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Review of Daniel Heller-Roazen, Fortune's Faces: The Roman de la Rose and the Poetics of Contingency.

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Daniel Heller-Roazen, <u>Fortune's Faces: *The Roman de la Rose* and the Poetics of Contingency</u>. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.xiii + 206 pp. ISBN 0801871913.

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Fortune's Faces, published in Hopkins's Parallax Series -- Revisions of Culture and Society -- is an impressive contribution to the vigorously growing critical literature on the thirteenth-century Old French *Roman de la rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and his continuator Jean de Meun. Heller-Roazen marshalls expertise in three disciplines -- classical and medieval philosophy, philology (Old French, Latin, and Greek), and close reading -- to build a persuasive -- and ingenious -- demonstration that the romance "shows itself and its own production to be not necessary but, instead, possible and merely fortuitous -- in a word, contingent" (7). The result is a tightly argued, dense but almost always limpid study that redresses many earlier critical misapprehensions of the so-called digressive, meandering or even incoherent nature of Jean de Meun's "second" *Rose*. Heller-Roazen further shows that this bipartite romance or "double fragment" (7), whose unity has so often been placed in doubt by the contrast between Guillaume's tightly articulated fragment and Jean's loose and wide-ranging continuation, is, in fact, unified by "the contingency of its form and structure" (8). By this, Heller-Roazen means that at each level of its construction, "in its characteristic interruptions and digressions, the romance appears as a work that incessantly explores its own capacity to be otherwise than it is; in the staging of its very 'accidents,' the poem reveals itself to be dedicated to nothing other than its own bare capacity to take place (*accidere*): to take place as it is, to take place otherwise than it is, and, *a limine*, not to take place at all -- to be cut short and interrupted, like Guillaume's poem, by death" (10).

"*Inventio linguae*," Heller-Roazen's first chapter, is devoted to tracing the philosophical notion of contingency from Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* through Boethius's Latin rendition and two commentaries on it, and the fifth chapter of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. Heller-Roazen sees Boethius as radicalizing Aristotle's notion of potentiality and bringing to "*contingentia*" an element that will become central to Heller-Roazen's own hypothesis: i.e., the language expressing contingency is "irreducibly contingent" itself (21). Abelard's work in the twelfth century on future contingents, prolonging and modifying Boethius, as well as reflections upon it by Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, constitute the philosophical authorities influencing Jean de Meun. Heller-Roazen also argues that the invention of vernacular verse from the eleventh century onward offers a second powerful example of the "language of contingency" (26) or "novel speech" that by its refusal to signify or to refer,

breaks with the Classical notion of transparent language to advertise its agrammaticality, its unruliness and irregularities. This, then, is the verse tradition in which Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun conduct their experiments on amorous and poetic contingency.

Heller-Roazen then moves to consider "The Contingent Subject" in a chapter that begins by tracing modern attempts to define subjectivity (Spitzer, Singleton, Dragonetti, and Zumthor) and bemoans the insufficiency of the most recent attempts to do so. Heller-Roazen proceeds to situate a discussion of the medieval subject in the pronouncements of medieval grammarians and philosophers, e.g. Donatus, for whom "*personam recipere*" meant to assume/welcome/receive a mask in contradistinction to Zink's notion of "incarnating oneself in literature" (33), or Abelard, who sees the first-person pronoun as a "shifter . . . belonging to a class of terms that 'determine no nature or properties'" (31). The way is thus paved to argue that the "I" of this bipartite romance "functions as something other than the sign of a single, actual, and existing individual" (34). But the dual authorship is only the most obvious part of the complex demonstration, as Heller-Roazen suggests when he launches into an analysis of the *songe/mençonge* (dream/lie) rhetoric opening Guillaume's poem, introducing the notion of a fiction whose "covered" truth will eventually, when uncovered, be recognized. Guillaume's dream, reminiscent of the School of
Chartres's *involucrum* and *integumentum*, is close to the patristic notion of "figura" as it functions semiotically and temporally. In the same way that the poem "does not simply possess [an already existing] meaning" but rather "constitutes it" (40), Guillaume's "je" is double, insisting on the differentiation between its present (dreamer's) self and its past self; it is this differentiation which constitutes the poem's meaning. The doubled self that speaks about itself as protagonist of an *histoire* (Benveniste) is, according to Heller-Roazen, further fractured by the dream fiction "in a temporal inversion of the doubling carried out by the narrator's self-recollection" (44). Jean de Meun's poetic continuation carries the process even further, "[f]or in Jean's text the first-person pronoun will be . . . the cipher of a self who ceases to be himself [i.e., Guillaume's already fractured "je"]: a subject . . . who dies and survives himself as another, only to be himself, in turn, displaced and supplanted by a final figure, for whom the text of the poem has no name" (45). This "final figure" with no name is, according to Heller-Roazen, the *narrataire* of the character Amor's revelation of the rupture between these two poetic "I's," delivered, strikingly, at the midpoint of the romance. Since Amor's intervention is in the future tense prior to the fracture of the authorial "I," Heller-Roazen argues that yet another "I" -- the nameless addressee of Amor's prophecy -- adds yet another "subject" to the complex mix, since "the work has even before its existence, already been foreseen and in some sense written" (51). Encapsulating "the simultaneous sameness and difference of poetic selves" (53), serving as the locus of identity, identities, and non-identity, this first-person pronoun conforms, according to the

analysis in Chapter One, to the definition of a contingent subject. Furthermore, since it is incommensurate with a specific being and refers to the text and the process of love, the "I" becomes a figure for the language of the poem, a language that constantly advertises its possibility of being otherwise, i.e., its contingency.

The poetic figure that most interests Heller-Roazen not surprisingly is Fortune, whose workings he analyzes in the third chapter. In contrast to the dual nature of Fortune in the Classical authors (she brings forth [L. *fero*] and also figures chance and instability) and Boethius, Jean, who himself translated the *De Consolatione*, subtly introduces a significant change by seeing *fortunam adversam* and *fortunam prosperam* not as two separate and opposed currents but as one: "Fortune functions here as a figure for contingency [in that she] . . . bestows gifts that are *contingentes* in the technical sense of the medieval philosophers; they are capable, at every moment, of revealing themselves . . . as 'their opposite', showing themselves . . . to be other than themselves" (76). One of the most impressive, sustained sections of the argument focuses on the Aristotelian conception of fortune as taking place not "as itself but as something different" (84) and then illustrates by persuasive close readings how Jean's Fortune exemplifies the paradox: e.g., she never speaks but is spoken of and is thus never unitary; what is at issue is not her appearance, Heller-Roazen shows, but rather her construction (and, I would add, deconstruction) of that appearance, by covering, then uncovering herself, or by contemplating herself as another. As such, Jean's Fortune shows what operates in the notion of *persona ficta*, by laying bare the "making of a face" (91).

Another of Heller-Roazen's important insights in the fourth chapter, "Through the Looking-Glass," concerns the lengthy passage (v. 17029 ff.) in which Nature reconciles divine foreknowledge with future contingents. Earlier commentators have tended to write it off as heavily indebted to Boethius, digressive and/or symptomatic of Jean's lack of control of his text. Carefully prepared by a review of Aristotle, Boethius and Peter Lombard, Heller-Roazen's close reading of Nature's four propositions has the merit of focusing on the precise poetic passage that is the crux of the poem's meditation on and demonstration of contingency. Nature's reconciliation depends upon the "double apprehension" (122) of contingency: i.e., man's temporality or mortal perspective on the indeterminate nature of future events and God's fully determinate foreknowledge. The image Jean creates to figure the difference in perspective is the "mirouer pardurable" (v. 17429), "the eternal mirror, which no one, except him [God], can polish, and which takes nothing away from free will" (tr. C. Dahlberg, rpt, 1995). What is particularly interesting in Jean's use of the mirror is that it is not used, as Heller-Roazen shows, in treatises on contingency or in the discussions of free will and omniscience in the two centuries preceding the *Rose*. Heller-Roazen interprets Jean's mirror as a reversal of Paul's, in that God rather than

man looks through the mirror and sees not "*in aenigmate*" but "*apertement*" (openly, clearly). While this insight is productive, his excursus on God's need of a *corruptible* mirror (since it occasionally needs polishing) to see the divine scheme of things, seems to me forced, in a reading that is fortunately one of few such: "the mirror introduces a lack into the divine presence precisely by filling it" (127). Much more persuasive is the analogy Heller-Roazen draws between the divine mirror in Jean and the Boethian image figuring the relationship of time to eternity as the circle's periphery to its center. Thus, Heller-Roazen can show that Nature's mirror is "a singular *translatio* of philosophical conceptuality into poetic figuration" (129). The demonstration is further enriched when Heller-Roazen notes the morphemic and lexical closeness between *specula* (f.), (watchtower), which to Boethius denotes God's eternal, all-dominating vigilance, and Jean's mirror or *speculum* (m.). The allusiveness of the latter gains thereby to suggest divine foreknowledge *per speculum* not *ab specula*, although what Heller-Roazen calls the "complex lexical and semantic *translatio* from Latin to Old French" (129) seems more properly to me an example of the interplay among words and concepts already comfortably installed in the bilingual space of thirteenth-century literary production.

Heller-Roazen's final contribution comes in his concise conclusion when he examines the character Faux Semblant as yet another figure of the contingent subject. Faux Semblant's protean change into any identity and then its opposite -- wrongly interpreted by early critics as yet another of Jean's digressions -- has been more richly read, the author believes, by recent critics (Stakel, Patterson, Huot, and K. Brownlee) as a polyphonic and multivocal figure. Heller-Roazen conceives of his own focus on contingency as building on their work by showing that the character is "a figure of the two-part romance itself . . . doubled through its unitary bipartition, multiplied by its single "I," fractured by the temporal and hermeneutic structures of its allegory, set in movement by its figures of instability and impermanence" (136).

Tightly organized, dense, vetted by several of the foremost *Rose* scholars, this rich study is also perforce circumscribed in the breadth of its analysis. Heller-Roazen not only recognizes this fact when he states "*Fortune's Faces*lays no claim to comprehensiveness in its readings" (9) but also sees it as one of its strengths. Unlike other studies that have sought to elucidate the complex architecture of the conjoined poems, he focuses on reading closely "a series of forms, figures, and moments of contingency in the romance that prove exemplary for an understanding of the work as a whole" (9). The result is an elegant book by a scholar from whom we can hope for further equally incisive contributions to medieval studies.