La Roman de la Rose was begun by Guillaume de Lorris in 1237 as an allegory of the art of courtly love, but it was left incomplete at line 4058. The poem was winding down but presumably Guillaume died before finishing it. An anonymous poet supplied a quick 78-line wrap-up, but later in the century Jean de Meun wrote an enormous amplification to line 21,780. His additions involved the scholastic impulse towards rhetorical debate and encyclopedism.

Many a man holds dreams to be but lies,
All fabulous; but there have been some dreams
No whit deceptive, as was later found.
One might well cite Macrobius, who wrote
The story of the Dream of Scipio,
And was assured that dreams are oft times true. (1.1-6)

The poet begins by introducing the popular medieval topic of dreams and their debatable significance. The "dream vision" format lends importance to something that is not an otherwise "authorized" story, and it allows free play of allegory, all under the convenient protection of its validity's own dubiousness. The poet insists that "No single thing which in my dream appeared / Has failed to find fulfillment in my life" (1.19-20). So the entire work is a mere prelude to an application in real life that we will never hear.

When I the age of twenty had attained--
The age when Love controls a young man's heart--
... (I.14-15)

The dreamer/lover is sufficiently mature, but still youthful. Most of the poetic decisions in the story find their origin in Andreas Capellanus' The Art of Courtly Love -- and de Lorris cites his source:
The Romance of the Rose it is, and it enfolds
Within its compass all the Art of Love.
(1.27-28)
The poem is an activating of Andreas Capellanus' rules, a poeticization of the courtly love handbook. The poem is set in springtime, May here (1.34), so we've got an instance of the "reverdie" (re-greening) tradition, of which the opening of the Canterbury Tales is the most famous example.

Falling asleep initiates the adventure, as is traditionally the case with the romance genre. The poet/dreamer, after idiotically prancing around basting his "sleeves in zigzags" (1.69) recounts a dreamscape not unlike that described by Billy Joel in his song "In the Middle of the Night" (1.74ff). He comes to a walled garden -- always something to be wary of in medieval literature because of the various Edenic associations. And love is truly exclusive, as Andreas had indicated, for images and personifications outside the garden include Christian vices but also such things as Poverty and Old Age -- qualities excluded only from "fin amour" (2.1ff). The dreamer cannot even find an entrance to this garden for a while. When he does, he is greeted by
Idleness, the first character we meet inside (since love is predicated on having leisure time). She is gloriously described in terms representative of the ideal medieval lady: yellow hair, radiant forehead (the women used to pluck their hairline to broaden their foreheads), grey eyes, perfumed breath, and seemly neck (3.1ff). The dreamer's courteous words function like magic and he is allowed in.

The Garden of Love is an odd place -- artificial in nearly every respect, including its measured square construction. Nature is tampered with so that the trees are carefully laid out and ugly ones excluded. Nature seems enameled. The chirping of the birds is vaguely holy, but not spontaneous; it's an acquired skill, contrived (3.102ff), and they achieve polyphony too! And no frogs or newts! Sir Mirth doesn't seem very mirthful. And where we might expect something more akin to a sordid free-for-all dionysian orgy, we see instead a flirtatious but formal brush-kissing dance.

The act of falling in love takes place at the fountain of Narcissus! (7.102ff), signifying vanity and preoccupation with self. The "mirror perilous" of the water's surface suggests that one views the love object indirectly -- only a reflection -- at first. And is it mingled with the image of the self? (Jung would agree with this absolutely since he describes the experience as one involving the shadow projection of the self.) The physiology of love is as Andreas describes: love enters through the eyes, and soon it will wound and lodge in the heart. The lover both "chooses" and is "seized by" love. And the initial impulse is that of the id: to seize! pluck! grab! One doesn't though, since the ego mediates between this impulse and the superego (fear of the "owner"). So the rose is an object, a possession. (It's not impossible that Guillaume was immortalizing a woman whose name was Rose -- so that the entire poem is based on a world-play!) There's no respect for the rose really, just fear of the father figure, the soon-to-be previous "owner." Courtly love from the start is deceptive in its insistence that the woman has power and control and the man is subservient. And later, once the rose is plucked, the game will be over.

The God of Love, Cupid, is sinister and armed: pain is an important part of love. Each of his darts represent various features of the love experience, as we learned before. Now he pursues the dreamer and shoots him. The Pains of Love are listed as insomnia, lack of appetite, erotic dreams, anxiety, burning, emaciation. Commandments are also listed: reputation to be guarded; attention devoted to fashion sense, good grooming; cut a dashing figure on horseback, learn the bassoon. Get to know the object of one's love on a personal level? No. Have a real relationship? No.

This is "fin amour" -- refined love -- so it's based on exclusivity, elitism, and artifice. A general ritualism pervades with rules, a set number of darts, etc. So love here is a style, a manner, not an emotion. Love is a pose.

Christine de Pizan despised this poem (but mostly Jean de Meun's portion). Until I link her analysis, you can read a former student's assessment of a similar issue here.