

Knox, Philip. 2022. *The Romance of the Rose and the Making of Fourteenth-Century English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xv + 296. ISBN 9780192847171.

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The Romance of the Rose (hereafter the *Rose*) had an enormous influence on medieval English literature. The *Rose* has a very complex genesis: there were two separate authors, and they were from different periods. Therefore, the ideas and thoughts contained in the *Rose* must have been influenced by the prevailing conditions of each time, and even within the *Rose* it had undergone the various changes in manuscript contexts throughout its history. Knox is, however, aware that the *Rose* is not a unified entity. Knox's challenge, then, is to reveal how different kinds of "readers and writers came together, and how they imagined themselves and their connections to the *Rose*" (29–30). It seems significant that, because of the complexity of the *Rose*, its history 'cannot be wholly grasped in synchronic perspective', and Knox 'eschews an author-centred approach, and makes no attempt an exhaustive account' of what the *Rose* meant for particular authors (30).

The book is divided into three parts, following the introduction, and finally the Conclusion, with an Appendix, Bibliography, and Index.

In Chapter 1, Knox explores how the text as a platform, which was used in a specific courtly reaction, contributed to establish or challenge shared literary value within the community. Clear discussions are demonstrated through examples such as the complete opposite way of reading the *Rose* between Oton de Granson and Geoffrey Chaucer, and the literary controversy between *L'Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* of Christine de Pizan and Thomas Hoccleve, who translated Christine's work.

Knox's argument in Chapter 2 concentrates on how English writers were able to engage in an intellectual and philosophical exploration of the *Rose* in different ways, through the gradual and intricate evolution of diverse readerships and their changing expectations. This was particularly noticeable in English works, such as Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Langland's *Piers Ploughman*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *Cleanness* of the Gawain-poet, in the ways in which they delved into traditional depictions of nature and (sexual) desire.

The central purpose of the third chapter, "Being a Poet", is to disentangle the prevalent medieval notions concerning authorship, poetry, and fame, which the *Rose* subsumes. In the last segment of this chapter particular emphasis is placed on the section "Dead Poets: *The House of Fame*" in terms of that the trace of the *Rose*'s generative afterlife in Chaucer's *House of Fame* is observable.

In the final chapter, Knox concludes that the *Rose* includes a wide range of knowledge that "allowed readers and writers to examine how readerly communities [...] create the meaning and value of texts", and that "the *Rose* in fourteenth-century England

was [...] a vital force in the literary experiments that made the writing of this period so rich and so plural" (214).

While in many ways compelling, Knox's overarching claim that the *Rose* maintained (and is responsible for) literary networks all over Europe is something of an overstatement. Certainly, the *Rose* has a very high number of extant manuscripts, which is indicative of its popularity and wide transmission, and is unquestionably one of the sources that was frequently cited by numerous fourteenth-century English writers. It is misleading for Knox to assert, however, that traces of the *Rose* can be found throughout medieval English literature, or that the *Rose* is the *fons et origo* of them. Dream visions (*visio*), for example, while clearly present in the *Rose*, are part of an ancient and unbroken literary tradition: Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, Boethius' *De Consolatio Philosophiae*, Macrobius' *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, to name but a few. In addition, there is a genealogical view of women that appears in the second part of the *Rose*, which takes a "misogynist" or "anti-marriageist" position, regarding women as descendants of the tempter/seducer "Eve" and abhors them. These include St Hieronymus' *Epistola Adversus Jovinianum*, *Liber de (Aureolus) Nuptiis* attributed to Theophrastus, and Walter Mapp's *Epistola Dissuasionis Varerii ad Rufinum Philosophum, ne Uxorem Ducat*. It is perhaps more appropriate to consider that Chaucer's having Alisoun talk about perversely misogynistic and anti-maritalism in his *Wife of Bath's Prologue* follows such a genealogical tradition of women, rather than being indirectly influenced by the *Rose*.

The direct influence of the Italian poets, especially on Chaucer's works, should not be overlooked, although this underrating is particularly evident in chapters 3 and elsewhere. There is no doubt that the *Rose* was significant in many aspects of fourteenth-century English literature. Although the above discussion gives the impression that the *Rose* was foundational for everything, the impact of earlier sources should not be underestimated. Moreover, literary works written after the *Rose* cannot all be derived from the *Rose* when they are closely related to other vernacular works, even though these works themselves are of course connected to the *Rose*. The section on "Dante and the *Rose*" (201–04), while acknowledging the major influence of Dante's *La divina commedia* in Chaucer's *House of Fame* and other works, emphasises Chaucer's ambivalent attitude towards Dante as a result of recent research. But Chaucer's attitude toward Italian literature in terms of his equivocality is not at all surprising, because his consistent attitude, especially as regards to authority, is fundamentally a detached one.

This book is filled with extraordinarily dense arguments. It is a treatise of eloquence; the language is constantly refined, and the style is occasionally complex, but regularly rich in rhetorical devices in an attempt to carefully unravel and explain difficult concepts, ideas, and intricate thoughts (and therefore may be less comprehensible to an uninitiated non-Anglophone such as myself). As Knox makes clear, it is precisely because the *Rose* is not a unified body that it is able to be incorporated in so many different ways and in so many different genres. It could be seen as the result of empowering one vernacular, i.e. the *Rose*, which is then emulated in other vernaculars. In this sense, the book excellently represents the essence of the *Rose* and the way it relates to the social and literary-cultural communal structures of fourteenth-century England that received and transformed it. The greatest importance of this volume is, I imagine, that it shows how medieval vernacular literature became a kind of authority and how it was diffused, while also

unveiling the possibilities and the limits of the *Rose* and its English conveyers of the tradition in the fourteenth century.

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