meet a violent end, but he is also seen to waver and change his mind about the status of his own discourse.

As the dramatic fate of Malebouche suggests, a speech act (or exercise of voice) is an attempt to gain control, however provisional, of the language of other voices, and it is an attempt that is always partly doomed to fail. The ubiquity of reported speech in the *Roman de la rose* makes it clear that Malebouche is not alone in his dilemma. The heteroglossic nature of the text endows some voices with more authority than others, but leaves no voice autonomous and entirely irony-free. Furthermore, Malebouche’s loss of authority is less final than one might imagine. As a character in the text, he proves surprisingly hard to kill. Although his murder takes place many thousands of lines before the romance’s conclusion, his name continues

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Irrepressible Malebouche

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to reappear, as other characters express their fear of him or rejoice that he is dead (v. 12619-33, 14563-73, 14730-34, 21277-301).49 He will never recount his story of the lover and Bel Accueil again (so Amour’s barons reassure La Vieille) unless it is by some dark enchantment:

La hors gist mort en cele biere
En ces fossez, gueulle baee.
Sachiez, s’il n’est chose faee,
Jamais d’euls .ij. ne janglera,
Car ja ne resouscitera
Se dyables n’i font miracles
Par venins ou par tyriacles (Rose, v. 12468-75).

Yet Malebouche’s enemies protest too much; the romance narrative works its own kind of dark magic. The very assertions of Malebouche’s death, through their repetitiveness, remind us of his voice again and let us know that the phenomenon his discourse represents – the way new voices are always refracted through old ones – is still very much alive.

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49 H. Swift argues that the ghost-like figure of Jean de Meun is similarly brought back to life in « Querelle de la rose » debates; cf. Swift, op. cit., p 18-90.