

The “Now” of the *Roman de la Rose* in Five Images



Figure 1

The “now” of the *Rose* begins with this image. It shows the insight that liberated the poem from the idea that words alone, in a **modern** edition, can truly portray a **medieval** work as complex as this. It shows the “**centripetal**” *Rose* of the critical edition: a coherent work mined from supposedly “unreliable” manuscripts. Surrounding the edition, we see examples of a “**centrifugal**” *Rose*: a work that seeks not coherence, but the clashing of contraries delivered in hundreds of unique manuscripts. This image contrasts the black and white **pages** of print with colorful **folios** where scribes and artists recorded *their* vision of the *Rose* from the late twelfth to the early sixteenth century. And, finally, this image shows the “digital turn” that at last allows us to **see** the *Rose* as our medieval forebears intended, as a multi-voiced, “polyphonic” work of art.

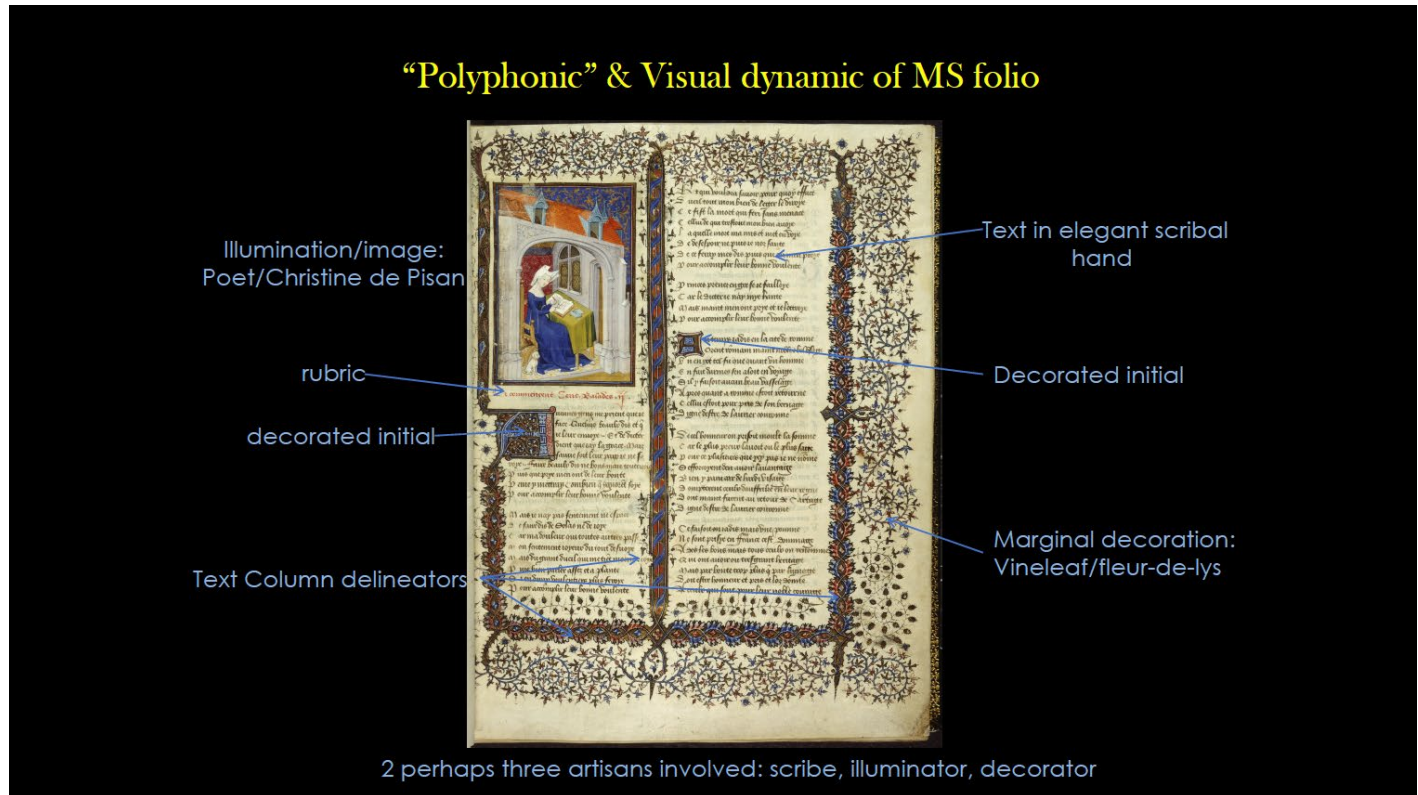


Figure 2

Figure 2 illustrates that the “now” of the *Rose* means learning to read its pages or folios as multi-media performances. Think of a manuscript folio not as **inert**, but as *flesh*: parchment acting as a matrix or dynamic space for recording voices and visions. Parchment that began life as the skin of a cow, a sheep, or a goat; parchment slowly transformed from a foul-smelling hide to a supple, glossy surface painstakingly covered with script, images, and decorative motifs. Imagine the collaboration between scribe and artist: the scribe copying, editing, or supplementing the words of a long-dead poet; the artist suppling an image of that poet while transposing his words into paintings that inject new perspectives into the poetry.

Depiction of poet in MS represent the “authority” for the scribes who are their “voices.”

Existentially, within a MS, scribe and artist are the poet’s alter ego who represent their intentions in word and image.



Roman de la Rose

New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 948 fol. 5r.
(Paris c. 1520-25).

Figure 3

Thirdly, the “now” of the Rose demands that we abandon the modern concept of unique authorship in favor of a collaborative model of creation. The *Rose* is particularly interesting in this respect because, as the work of two poets, Guillaume de Lorris (c. 1235) and Jean de Meun (c. 1280), it was an example of creative appropriation from the beginning. Jean readily acknowledges Guillaume’s role as originator of the poem, but has Amour, the god of Love, proclaim *him* the true visionary and advocate of love. In one bold stroke, Jean claims his place as the *Rose*’s “master poet,” giving the work a much broader focus than Guillaume’s.

His blatant appropriation influences the way artists portray him and Guillaume, as the next image shows. But first, we need to bear in mind that poet “portraits” are always ambiguous. The original poets are often long since deceased when a given manuscript is being produced. It is natural, then, for the author “portrait” to signify both the original poet, *and* the scribe who gives voice to the work. It is the scribes and artists who represent the poets’ intentions in word and image.



Figure 4

Figure 4 shows how differently *Rose* manuscripts depict its two poets. This is not only because Jean arrogates poetic authority to himself. It is also that, from the beginning, Guillaume figures in the narrative as the 20-year-old lover-protagonist of the allegorical dream that frames the poem. And that is exactly how artists portray him. For example, here on the opening page (*incipit*) of BnF MS 25526 (on the left), which shows the young Guillaume entering his allegorical dream narrative in four panels. The images show Guillaume-as-lover, but at the cost of representing him as poet. In fact, there is no image of the mature poet.

That privilege is reserved for Jean de Meun whose "portrait" often appears—as in the Valencia *Rose* on the right—at the point where Jean later tells us that Guillaume's poem breaks off and his begins. Jean's image does more than mark this rupture, however. By its position on folio 31 of 150 folios, it offers ocular testimony to the commanding presence and monumental nature of his 18,000-line poem.



Figure 5

Finally, the “now” of the *Rose* recognizes the asynchronous nature of textual transmission. Meaning simply, that while the date of creation—the 1280s in the case of Jean de Meun—remains fixed, the poem was transmitted via unique versions for more than two centuries. The scribes and artists responsible for each iteration lived in times and cultural spaces different from those of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. Since language, customs, dress, and social perceptions continually evolve, scribes and artists responsible for manuscript transmission naturally reflected such changes in their work. Their patrons expected as much. For them, the *Rose* was a *contemporary* work, not an historical artifact. As a result, dynamic variation characterizes *Rose* manuscripts, making each unique. Dynamic variation also makes it possible to track aesthetic, artistic, scribal, and, to some extent, linguistic modes over time.

But even though each manuscript is unique, they all convey a recognizable version of the *Rose* thanks to a creative tension between dynamic variation and “mutable stability” among

components of the manuscript matrix. We see this tension at work in Figure 5, where color, paint, design, layout, and style mark the most salient variables between these two fourteenth-century codices. Although both originated in Paris, circa 1325 and 1350-60 respectively, Morgan 132 (left) exhibits stylistic traits characteristic of the first half of the century. Meanwhile, the colors and execution of the miniature, bas-de-page escutcheon, decorated initials, and decorative foliage of University of Chicago 1380 (right) attest to Paris's rise to pre-eminence in manuscript illumination by 1375 thanks to the patronage of Jean II (r. 1350-1364) and Charles V (r. 1364-1380). If eye and taste favor esthetic variation, equally salient elements attest to the kinship of the two incipits. For example, the introductory miniatures; the figure lying asleep with a flowering rose bush next to the bed; the decorated initial "M" at the beginning of the first text column; the decorated "Q" a few lines below; and, of course, the words of the preface to the poem. Even though each element presents differently, they are what the Middle Ages—which had no concept of exact reproduction—recognized as "the same." This phenomenon of "sameness with difference" or "mutable stability" assured a continuity of *Rose* texts for more than two centuries of transmission by unique manuscripts.

These are but a few of the lessons "the now" of the *Rose* has taught us since 1991 when, in "The New Philology" issue of *Speculum*, I proposed that we study the *Roman de la Rose* as an open, generative work across the expansive landscape of its authentically medieval versions.

Stephen G. Nichols