

## Authorship, Authority, and Jean de Meun in Fourteenth-Century England: Biblioteca Riccardiana MS 2755 and English readers of the *Roman de la rose*

Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana MS 2755<sup>1</sup> is a fascinating and enormously important copy of the *Roman de la rose*. In its script and layout it is consistent with the large body of *Rose* manuscripts produced in France in the mid-fourteenth century. It is relatively unusual copy of the *Rose*, however, in being a competently written and high-grade codex, but containing only a single miniature (the dreamer in bed, f.1r), and with no spaces left for possible future inclusion of further illustrations. It also contains an extremely detailed table of contents in its final leaves, which looks to have been copied by the single scribe of the main text, with each entry giving a brief narrative summary of an episode in the text, followed by a quotation of a few words which is meticulously keyed to the first initialled line on the relevant folio in this manuscript. It is, in other words, a fully-functional table of contents, either designed and intended to be included in precisely this manuscript, or copied along with the main text from an earlier manuscript with precisely the same foliation. It seems, however, far more likely that the table was produced by the main scribe after having finished copying his text, simply because tables of contents are so remarkably rare in *Rose* manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> For a text like the *Roman de la rose* with a wildly digressive, perhaps even fragmented narrative in which voices are nested within voices, the very existence of a table raises interesting questions of this reader's experience of the text: does a table suggest that a reader approached this poem vertically, seeing it a sequence of separable and meaningful units of knowledge? Or, conversely, does the very existence of an attempt to make sense of a work by summarising each episode as one moment in a continuous narrative suggest this reader's view of the embeddedness and inseparability of each episode in the poem's wider scheme?

If the design, copying, and tabulating of this manuscript is the earliest stratum of evidence for a reader's involvement that it contains, the later strata are equally fascinating. My particular interest in this manuscript was in the evidence it contains of English readership, and, in a different way, of English ownership. Of these, the most important is marginal note that appears between at the ligature between the poem's two authors, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. A great deal of *Rose* manuscripts identify this moment of transition between the text's two authors with a rubric or even a miniature that is clearly part of the manuscript planner's original scheme. In MS 2755, this important moment is not marked by the main scribe in any way: the text runs continuously.<sup>3</sup> However, a later hand has added a note in the margin at this point:

Ici comencetz louere mestre Ion de Meoun pour ceo que mestre Gyliam cy  
cessa. soun ouere pour qil ne pout plus fere ou ne vout plus fere  
(f.27v)

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<sup>1</sup> A small but important consequence of my visit to the manuscript was the realisation that the magisterial volume of *Roman de la rose* manuscript descriptions by Ernest Langlois, *Les manuscrits du Roman de la Rose: Description et classement* (Paris, 1910), makes a small typographical error, designating this manuscript as "Florence. Bibl. Riccardienne 2775" (187), when in fact the correct shelfmark is MS 2755.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Huot notes only two *Rose* manuscripts (this and Paris, BnF MS fr. 1560) which contain tables. See *From Song to Book: The Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative Poetry* (Ithaca & London, 1987), 101n32.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the scribe or manuscript planner was ignorant of the fact that there was an authorial ligature here: his detailed table of contents notes accurately that it is on this folio that Jean de Meun begins: "LXVIII La prophecie au deu damors de mestre [f.142r] iehan de meun aucteur de cest liure" (f.141v-142r).

Langlois transcribes this note and suggests that it was made by “un Anglais”, without giving his reasons for thinking so.<sup>4</sup> From analysing this hand, I am able to be a little more specific: not only are there identifiable Anglo-French linguistic forms in this marginalium, it also contains a large number of insular cursive gothic (or “anglicana”) graphs. It is a hybrid script, also including a number of continental graphs consistent with what is known as “secretary hand” in England, which was gaining currency in England at the end of the fourteenth century. We usually date hands like this to c.1400, which seems entirely appropriate here.

It is particularly fascinating and useful for me that this reader’s intervention in the material record of this manuscript occurs precisely at the point where one author ceases and another begins, suggesting at least an awareness of – or perhaps even a preoccupation with – the poem’s two authors in England at this time. But this book-user stages further interventions (not identified by Langlois). On f.2v and f.3r, the leaves have been damaged by a large splash of water or candle wax. The vellum must have been quite badly damaged, since the same c.1400 English scribe who leaves a note at f.27v has overwritten the damaged text, using the same script as he used previously (including its English graphs). It is impossible to see how legible the damaged text was underneath his restoration, but if it was completely obliterated, it suggests that this scribe was collating the manuscript with another copy.

An ownership note occurs on the final leaf of the codex. Again very useful for my purposes, this note points to an English owner (rather than simply a user). Langlois transcribes this note: “Cest livre est a Robert de Becchys (?) de le don(ation) f(rere) Joh(an) de Nicole”.<sup>5</sup> The note is under an erasure, and is to my eyes almost completely unreadable (I can identify with any confidence only the first four words). Having looked at it under ultraviolet light, and having put high-quality digital images of this leaf through digital colour spectrum analysis, I still can’t make it out: the erasure must have degraded over the century since Langlois looked at it, due to light exposure, rubbing, or just time. In the manuscript a modern hand (19<sup>th</sup> century? 20<sup>th</sup> century?) has written an attempt to decipher the erasure on the opposite leaf (f.144r). It is a little different to Langlois’s version: is it an independent witness of an inscription now lost? Or did it inform Langlois’s attempt? Either way, it is a sobering realisation of how much stands to be or is lost in the material record of medieval culture despite the best technologies of conservation.

A final aspect of this manuscript deserves close attention: it contains a small number of lexical glosses in some dialect of Italian that I would date, with some hesitation, to around the middle of the fourteenth century.<sup>6</sup> These glosses raise fascinating and important problems for the provenance of this manuscript: was it already in Italy by the mid-fourteenth century? Do the two strata of English readership or ownership prove that it was in England, or could these readers have read and indeed exchanged this book in Italy (where we know Chaucer, amongst others, travelled)? Did Italian and English readers consult it in France? Or did Italian and English readers consult it in England? Did it move from France to Italy to England and back again? These questions must and will remain unanswered: testament to the interpenetration and flow of late medieval literary culture across a continuous and continent-spanning spectrum of francophony.

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<sup>4</sup> Langlois, *Les manuscrits*, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Langlois, *Les manuscrits*, 187.

<sup>6</sup> I found only two of these glosses: “oçio”, glossing *oisouse*, f.5v, and “lenga”, glossing *leesce*, f.5r.