

The Wife of Bath and Excerpts from *Le Roman de La Rose*

One of the most widely read medieval French literary works, *Le Roman de la Rose* (*The Romance of the Rose*), survives in some 300 manuscripts dating from the late 13th to early 16th century. Numerous printed editions exist from the 15th and 16th centuries. Widely read throughout Europe, the poem influenced much of the literary output of the Middle Ages and was enjoyed by poets such as Chaucer, Gower, Dante and Petrarch.

The poem is an allegorical dream vision about sex, in which a young man seeks to possess the rosebud with which he has become enthralled. Unfortunately, the rosebud is sealed away within a castle of chastity, guarded day and night by various allegorical figures such as Danger, Jealousy, and so on. The Lover, our young hero, must find a way to bypass the guardians so that he may possess the rosebud. Various allegorical figures such as Reason, Fair Seeming, and others offer him advice (often contradictory) concerning the best way to win his rosebud.

The text is attributed to two authors. Guillaume de Lorris wrote the first 4,058 lines by around 1270. Jean de Meun, a Parisian writer, finished the remaining 18,000 lines a century or so later. Written in Middle French in octosyllabic rhyming couplets, the poem is important for being the first example in French of both a sustained first-person narrative and of narrative allegory.

The Wife of Bath is not an entirely original character in Chaucer. Chaucer's version of the Wife of Bath appears to originate in this earlier French poem, *Le Roman de la Rose*. He combines description taken from *La Vieille* or *La Duenna Vieille* ("The Old Woman") and from *La Jaloux* ("Jealousy"), two characters in that work. Like the Wife of Bath, *La Vieille* has been married numerous times, she knows the arts of manipulating men, and engages in a lengthy confessional revelation of her controlling techniques and avoiding the potential miseries of marriage.

Read through these excerpts and notice similarities and differences between *La Vieille's* attitude and the Wife of Bath's beliefs concerning marriage, sexuality, and dominance in the marriage bed.

ROMANCE OF THE ROSE: line 3938 and surrounding material, introducing and describing *La Vieille*:

An old beldame to spy upon him there
No other duty had but to keep watch
Lest he some folly might commit. No man
Could trick her with a gesture or a sign;
For there was no device she did not know,
Since in her youth she'd suffered all the pains
And joys that that Love unto his servants gives.
Although Fair Welcome listened and kept still,
Fearing the hag, he could no motion make
So cautiously that she could not perceive
The thought behind his simple countenance;
For well she knew the ancient dance of love.

THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE line 8980 and
surrounding material describing woes in marriage:

Will take a wife, or poor or rich,
8980 As goddess fair, or like a witch
Bewrinkled -- he hath writ the whole
Within his book hight "Aureole,"
Which treats of marriage: Ha! He cries,
Man's life is filled with miseries,
Troubles, and ills, on every side,
Induced by the insensate pride
Of women, their demands and plaints
Such trouble cause as life attains
With miseries manifold; alack!
8990 Hard task hath he who striveth back
To call them to a decent sense
Of modesty and reverence.

Whoso will take one indigent
To wife, must wonder not if spent
His substance be in gowns and shoes;
And if a wealthy wife one choose,
He need not marvel if disdain
She showeth towards him, or if vain
9000 And proud she prove, and not a fly
She valueth his authority,
And further, will perhaps engage
To vilify his lineage ;
Till he to madness will be stung,
Through clack of her unbridled tongue.

Or is she fair? At once a cloud
Of suitors round her footsteps crowd,
Hustle and bustle, push, dispute,
While each one strives to press his suit,
And find out what may please her best,
9010 Here anxious prayer, there love confessed,

THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE line 8884 and
surrounding material in which a husband describes
his woes in marriage:

Soon as I sally forth to work,
Away you start, with smile and smirk,
Ready-for some wild prank or game,
Whereat your cheeks should burn for shame,
Singing aloud like siren sleek --
8890 God curse you with an evil week!

When business drags me far from home
To Frisia's shores, or e'en to Rome,
At once you mount coquettish dress,
That leaves but little room to guess
My lot, till neighbors talk thereon.
And when they ask wherefore you don
Such gay attire while I'm away,
With brazen impudence you'll say
In mocking tones: Oho! Oho!
8900 'Tis that I love my husband so.
But I, poor wretch, may mope and grieve,
Who careth, whether I forge or weave,
Or whether alive or dead am I?
Then one would hit me in the eye
With bladder reft from goat or sheep,
And all the world but holds me cheap.
Because to beat you I've forborne,
While nought I win from you but scorn,
You brag! Though well 'tis known you lie.
8910 Alack! Alack! A fool was I
With such a pair of gloves to cramp
My hands -- but I the bit may champ.
Alas! A fool's cap 'twas I wore
That day when you obedience swore
In church, and I, poor idiot dreamed
You'd later prove what then you seemed.