

Finding One's way in Manuscripts: Le Roman de la Rose

1. The Challenge

We are so used to numbered pages in modern novels, and to seeing poetry printed with stanzas, lines, *and* pages enumerated, that we scarcely give a thought to the convention, let alone wonder when it began. We simply accept numbers as convenient ways to specify pages or lines when quoting. It may come as a shock, then, to discover that medieval manuscripts have no such conventions.

Isn't that a problem? Lacking page or line numbers, how are readers supposed to navigate parchment sheets with double columns of poetry handwritten on both sides of the page, especially in the case of very long poems like the *Roman de la Rose*? More confusing still, how can one make comparative references from one manuscript of the same work to another, especially when multiple manuscripts exist, each different from the others?

Citation practice for the *Roman de la Rose* – and for medieval texts in general – has traditionally referenced not the manuscript itself, but a critical edition of the “work.” If there's only a single surviving manuscript, then the editor transcribes it, adding line numbers to the poetry and page numbers to the edition. But a critical edition of even a single manuscript means that the “work” represented in the edition is the editor's modern presentation and conception. It is no longer an authentic medieval artifact.

If that is the case for a medieval work with a single manuscript, it is even more so when there are scores, or even hundreds of copies, all different from one another. In the case of a work such as the *Roman de la Rose* with some 250 surviving manuscripts, critical editions – of which there have been a number in the last two centuries – an editor normally chooses one manuscript as the base for his edition, while utilizing elements of any number of other manuscripts.

In recent years, the scholarly edition of choice for the *Rose* has been that of the French scholar, Félix Lecoy's, published in three volumes from 1965-1970 for *Les Classiques français du moyen âge*. Prior to Lecoy, the standard reference – which still commands authority, though it is harder to obtain (outside of research libraries) – was the five-volume edition of Ernest Langlois published for the Société des Anciens Textes Français from 1914 to 1924. More recently still, in 1992, Jean Strubel published a very useful, bilingual version of the *Rose* in the series, *Les Lettres gothiques*, although its format does not allow for an extensive critical apparatus or vocabulary.

Now every one of these editions produces a text of the *Rose* different from the others. Even more disorienting, since each edition uses a different text editing protocol, they all have different line numbers, sometimes varying by fifty or more verses. The manuscripts themselves, of course, do not use line numbers, and, in any case, the number of lines for the *Rose* varies from one manuscript to another, depending on passages added or omitted by a given scribe. Heretofore, scholars rarely had occasion to cite more than a few manuscripts at any one time, and then usually with reference to one of the critical editions.

2. Navigating the Micro-Space of the Folio (Page)

We are fortunate today that manuscripts in digitized form offer unparalleled access to medieval literary works. The *Roman de la Rose* Digital Library, for instance, allows students to study this poem in its original form (<https://dlmm.library.jhu.edu/en/digital-library-of-medieval-manuscripts/>). Their journey will begin on a bewildering note, however, since they won't find any of the guides modern readers expect.

Instead of external indicators like page or line numbers, medieval readers relied on visual signs like headings in red ink called rubrics (from Latin *rubrica* < *rubor* "red"), or miniature paintings on the folio depicting dramatic elements of the poem. Rubrics may identify the narrative depicted in such paintings, or announce the ending of one chapter or section as well as introducing the next one. Paintings may also represent enlarged letters containing a person, bust, or scene depicted in the negative space of capital initials such as "A", "B", "C", etc., as in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1. Latin Bible, Malmesbury Abbey, Wiltshire, UK (1407 CE). Detail of a rubric announcing the end of the Epistle of Saint James and the beginning of the Epistle of Saint Peter. Illuminated letter P: PETRUS for beginning of the First Epistle of Peter. (Photo by Adrian Pingstone: released to the public)



Figure 2. Folio of *Roman de la Rose* showing Love shooting his arrows at the Lover. Paris, BnF MS fr 5226, fol. 14v (det.). Paris, 14th century.

Enlarged initial letters with figurative paintings, as in Figure 1, are called “historiated” to indicate that the painting represents a figure important to the text as in “this is the beginning of the Epistle of Peter.” Almost invariably this is how we encounter enlarged “letter paintings.” A more varied painted initial with a colored pattern is known as “a decorated initial” because it lacks figurative images. As with historiated letters, they represent the first letter of a word beginning a sentence, but are often smaller, serving to set off sections of the narrative in the column of poetry as in Figure 3.

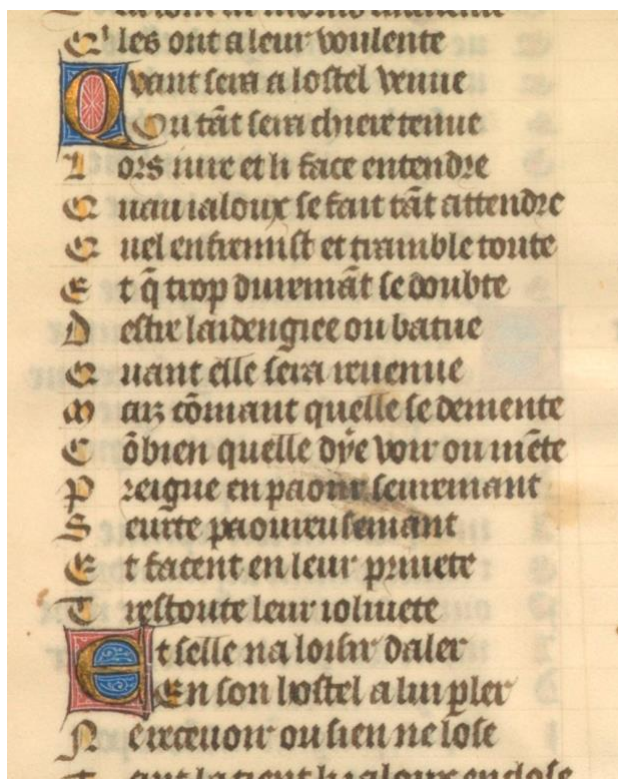


Figure 3. Folio of *Roman de la Rose* showing decorated initials “Q”[uant] and “E”[t]. Decorated initials serve to demarcate a block of text conveying an action, speech, description, or other meaning unit. Paris, BnF MS fr 5226, fol. 103v (det.). Paris, 14th c.

By marking the beginnings and endings of “reading units,” decorated initials serve as punctuation. They were helpful because scribes continued the ancient practice of writing poetry without punctuation, expecting readers to intone the rhythms and syntactical units of the text. It was only with the transition to printed texts in the late fifteenth century that punctuation and silent reading became the norm.

Intoned reading of manuscripts and silent reading of printed texts account for a material difference between the design of manuscript folios as opposed to printed pages. Whereas printers found it expedient to set type across the width of the page, medieval scribes divided each side of the parchment sheet into two columns for a total of four columns per folio. Moreover, whereas a printed page eventually came to be numbered on both sides, a manuscript folio counted only as a single sheet. Since numbering the folios of a codex was not a fixed practice, many manuscripts bore no folio numbers. Post-medieval owners or curators often added Arabic numeration in the upper right (recto) corner of a folio to facilitate navigation (Figure 4). Some medieval scribes, however, did number folios with “letter painting a Roman numeral in the top margin as in Figure 5.

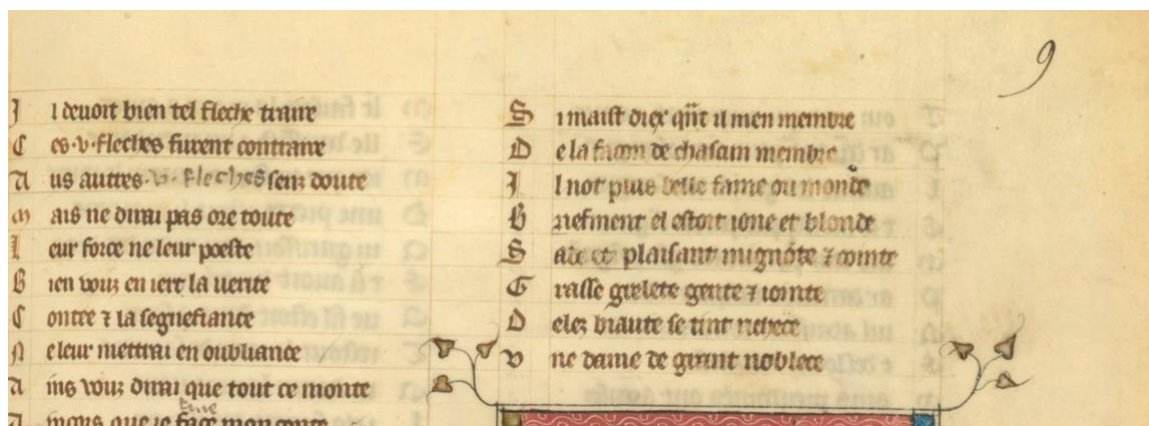


Figure 4. Detail of *Roman de la Rose* folio showing modern folio numeration. Paris, Bnf fr 1567, fol. 9r. Paris, c. 1350.

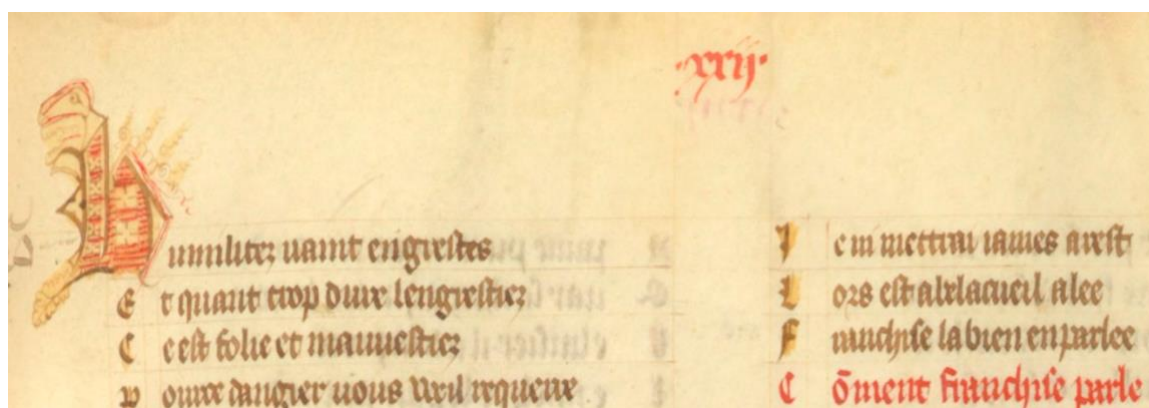


Figure 5. Detail of *Roman de la Rose* folio showing the original folio number Roman numeral .XXII. Paris, BnF MS fr 1560, fol. 22 (det.). Paris, 1300-1340.

Finally, to identify a particular passage, rubric, or image in a codex, we cite:

- 1) the work: i.e., *Roman de la Rose*;
- 2) the city and repository where the codex is currently located: i.e., Paris, **Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)**;
- 3) shelf mark: i.e., **français (fr) 5226**;
- 4) folio number and side: i.e., **fol. 103r**[ecto] or **fol. 103v**[erso]. If it's expedient to indicate a column, we can say: **fol. 103r-a**, for column 1 of a recto, or **fol. 103v-d**, for column 2 of a verso. Alternatively, one can simply say, **BnF fr 5226, fol. 103b** (= 2nd column on the recto of folio 103).
- 5) Place of creation and date of the codex: **Paris, 1300-1340**.

3. Navigating the Macro-Space of the Codex

Modern books come with built-in “roadmaps” or analytic guides in the form of a table of contents, chapter divisions and headings, and even, where appropriate, chapter sub-divisions and section-headings. As a result, we have no difficulty locating passages or finding our way even in long volumes. The situation is very different in the case of medieval codices, especially of long poetic narratives like the *Roman de la Rose*.

Faced with several hundred folios, how is one to locate a specific passage or scene without having to page through the codex one screen or folio at a time? Even more daunting, how can one locate specific passages in several codices? These questions go to the heart of why digital repositories of medieval codices have sparked new ways of look at and thinking about the role of manuscripts in shaping medieval vernacular literature, especially a long allegorical narrative like the *Roman de la Rose*.

By aggregating the rich diversity of the more than 250 extant *Rose* codices, digital repositories provide a trove of literary data—not to mention art historical, codicological, and environmental information—hitherto

unavailable for study in one space. This encourages comparative cross-manuscript study to document and analyze the nature and extent of variation from one *Rose* codex to another. Since extant manuscripts of the *Rose* extend from c. 1290 to 1520 C.E., variations reveal historical shifts in focus on reception and interpretation of the poem itself, not to mention styles in painting, scribal hands, and the gamut of codex formats from very plain, to religious, to luxury volumes produced for royal and ducal courts.

While it might seem a simple matter to match a scene from one manuscript with the “same” scene in another, the individuality of each codex proves something of an obstacle. No two manuscripts have the same number of lines, nor do we find images situated in the same relative locations—except for certain “set” image-series like the portraits of the courtly “vices” painted on the exterior wall of Déduit’s garden—where the allegory takes place—as shown on folios 2r-4v or 5r on illuminated manuscripts of the *Rose*. Similarly, rubrication protocols vary from one manuscript of the poem to another. This means that if we are interested in comparing a passage from fol. 103v in one manuscript, its analogue will appear at some distance from it, say, ten folios earlier in another manuscript, five folios later in a third, while a fourth may omit it altogether.

Critical editions do have line numbers to facilitate navigating within the poem. But the line numbers in a critical edition of the *Rose* do not correspond to the text of any actual manuscript, since each editor chooses a different version to use as a basis for establishing his text of the poem. Moreover, editors may incorporate a passage from another manuscript to fill a lacuna [missing passage] in the base text chosen for his edition. As a result, the line numbers for the *Rose* differ from one edition to another, sometimes widely. One does better to turn directly to the manuscripts themselves, although, as noted above, a passage that appears on folio 200r in one manuscript, for example, will not appear on folio 200r in any other manuscript.

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As a start, we can take our cue from the way some scribes lay out the text, image(s), and rubrics on a folio to form discrete reading units set off by visual markers like decorated initials and rubrics. Similarly, scribes often denote longer reading segments by rubrics as well as miniature paintings. Such segments may include descriptive passages, scenes of action, dialogues and discourses by and between characters, classical tales and myths, or interventions by the poet addressed directly to the reader. Whether long or short, by signaling such coherent units, medieval scribes reveal their desire to present the poem in coherent segments demarcated by graphic markers.

Given the individuality of manuscripts, it should come as no surprise to find that while scribes all practiced narrative segmentation, they did so idiosyncratically. If reading is inherently subjective, the delineation of reading units calls for even greater exercise of individual judgment. This did not pose a problem for medieval readers for whom textual consistency was simply not an issue, or at least not for vernacular literature. While we can appreciate their sense of textual fluidity, we do need to be able to map narrative segments of the poem in order to trace and understand its variances from one manuscript to another. Medieval scribes can't help us here.

The answer to our problem lies in a protocol developed for classical philosophy—Platonic dialogues, for example—which can be readily adapted to the *Rose*. When quoting ancient thinkers, we do not cite the page number of a given edition or translation, but rather refer to an identifier of a text segment, i.e., *Philebus* 38d-e or *Sophist* 10a, where “*Philebus*” identifies the work; “38” its segment number; and “d-e” the sub-segment. All editions and translations of these dialogues place the segment number in the margin next to the beginning of the segment with the lower-case sub-segment identifiers in the margin where these segment components begin.

In the case of the *Rose*, the DLMM has taken the longest-known version of the poem (excluding the Gui de Mori continuation/revision) and mapped narrative segments of Guillaume's and Jean's parts of the poem. These segments each bear an identifier composed of four components:

- (1) the initial, “G” for Guillaume de Lorris or “J” for Jean de Meun;
- (2) an Arabic numeral identifies the segment: “G1”;
- (3) a lowercase letter indicates the sub-segment: “G1a” for Guillaume's Preface, beginning, “*Maintes genz dient...*”;
- (4) a number-range denotes the lines of a subsection: “G1a 1-20” indicates the twenty-line Preface with which Guillaume begins the 4,100-unfinished lines of his part of the *Rose*.

See Figure 6 for an illustration of this protocol.

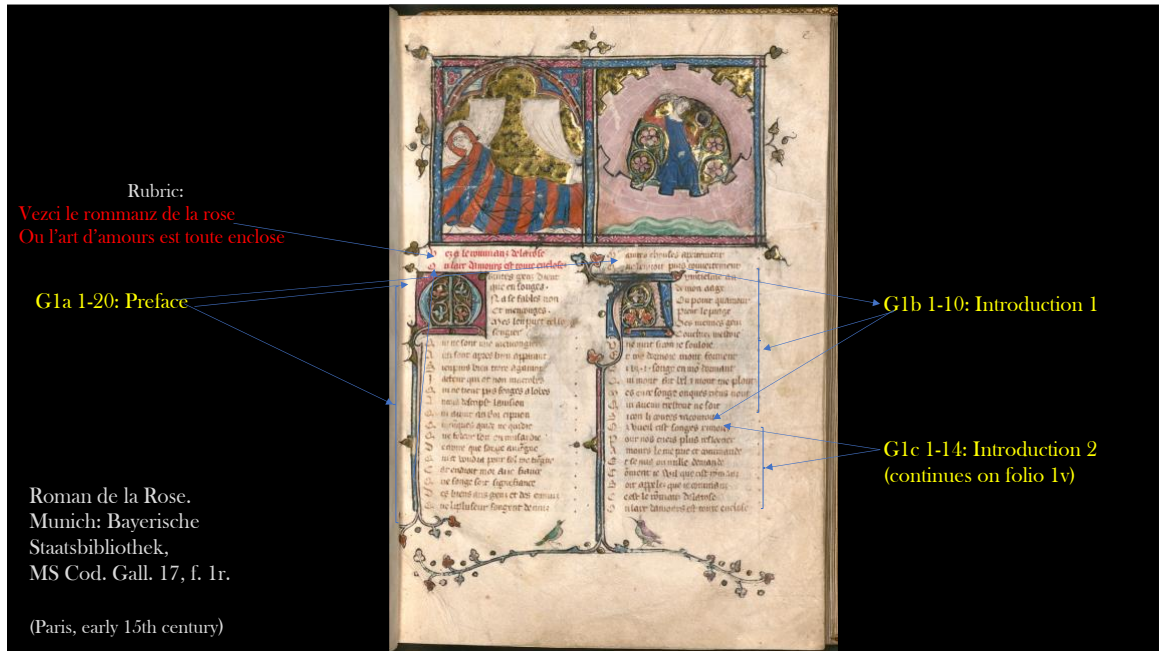


Figure 6: Narrative segment and sub-segments of Preface and two-part Introduction of Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose* on incipit (first folio) of Munich, MS Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Cod. Gall. 17, fol. 1r (Paris 1407).

One last remark concerning the narrative mapping protocol. Manuscript variations sometimes arise thanks to the freedom which scribes exercised in interpolating exemplary material they felt would enhance the narrative. In this, they undoubtedly felt authorized by Jean de Meun's exuberant introduction of classical myths and exempla. If one turns to the "Narrative Sections" spreadsheet of *The Roman de la Rose Digital Library*, interpolations appear as supplemental insertions in the narrative segmentation sequence marked by an asterisk after the line number, and an italicized descriptor.

The first interpolation in Guillaume de Lorris, for example, is that of the myth of the mirror Virgil created to warn Rome of the approach of hostile forces which appears in Pierpont Morgan Library's MS 132 and in the Bodleian Library's MS Douce 332. The interpolation juxtaposes Virgil's beneficial mirror that warns of danger with Guillaume's deadly mirror—the *fontaine perilleuse*—which lures Narcissus to his death-by-self-love. Here is how the DLMM references this interpolation in the "Narrative Sections" spreadsheet:

- G9c 1-44 Description of *le miroir périlleux*
G9c.1 1-8 No remedy for lure of *le miroir périlleux*
G9c.1*1 1-36 The Mirror of Narcissus compared to Virgil's mirror
G9c.2 9-44 Account of the mirror's destructive powers

Note that the lines given for G9c.2 run from 9-44, rather than 1-38 as one might expect. This reflects the interruption by the 36-line interpolation juxtaposing Virgil's beneficent mirror with the fatal lure of the perilous "fountain."¹ In most manuscripts, G9c.1 will simply continue without interruption for 44 lines. Since the Virgil interpolation exists in at least two MSS, however, it must be signaled as an insertion between line 8 of G9c.1.1 and line 9 of G9c.2, which is simply a continuation of G9c.1. Other interpolations receive the same treatment.

One final remark about the mapping protocol spreadsheet in the *Rose Digital Library* (<https://dlmm.library.jhu.edu/en/romandelarose/>). Upon clicking on the "Narrative Sections" link on the *RDL* homepage, you will find that the spreadsheet has four headings: "Section," "Lines," "Lecoy," and "Description." The "Lecoy" column lists the line numbers in his edition that correspond more or less to the narrative segment identified in the "Sections" column.²

So, for example, G9c.1 corresponds to lines 1576-1577 in Lecoy's edition, while G9c.2 corresponds to Lecoy 1577-1612, while the Virgil interpolation slots into the narrative between Lecoy 1576 and 1577. Of course, that's not the way medieval scribes or readers would have perceived this or any

¹ Guillaume de Lorris draws upon the myth of Echo and Narcissus from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* III:337-508. Guillaume offers two versions of the Fountain of Narcissus legend. First, a description of Ovid's "Perilous Fountain" on whose surface Narcissus sees his own image. Not understanding the properties of reflection, Narcissus sees only a beautiful youth with whom he falls in love. Since the "other" youth in the fountain cannot respond, Narcissus, obsessed, cannot tear himself away from the image, and is on the verge of wasting away from "unrequited" love, when he's transformed into his eponymous flower. Guillaume's second version of the Narcissus fountain figures Guillaume's Lover gazing into a pellucid pool where, on the bottom, he spies two prisms that reflect "a perfect Rose" with whom he falls in love. Although love is a perilous enterprise, Guillaume clearly expects his Lover, after suffering various vicissitudes, to win "the Rose" finally, thereby lifting, at least partially, the curse from Narcissus's fountain.

² Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, publié par Félix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris : Librairie Honoré Champion, 1965-1970). *Les Classiques français du moyen-âge*, 92, 95, 98. Although out of print, most research libraries and many college libraries as well possess this edition.

other interpolation. To them, the word “interpolation” —with its aura of “illegitimacy,” of having something like the status of a cocoo egg in a robin’s nest— would not make sense. They would read Morgan 132 or the Bodleian’s Douce 332 as perfectly “normal” *Rose* versions. It is only the advent of textual scholarship with its modern notion of a fixed text that conceives of ordinary medieval variations as “interpolations,” or departures from a standard text of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. The *Digital Library of the Roman de la Rose* exists to show why concepts like “interpolation” or “standard text” have no place in the world of medieval *Rose* manuscripts, and why their world of textual flexibility is far richer and more exciting.³

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³ On the concepts of “mutable stability” in manuscript transmission and medieval textuality as determined by the making of a manuscript rather than by the author, see Stephen G. Nichols, *From Parchment to Cyberspace: Medieval Literature in the Digital Age* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), Chapter 4: “The Paradox of Manuscript Transmission,” and Chapter 5: “Variance as Dynamic Reading.”