Where are the bodies?
Gender-bending voices in the Roman de la rose

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Abstract: In the Roman de la rose, it might seem that the nominally female speaking characters (particularly Raison, Nature, and La Vieille) disrupt the privileged male site of intellectual knowledge by introducing learned female voices. This essay considers how subversive these voices really are. Each character’s claim to being an embodied female speaker breaks down as it becomes apparent that she is being ventriloquised by a male author. The Rose is insistent in drawing attention to the constructed nature of its speaking voices, both female and male. The female body appears to interfere with the discussion of abstract theoretical material and the text bears witness to male anxieties about both the female body and female threats to participate in male theoretical discourse, even as it demonstrates the disembodied and ultimately unthreatening unreality of any of the speaking female voices in the poem’s narrative.

Résumé: Dans le Roman de la rose, on pourrait penser que les personnages nominalement féminins dotés de voix (surtout Raison, Nature, et la Vieille) bouleversent l’espace privilégié masculin du savoir intellectuel. Cet essai considère dans quelle mesure ces voix sont en réalité subversives. Toute prétention à être une vraie femme en chair et en os s’effondre, et il devient clair que l’origine de chaque voix est un auteur masculin qui fait de la ventriloquie. Le Roman de la rose signale sans cesse la nature artificielle et construite des voix discursives, autant masculines que féminines, qui se trouvent dans le texte. Le corps féminin semble interrompre la discussion de questions abstraites et théoriques, et le texte témoigne des peurs masculines de femmes qui participeraient au discours théorique masculin. Dans un même temps, le texte démontre aussi l’irréalité incorporelle et finalement peu menaçante de toute voix féminine dans le poème.

The Roman de la rose, especially in its continuation at the hands of Jean de Meun, bears witness to – or, alternatively, satirises – a phallogocentric anxiety about the dissolution of gender boundaries implied by women’s access to knowledge. In the medieval male imaginary, the masculine is associated with activity, with abstract knowledge, and with the Aristotelian concept of the form, which shapes the female counterpart of matter\(^1\). The feminine, then, is passive, ideally silent, and is shaped by the dominating structure of masculinity. That this brutally neat conception of gender starts to fall apart in the Rose has been comprehensively demonstrated by Sarah Kay

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and Sylvia Huot. The desperation of le Jaloux, the uncontrollably violent husband portrayed mockingly by Ami, bears witness to the challenge posed by the female body that « is in the end curiously resistant to male domination and to the imposition of any meaning other than that of its own choosing ». At the same time, the « spectre of the uncontrollable woman » is not a silent ghost, but one that, in the figures of Raison, la Vieille and Nature, dominates the dissemination of knowledge in the Rose. Raison and Nature, in particular, are responsible for voicing the bulk of the speculative or abstract forms of knowledge that are supposedly masculine. These ostensibly female figures, it could be said, are interrupting and destabilising the masculine site of academic knowledge. The Rose is, after all, a text written in and wholly saturated by the all-male culture of the University of Paris in the late thirteenth century. The kind of disruption caused by a speaking female body is the starting point for Jane Burns’ project of analysing speaking women in Old French literature. In an analysis very much inflected by Luce Irigaray’s understanding of the disruptive power of embodied female speech, Burns reads the heroine of the twelfth-century French Philomena as a challenge to the active-male/passive-female dichotomy mentioned above:

[W]here the woman’s voice refuses to adopt the binary logic that pits subject against object, it is also the female anatomy, though in a very different way, that allows us to hear a nonstereotypical voice behind Philomena’s question. It is because we as readers know Philomena to be a female character that we can reread her question as an interrogation of the power dynamic in male/female relations. The very female body that would traditionally incite a standardized gender-determined interpretation of Philomena’ feminine voice can also provoke us to hear in that voice a forceful alternative response.

If Philomena’s voice, emerging from a female body, presents a serious challenge to phallogocentrism, what are we to make of theoretically female voices that emerge from no body, that have no anatomy? In the Rose, none of the prominent female speakers are characters in any conventional sense of the term. They are (even la

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4 Huot, art. cit., p. 48.
5 Kay, art. cit., p. 217.
8 Ibid. p. 3.
Vieille, the figure of the old woman, rather than a literal old woman herself) intertextual abstractions, woven together from the curricula of the medieval – and masculine – school and university. They represent theoretical principles, and not embodied, « real » women whose speech can be traced back to a body. The ventriloquism act can get quite complicated in the Rose. Heloise, as we shall see, is quoted by le Jaloux, a literary type rather than an individuated character. Le Jaloux himself is being voiced by Ami, equally literary and typical, who is a speaking figure in a dream-narrative dreamt theoretically by Guillaume de Lorris. Given the dream-framework of the poem, all the speech in the text could be said to stem from one of two bodies, that of the dreaming Guillaume de Lorris or else that of the writing Jean de Meun. Guillaume left the Rose unfinished after around 4 000 lines, with the result that in the continuation the narrative « je » cannot ultimately be traced back to his body, but rather comes from Jean de Meun ventriloquising Guillaume as narrator, who in turn reports the speech of Ami, who reports the speech of le Jaloux who quotes Heloise. This strategy of writing wholly disembodied female voices is a preventative measure to short-circuit the expression of abstract knowledge by literal female speakers. While it may appear that female speech, particularly la Vieille’s parodic university lecture, disrupts the boys’ club of academic discourse, in the Rose such impossible, excorporate female speech serves to foreclose the possibility of real women becoming teachers and thus reinforces gender boundaries rather than dissolving them. This exclusionary tactic, it must be noted, frames a poem in which anxiously paranoid male claims to exclusive possession of knowledge are exposed as self-contradictory, impossible and, in the case of the wife-beating Jaloux, dangerously absurd.

Before coming to the speaking voice that makes perhaps the greatest claim to originating in a diegetic woman, namely that of la Vieille, I want to touch on two of the more abstract speaking figures, Raison and Nature. Raison first appears in Guillaume de Lorris’ first section of the Rose. The abstract concept of Dangier has chased off Bel Acueil, a character who represents the desiring part of the desired woman’s psyche; Bel Acueil, though male in appearance, is rooted in the female body that is signified in part by the Rose itself. Raison descends from her high tower and approaches Amant:

El ne fu joine ne chance,
ne fu trop haute ne trop basse,
ne fu trop grelle ne trop crasse.
Li oile qui en son chef estoient
con II. estoilles reluiseoint,
si ot ou chef une corone:
bien ressembloit haute persone.
A son semblant et a son vis
part qu’el fu fete ou paravis,
car Nature ne seust pas
ovre fere de tel compass.8

8 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la rose, ed. by F. Lecoy, Paris, Champion, 1965-70, 3 vols, v. 2962-72. Subsequent references to the Rose will be
Raison seems to have some kind of a body, although it is largely described apophatically, as lacking characteristics rather than having them. Apart from the perfection of her appearance, the only things we know are that her eyes are incredibly bright and that she wears a crown. If her body might appear to be some kind of Aristotelian mean, it is nevertheless constructed through what it is not, rather than what it is. There is something impossibly abstract and divine about Raison, made by God «a sa semblance et a s’image» (v. 2975). This lack of specificity makes it impossible to depict her in a body that can be individuated through any defining characteristics, a body, that is, that might exist in the sublunary sphere and that could have been created by Nature. Raison does have some kind of form, though, since otherwise she would be unable to interact as a character with Amant, but her voice cannot be located in an individuated, corrupt (because fallen), and therefore destabilising female body. Jean de Meun, when he reintroduces Raison just after beginning his continuation simply describes her as «Reson, la bele, l’avenant» (v. 4196), thus skating over the character’s bodily confusion only to draw attention to it later in her speech.

This speech is, like that given later by Nature, composed of long philosophical disquisitions, although it is interrupted by a parodic intellectual debate as Raison tries to persuade Amant to spurn the foolish behaviour demanded by Amour. She draws on a vast range of theoretical sources, acknowledged and unacknowledged, ranging from Aristotle to Livy, Lucretius, and Alain de Lille. Raison is not, though, speaking from a gendered female body whose speech might disrupt the patriarchal claims of a monopoly on intellect. This fact is brought sharply into focus by Raison’s notorious and absurd offer of herself as a girlfriend to Amant:

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\begin{align*}
&Ne \ porquant si ne veull je mie \\
&\text{que tu demeurges sans amie.} \\
&\text{Met, s’il te ples, en moi t’entente.} \\
&\text{Sui je pas bele dame et gente,} \\
&\text{digne de servir un preudome,} \\
&\text{et fust enpereres de Rome ?} \\
&\text{Ci veill t’amie devenir (\textit{Rose}, v. 5765–71).}
\end{align*}
\]

Raison wishes to engage Amant in a kind of love that excludes the physical and lies purely in the (always masculine) realm of the theoretical, in the love of philosophy.

incorporated in the text. Guillaume de Lorris’ description differs somewhat from Boethius’ somewhat baffling description of Philosophia in \textit{De consolatione Philosophiae}, in whose tradition it situates itself. Boethius’s Philosophia is both full of energy and unimaginably old, and her height keeps varying. Raison is less paradoxical than Philosophia, but retains a sense of the impossibility of placing an abstract concept in a body obeying the laws of nature. \textit{Cf.} Boethius, \textit{De consolatione Philosophiae ; Opuscula theologica}, ed. by Claudio Moreschini, Munich, Saur, 2000, I.1.1–6, p. 4–5.

The delicate paradoxes of Raison’s physical status are ironed out in manuscript illuminations that show Raison in conversation with Amant, the two figures appearing as equally embodied characters.
Raison’s status as a gendered woman is rendered ridiculous as she invites consideration of her physical body, earlier described only by what it is not. Her lack of any kind of carnality demonstrates just how little Raison is actually a woman, even as she goes on to compare herself to the spurned Echo and to complain that « [t]rop sunt dolentes et confuses / puceles qui sunt refusees » (v. 5804).

The paradox of Raison becoming confused in a way explicitly linked to physical desire and the feminine seems to suggest that as soon as she gestures, however implausibly, towards her status as female, she becomes overcome by impossibility. She asks Amant to be her loyal lover, even though she can never be a monogamous partner for him, in theory requiring the love of every man alive. For Raison to remain reasonable she must suppress any suggestion of the feminine, and the status of theoretical knowledge as the exclusive possession of men is preserved.10

What is more, the paradoxes of Raison as a female character point implicitly but clearly to the fact that her speech has, in fact, been penned by a man who would have lectured on Boethius, Aristotle et alia at the University of Paris. Raison’s parallel with Echo is also significant here. The reference does more than recall that earlier in the text it is while looking into Narcissus’ fountain that Amant sees the Rose and becomes smitten with love. The result of Narcissus’ rejection of Echo in Ovid’s version of the story is that Echo pines away until all that remains is her disembodied voice. The allusion to the Narcissus story seems to point towards the fact that Raison is equally a voice attached to no female body and maybe even that she, like Echo, is merely reproducing words given to her by a man.

Let us turn now to Nature to see if she comes any closer than Raison to providing a properly female, embodied discourse. When he comes to describing Nature, rather than following Alain de Lille’s prolix portrayal of the goddess Natura and the wondrousness of her clothing11, Jean’s narrator throws up his hands and declares:

Bien la vos vousisse descrire,  
mes mi sans n’i porroit soffire (Rose, v. 16136).

The narrator then goes on to declare the task of representing her beauty to be beyond the ability of even the greatest philosophers or artists: « Nus for Diex ne le porroit fere » (v. 16180). Nature, like Raison, an abstract concept made most unphilosophically into a poetic voice is denied any bodily representation beyond assertions of her beauty.12

10 As Kay points out, in Boethius’ text, « although Philosophia is feminine, her gender is not referred to after the opening prose section. She is more a voice than a fleshly body » (art. cit., p. 226). Jean de Meun’s text is far more engaged with the knotty questions of gender.

11 Alain de Lille, De planctu naturae, ed. by N. Häring, Studi Medievali, 19, 1978, p. 808-20, II.1-IV.3.

12 The most detail we are given is that Nature’s face is as beautiful as a fresh lily in May (v. 16211-12), which – despite the allusion to another flower in the text – reveals nothing specific about her appearance.
That Raison and Nature are not real women is hardly a bold claim; they are part of a long literary tradition of the allegorical speaking figure used to represent abstract concepts going back to Prudentius’ *Psychomachia* in the fourth century, Martianus Capella’s *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* in the fifth century and Boethius’ *De consolatione Philosophiae* in the sixth century. This tradition was renewed from the early twelfth century onwards by Goliardic poets, philosophers in the French schools, and Occitan troubadours, and was drawn on extensively by Alain de Lille in his *De planctu naturae* and *Anticlaudianus*. Jean de Meun’s *Rose* differs from this inherited convention of allegorical visions in that he deliberately draws attention to the female aspect of his abstract figures, through the gendered discourse that he makes them perform. The question of the relative femininity of their speech opens up the possibility that the female figures in the *Rose* may have a much closer relation to real, embodied women than their predecessors. Given the authority with which figures such as Raison or Philosophia are invested, is there a danger that such authority might be taken away from men and given to female figures that are more than representations of abstract ideas?

The first words that we hear from Nature mark her as female. Having overheard Amour’s oath, echoed by his army, to pursue nothing but sexual satisfaction, Nature laments of her creation of mankind: «Lasse qu’ai je fet !» (v. 16223); she goes on to repeat herself:

Lasse fole ! Lasse dolente !
Lasse, lasse . C. mille foiz,

Beyond Nature’s referring to herself repeatedly using feminine terms («lasse», «fole», «dolante»), we can see evidence of the uncontrolled and less than wholly rational speech of the stereotyped medieval woman. The bulk of Nature’s speech, her so-called confession to her misogynist priest Genius, is however closer to that of Boethius’ Philosophia in its total lack of distinguishing marks to signal her voice as feminine. After her initial exclamations, Nature composes herself while Genius insists on the importance of men remaining silent during sex so as not to allow women to discover their secrets and thus control them. When she begins to speak again, there follows some 2 700 lines of abstract theoretical discussion in which the supposedly female figure sets out a vast range of theoretical topics that are focused largely on the natural world – dealing with phenomena such as floods, optics, the movements of the planets and the etiology of dreams – but which also include theological topics such as the relationship between predestination and free will, the punishments of hell, and the Incarnation (the last of which, she admits, surpasses her understanding). Her initial outburst is not repeated and, instead, Nature gives calm, clear expositions drawing on Boethius, Aristotle, Macrobius and many others. The specifics of Nature’s voice have largely faded away with the result that this speech might seem almost devoid of any marks of gender. There is one important moment, though, right at the end of her speech, when admitting her ignorance about the

Incarnation and just before bemoaning man’s sinfulness, when Nature reemphasises her status as female:

\begin{quote}
Fame sui, si ne me puis tere,
ainz veill des ja tout reveler,
car fame ne peut riens celer,
n’onques ne fu mieuz ledangiez (Rose, v. 19188-91).
\end{quote}

It is striking that this brief reintroduction of ostensibly female speech with discursive markers of orality – especially the subsequent questions, rhetorical or otherwise, directed toward Genius – takes place precisely when Nature is acknowledging her ignorance and also castigating man. However, what has come before, the teaching of theoretical knowledge, is never actually neutral, but rather is an activity gendered masculine, as is made clear by Nature herself. She implicitly positions herself as a cleric when teaching about the thorny problem of predestination.

\begin{quote}
Mes de sodre la question
comment predestination
et la divine presciance,
plaine de toute porveance,
peut estre o volonté delivre,
fort est a lais genz a descrivre (Rose, v. 17071-76).
\end{quote}

According to the discursive logic of the narrative, Nature is not talking to a lay (that is, non-clerical) audience, but is confessing to Genius, despite the fact that until the very end of Nature’s speech there is almost no reference either to her interlocutor or to the context in which she speaks\textsuperscript{14}. These lines of scientific knowledge put into verse are floating around voiced by an indescribable, disembodied and allegorised figure of Nature, who is clearly a narrative fiction and whose initial femininity is in no way evident in her discourse. It might be argued that gender identity is not really important to Jean de Meun here and would not have been to his readers, that he has simply bookended female speech patterns onto a narrative of natural philosophy with no apparent narrator. This would accord with what A. C. Spearing has claimed about the precedence of narrative over narrator in the Middle Ages, insisting that we need not identify every literary creation with the utterance of a single speaking subject\textsuperscript{15}. Jean de Meun, though, is most definitely interested in the relation between gender with voice. If at this stage in Nature’s speech earlier suggestions of a female narrative voice have been forgotten, a different, gendered voice interrupts the careful statements of scientific truths. The caveat about the difficulty of teaching about free will to non-clerics emphasises the clerical (and thus male) enunciation of a supposedly abstract, and hence subjectless, authoritative third-person philosophical

\textsuperscript{14} One exception, though, is a brief exchange between Nature and Genius about Venus’ adulterous relationship with Mars, where the characters both agree that the lesson to be learnt is not to trust in the heart of a woman: Rose, v. 18031-18122.

discourse (the Scholastic *ponitur* or *videtur quod* of, say, commentaries on Aristotle or of Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae*). It also emphasises the impossibility, already apparent, of attributing Nature’s discourse to a single, coherent (female) speaking figure. The narrative, as it emerges at this point, is not a confession to Genius but concerns the transmission of elite theoretical knowledge from Latin into the vernacular to make it accessible to those outside of the university context. The narrating voice here looks (or sounds) suspiciously like it could belong to Jean de Meun, almost certainly a Master of Arts at the University of Paris, or at least to someone like him, which is to say to a cleric. Such a suspicion only becomes strengthened when the voice that is supposed to be Nature’s later goes on to say how clerics are, above all other people, most capable of being virtuous and wise:

> car li clerc voit en l’escriture,  
> avec les sciances prouvees  
> resonables et demontrees,  
> touz maus don l’an se doit retrere  
> et touz les biens que l’an peut fere (*Rose*, v. 18610-14).

This is more than a little disingenuous and again points to a male figure behind Nature’s speech who privileges the kind of learning accessible only to men. The speech itself, despite its claims, is not founded on an innate knowledge of the natural world such as that supposedly available to a figure representing all of nature, but comes from texts. The discussion of mirrors and lenses, for example, is prefaced by a reference to Alhazen’s treatise on optics (v. 18000-13). The treatment of free will and predestination draws heavily and self-consciously from Boethius’ *De consolatione philosophiae*, V.4-6. Even before any knowing references to clerics, the speech is ostensibly learned, and hence male. Built up from anterior textual authorities, and given a third-person narrative voice that is apparently omniscient and unindividuated seems very much like a work of Scholastic philosophy or natural science in an exclusively male register. The diegetic framing of the speech as being given by the female Nature only draws more attention its ultimate origin in a male author.

Is the *Rose* then saying that women would not be capable of teaching or of handling the level of intellectual discourse of the *Rose*? There is one striking counterexample to medieval claims of female intellectual inferiority to men, in the person of Heloise, the most celebrated intellectual woman of the twelfth century. Le Jaloux – an emblematic figure of the failure of male domination over women – cites her as an authority in his diatribe against marriage in particular and women in general. According to le Jaloux, Abelard

> li provoit par escritures  
> et par resons que trop sunt dures  
> condicions de marriage,  
> conbien que la fame soit sage (*Rose*, v. 8739-42).
This is exemplary clerical behaviour on Abelard’s part and chimes in with Nature’s later description of the superior morality of the *clerc* who « voit en l’escriture, / avec les sciances prouvees / resonables et demontrees / touz maus don l’an se doit retrere », as we saw above. When Heloise, an embodied and sexualised female figure of learning, speaks she repeats – and thus draws attention to – Raison’s incoherent reference to the emperor of Rome made during the earlier attempted seduction of Amant:

« Se li empereres de Rome,
   souz cui doivent estre tuit home,
   me daignet volair prendre a fame
   et fere moi du monde dame,
   si vodroie je mieuz, fet ele,
   et Dieu a tesmoign en apele,
   estre ta putain apelee
   que empereriz coronee » (Rose, v. 8787-94).

Heloise’s position as a learned woman is wholly subordinate to Abelard’s as teacher; it is he who has access to the books and proofs, although in le Jaloux’s version, his use of them to oppose marriage hardly tarries with conventional ideas of virtue. Heloise is only allowed to echo Abelard’s instruction, although maybe here it is possible to discern what Jane Burns calls « bodytalk »16: even as Heloise goes along with Abelard’s morally dubious teaching, her brief speech with its ambiguous and quite possibly satirical valorisation of being a « putain » over any kind of marriage could well signal an alternative female take on the injustices of medieval gender politics. It certainly disrupts the simple misogynistic thrust of le Jaloux’s outpouring. After introducing and then quoting Heloise, le Jaloux declares:

Mes je ne croi mie, par m’aime,
   c’onques puis futi nule tel fame (Rose, v. 8795-96).

Having conjured up the figure of a supposedly real and historical, educated woman, le Jaloux – who often seems to represent the jealous male possession of knowledge as much he does a jealous husband – suddenly reveals that the speaking voice that he has just ventriloquised is in fact tied to no historical female body. The spectre of an educated woman is deeply disturbing to masculine paranoïd jealousy and le Jaloux is less than rational in his phallogocentrism. Having disregarded Heloise as a female authority due to her supposed non-existence, he goes on to say, irrationally:

si croi je que sa lestreüre
   la mist a ce que la nature
   que des meurs feminins avoir
   vaincre et donter mieuz en savoit (Rose, v. 8797-800).

16 « I attempt to hear, within the dominant discourses that construct female matter in the French Middle Ages [...] other voices that speak against and dissent from the dominant tradition. I have chosen to call this resistant doubled discourse ‘bodytalk’ » (Burns, op. cit., p. 6).
In order for Heloise to have spoken in a supposedly educated way, either she must be fictional or she must have fully removed any female parts of her personality. Heloise has repeated the very part of Raison’s speech that seems to exclude the possibility of rational theoretical discourse emerging from a female body, and the lesson seems to be the same for both figures: if you are a woman, you do not produce valid speech; if you produce valid speech, it is evidence that you are not really a woman. Le Jaloux, though, is no paragon of logic. His rejection of Heloise stems from his raging misogyny and his fury at his inability to control his wife. We later see his descent into irrational animality with the brutal assault on his uncontrollable spouse:

Lors la prent espoir de venue
cil qui de mautalant tressue
par les treces et sache et tire,
ront li les cheveus et desire
li jalous, et seur li s’aourse,
por noiant fust lions seur ourse,
et par tout l’ostel la traîñe
par corrouz et par ataine,
et la ledange malement (Rose, v. 9331-39).

There is perhaps one other speech in the Rose that could be attributed to an embodied female figure, one whose speech subverts the claims of a male figure to authoritative knowledge and disrupts the power matrix that links the female with the mutely material. That figure is Phania, the daughter of Croesus. Croesus has a dream that the god Jupiter is washing him while Phoebus towels him down (v. 6477-79). His daughter Phania, who « tant estoit sage et soutille / qu’el savoit les songes espondre » (v. 6484-85), correctly interprets this to have a hidden meaning which is the foretelling of his death by hanging, whereas Croesus claims that it shows that the gods are watching out for him. This exchange is largely about the interpretation of dreams, and, by extension, texts, although I want to focus particularly on the issue of gender in relation to knowledge and speech. To the version of the Croesus story compiled by the First Vatican Mythographer, Jean de Meun makes an important addition. In the Rose, Phania does not simply interpret the dream, but goes on to discuss the dangers of trusting in Fortune and to urge Croesus to lead a moral and charitable life (v. 6523-62). She appears to be taking on the role of moral educator in a manner very similar to Raison, who is herself voicing the story of Croesus and Phania. Phania, like Raison (and like Boethius’ figure Philosophia), is lecturing about the imperative not to put one’s faith in Fortune. She is dispensing ethical knowledge as an embodied female speaker rather than as a self-contradictory abstract representation (although she does exist in a story told by Raison, who is just such a self-contradictory speaker). The result is that she is ignored by her father, Croesus, who, like le Jaloux or even Amant, refuses to acknowledge female authoritative voices:

Cresus, qui point ne s’umelie,
touz pleins d’orgueill et de folie,
en touz ses fez cuide estre sages,
conbien qu’il feist granz outrages.
« Fille, fet it, de cortaisie
ne de sens ne m’aprenez mie ;
plus en sai que vos ne savez,
qui si chastié m’en avez » (Rose, v. 6567-74).

Even as the Rose allows female voices of authority only when they are transparently
to no real woman, it also dramatises the proud and foolish rejection
of knowledge that comes from women speakers. Just as important as the « sage et
soutille » Phania’s exposition of Croesus’ dream is his ignorant rejection of her
teaching. His first word to her – « fille » – establishes her inferiority both through
gender and through age, and thus enables his misguided claim of greater
understanding. Both Phania and Heloise, figures of female knowledge, are dismissed
or sidelined clumsily by demonstrably stupid men, although the speech, direct or
indirect, allotted to these two totals only some fifty lines in a text that runs to 21 750
verses. They are little traces of resistance to the overarching exclusion of female
embodied voices in the Rose and do not represent a serious and sustained challenge
to the claims of male domination – strident, if suspect and ultimately slightly
ridiculous – that run through the text.

Raison and Nature are not really women; Heloise and Phania are marginal,
both in terms of the status accorded to them by le Jalous and Croesus respectively
and also in the sense of the relatively few verse allotted to them in the text. La
Vieille remains the most obvious choice for an embodied woman subverting the
male hegemony on knowledge in the Rose. She certainly has more of a credible
body than either Raison or Nature. We first see la Vieille in Guillaume de Lorris’
section when he mentions an old woman put by Jalousie inside a tower to guard Bel
Acueil, and she seems more like a person than an abstract principle, even if she is
more of a type than an individual (v. 3902-12)17. In the hands of Jean de Meun, her
character becomes fleshed out, so to speak, in her speech. She has a biography – she
is a former prostitute, fallen on hard times, illustrating Phania’s and Raison’s
teachings about the fickle nature of Fortune. This past is linked to her body, not only
as it involved the use of sex and carnality for profit but also because the very
re-telling of the history affects her physically. When she thinks of how she used to
strip foolish men from their wealth, la Vieille tells Bel Acueil :

mout me delite en ma pensee
et me resbaidissent li membre
quant de mon bon tens me remembre
et de la jolivete vie
dom mes queurs a si grant envie;

17 For la Vieille’s relationship to conventional representations of old women as chaperones
and go-betweens in Old French literature, see H. Arden, « La vieille femme dans la littérature
médiévale : sexualité et narrativité », Europäische Literaturen im Mittelalter: Mélanges en
l’honneur de Wolfgang Spiewok à l’occasion de son 65ème anniversaire, ed. by D.
touc me rejuvenist le cors
quant g’i pens et quant jou recors (Rose, v. 12904-10).

This is a woman rooted in the physical, so it would appear, and the scandal of bodytalk seems as real here as anywhere else in Old French literature. She goes on to portray herself satirically as a University Master giving a parodic lecture about the teachings of love and gives Bel Acueil licence to teach as a master in the science of sexuality and wholly destabilises the male-female distinction around theoretical knowledge:

Biau tres douz filz, se vos vivez,
– car bien voie que vos escrivez
ou livre du queuer volentiers
touz mes enseignemenz antiers,
et quant de moi departiraiz,
se Dieu plest, encor an liraiz
et an seraiz mestres con gié –
je vos doign de lire congié
[…](Rose, v. 13469-76).

Knowledge’s status as a male preserve has been gender-bent out of shape. In this back-to-front, parodic university, La Vieille has granted Bel Acueil – a male figure representing part of the female psyche – leave to teach in public, an explicitly masculine activity18. La Vieille says that Bel Acueil will not become mistress, but a «mestres con gié» (a master as I am). Does this mean that women are taking over male roles such as that of a university Master? Alternatively, might it mean that being in a position to dispense theoretical knowledge inescapably implies masculinity?

La Vieille undoubtedly poses challenges to the phallogocentric imaginary. Kay has pointed out that her speech «plays a vital part in subverting the ‘woman is to carnal as man is to mental’ homology». This challenge, though, comes from the location of the carnal in the masculine as much in the feminine, rather than opening up the mental sphere to feminine possession19. Far from showing a female body entering the academic sphere, the construction of la Vieille serves rather to bring men down to the level of the physical. La Vieille gives a coherent and notably Aristotelian account of the similarity between the workings of sexual desire in humans to its functioning in other animals20. In outlining how women should take advantage of men, la Vieille discusses how different kinds of male animals are

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18 Bel Acueil also has leave to teach love in private, in defiance of the 1276 injunction that only the uncontroversial topics of grammar and logic were to be taught in private. See Kay, art. cit., p. 219.
19 Kay, art. cit., p. 218.
Gender-bending voices in the Roman de la rose

helplessly impelled by their natural drive towards the female of the species. La Vieille concludes:

Ausinc est il, biau filz, par m’ame,  
de tout homme et de toute fame  
quant a naturel appetit,  
don lai les retret un petit (Rose, v. 14057-60).

Male and female seem to exist on the same carnal plane with no differentiation between them, both susceptible to comparison with irrational beasts. La Vieille is here drawing from, or at least alluding to, Book VI of Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium*\(^{21}\), which poses a slight problem for a claim that she is a real embodied woman. La Vieille’s history as an uneducated prostitute means that she cannot conceivably have had access to the teaching of Aristotle’s natural history, which was only rendered in Latin from 1220 and only became part of the curriculum for the Arts Faculty (in Latin) in the University of Paris from 1255\(^{22}\). Equally implausible is her citing of Calcidius’ Latin translation of Plato’s *Timaeus* detailing how one’s memory is superior in childhood (v. 12858-62), or, for that matter, her reference to the decimal numerical system of «Algus», the Arabic mathematician Abu Abdallah Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi (v. 12760-66). This is hardly the speaking voice of a woman whose CV includes only sex work, followed by heartbreak and poverty. Far from this being a female claiming male knowledge and learning, la Vieille’s very status as an old woman signals the impossibility of her accessing such learning. Her discussion of Plato and Aristotle does not fit, therefore, and appears as a joke that simply reinforces the impossibility of a real woman like la Vieille ever having access to such discourse. Such a joke would have been particularly appropriate given the Aristotle-reading audience of the Paris masters in whose community the *Rose* was written\(^{23}\). This is not to say that there were no women with any learning in medieval Europe; Heloise has already been discussed as one particularly famous example. However, in late thirteenth-century France, access to Aristotle’s natural history was only possible in exclusively male world of the University of Paris.


\(^{22}\) B. G. Dod, « Aristoteles Latinus », *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. by N. Kretzmann, A. Kenny and J. Pinborg, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982 [2008], vol. I, p. 73. Before 1255, as Dod notes, «the total number of people in the whole of Europe who had an active interest in the new Aristotle was extremely small – a handful of masters and students in a few places » (p. 72).

\(^{23}\) The initial audience of the *Rose* being university-based, it seems only right to point out that in this case Spearing’s claim that «[m]odern scholars have been too ready to imagine medieval audiences to be as knowledgeable as themselves about medieval poets’ sources» (op. cit., p. 21) is inappropriate. In fact, it seems preferable to assume a readership with a far greater familiarity with Jean de Meun’s sources than even a scholarly modern reader would have.
Furthermore, when la Vieille is looked at closely, her claim to bodily discourse starts to look a little shaky. She may make reference to her body, and have the occasional discursively gendered tic\(^24\), but la Vieille is not a real, embodied woman. To an audience familiar with Ovid, it is clear that la Vieille is a later incarnation of Dipsas, the old woman of *Amores*, I.8, who counsels the female object of the speaker’s desire to take many lovers for the sake of profit. The advice that la Vieille then gives to Bel Acueil is a speech in which there are no fewer than thirty-nine allusions back to Ovid’s *Ars amatoria*\(^25\). The knowledge that la Vieille has supposedly gained through experience, like the knowledge in Nature’s speech, has in fact been accessed through reading. This is not the reading of a female figure, but of a cleric who subtly but insistently signals his presence as the learned puppeteer manipulating the unreal and essentially disembodied speaking figures, female or male, that are formed not from natural matter, but are woven together from the threads of previous texts\(^26\). It is hardly exceptional that a work of literature draws on earlier works\(^27\). What is striking about the *Rose* is how self-consciously overt Jean de Meun is in his demonstration of the constructed nature of a literary character. Raison, la Vieille, and Nature, rather than being speaking women, are composite voices that all ultimately have their origin in earlier texts, written by men. While almost all speaking men and women in medieval texts may have been written by men, the figures in the *Rose* reveal the gender politics of men writing women and self-consciously draw attention to the mechanisms of what might be called «transvestite ventriloquism»\(^28\). Discursive markers of femininity are all the more striking for their juxtaposition with a male academic discourse and draw attention to the male author behind the female textual voice.

\(^24\) The repetitions of « biau filz » and « biau tres douz fils » not only reinforce the gender-bending going on around Bel Acueil, to whom la Vieille addresses her advice to women, but might also be indicators of her old woman’s speaking voice. At the very least, there is a parallel to be made here with how Croesus’ use of « fille » when talking to Phania stresses the age and gender gaps between himself and his daughter.


\(^26\) For the inclusion of citations of the *Ars Amatoria* used in the glossing of a fourteenth-century French manuscript of the *Rose*, see S. Huot, *The Romance of the Rose and its Medieval Readers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 55-59. Huot notes that most of the citations are clustered around Amour’s speech in Guillaume de Lorris’ section and Ami’s speech in Jean de Meun’s part. P. Badel mentions a fourteenth-century Italian manuscript in which the copyist has put excerpts from Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Rose* alongside the text of the *Ars Amatoria*, including v. 13617-20 from la Vieille’s speech (P. Badel, Le Roman de la Rose au XIVe siècle, Geneva, Droz, 1980, p. 142-43). It seems fair to conclude that the intertextual and citational nature of speeches about eroticism would have been apparent to educated medieval readers of the *Rose*.

\(^27\) Spearing, *op. cit.*, p. 21-22.

This is not to deny the transgressive nature of la Vieille’s speech: the shamelessly mercenary advice for women to use their material bodies for profit, the queerness of the blurred gender boundaries, the destabilising threat of women taking the active role in pursuing and plundering men for their wealth. However, the academic knowledge included in her speech renders her a less threatening figure. No matter how devious la Vieille is, she is signalled as an impossible fiction played out by Jean de Meun – who can himself take the credit for such literary deviousness – for the entertainment of highly educated, male audience of his contemporaries in the university milieu in which he operated.

For all the threats of bodily female disruption of the male prerogative of knowledge, authoritative female voices are shown to be occupying an impossible space opened up by the dream of the Roman de la rose. Far from embodied women speaking and disrupting male privilege, ultimately the only body in the text is the sleeping body of Amant in whose imaginings all the speeches take place, although even the physicality of Amant’s body is far from a given; Guillaume de Lorris, to whom the body belongs in theory, has been long dead by the time Jean de Meun continues the dream. The prominence of female figures of authority poses challenges for a comfortable division of genders. However, despite the fear of women taking the reins of intellectual power that is staged in the Rose, any hints that they might actually be disrupting masculine academic privilege in the text are wholly undermined. Just as entry to the University of Paris remained barred to women, so too the walled garden of intellectual delights in the Rose is ultimately free of dangerous female bodies.

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