Introduction

This study offers a rereading of the medieval French prose romance in two senses of the term: it first questions the premises that have shaped our understanding of the highly repetitive Arthurian tales of the five-story corpus known as the Vulgate Cycle, and then suggests a new model of reading based precisely on that repetition. To "reread" these prose texts is to put aside considerations of narrative coherence, authorial control, and linear development, and to embrace instead the digressive and often illogical narrative path suggested by the text’s typed episodes. The Vulgate's individual tales are composed, in large measure, of narrative redundancies, elements that give the impression that the text is retelling itself constantly, always introducing new protagonists whose actions only repeat with variation what other knights have already accomplished. In contrast to a more linear kind of reading that might attempt to forge logical links of cause and effect or consequence between disparate aventures—making sequential sense of what is essentially and perhaps purposefully a nonlinear narrative structure—the kind of reading I propose will do just the opposite. By rereading we can examine the ways in which the récit of the Vulgate Cycle is systematically displaced from a straightfor-
ward narrative path, exploring how this text constantly shifts our attention away from the narrative at hand to other portions of the tale. Here logical sequence is consistently undermined by many different kinds of repetition.

The approach used in this study is conditioned by the narrative framework of the tales in question and qualified by the processes of textual composition and transmission that prevailed in the High Middle Ages. When we consider that the Arthurian prose romance was typically recorded in many manuscript versions, that the story committed to writing was subsequently reproduced on multiple occasions by a reciter reading aloud before an audience, and that the written version of any tale was subject to frequent rewriting and recasting by different authors across several centuries, it becomes clear that the medieval "text" shares little of the narrative autonomy and "coherence" that we ascribe to printed works by named authors.

Writing, in the medieval period was, above all, a process of continual rewriting, and the kind of textuality that results from this literary system presents a special problem for the modern reader. The five lengthy and rambling tales that make up the Vulgate corpus all but defy the constraints of artful composition generally associated with the well-wrought tale. Yet it is clear, judging from the number of extant manuscripts, that these prose romances were immensely popular in the Middle Ages. If we accept the flagrant discontinuities of narrative sequence as given, as forms of repetition that accompany the fundamental pluralism of the manuscript tradition in the Middle Ages, we can then advance an aesthetic premise for reading the prose romance that relies precisely on what have heretofore been considered its deficiencies: redundancy, ellipsis, and self-contradiction.

However, the model of rereading proposed here is not guided by formalist concerns alone, for the Vulgate's pronounced tendency toward narrative repetition raises significant questions about the very nature and function of textuality in medieval vernacular romance. Within the broader cultural context of Neo-Platonic theology, repetition occupies a priv-
illeged place when it corresponds to the act of representation in the chain of being. Through a kind of vertical repetition the Divine Idea is made manifest; and each reenactment of an event is valued as a concrete revelation of the abstract form that precedes it. In vernacular romance, however, repetition operates on a horizontal plane generating a seemingly limitless number of narrative elements. Grounded in self-reference, this repetition necessarily undermines the hierarchy essential to Neo-Platonic thought. Indeed, the predominance of rewriting in the Vulgate romances bears witness to a longstanding medieval controversy between Scripture and Rhetoric, a rivalry between two competing concepts of textuality that is played out on the field of Arthurian romance as the notion of the Divine text that copies sacred truth struggles against the tendency of literary texts to invent their own truths.

Rather than suggesting the possibility of transcendence through literature, the Vulgate tales use repetition to underscore the very immanence of the fictional text. In fact the cycle's abundant supply of narrative ressorts, which provides the most blatant example of literature's bold divergence from the theological model, is echoed in different volumes of the cycle through other aspects of rewriting. In the Estoire del Saint Graal and the Estoire de Merlin, multiple authorial voices generate overlapping narratives which echo and augment one another; as the tale is constantly recast, so too is the voice that recounts it. The putative allegorical structure of the Queste del Saint Graal participates in yet another type of rewriting since each Arthurian adventure is reformulated by a hermit who recounts analogous events taken from other tales. Here “interpretation” of narrative segments produces a whole series of highly fictionalized retellings.

Consideration of the role of repetition in the Vulgate texts leads, then, inevitably to questions regarding the function of authorship and authority on the one hand, and the role of interpretation and meaning on the other. These are issues of profound theological significance in the Middle Ages and, like the process of representation, they are posited in the Vulgate
romances only to be undermined by different instances of literary rewriting. We will see in the following pages that although these prose narratives purport to offer authoritative, truthful, and definitive accounts of the Arthurian past, the systems of coherence that they espouse are systematically undercut within the tales themselves. Successive chapters of this study will demonstrate in particular how the Vulgate's claims to single authorship, allegorical senesiance, and historical authenticity are narrative fictions firmly grounded in literary repetition.

We will begin by examining the manner in which textuality is conceptualized within the Vulgate Cycle considering especially how medieval textuality is anchored in an aesthetic of pluralism that governs the role of author and text alike. Chapter 2 focuses more specifically on the question of authorship, demonstrating how the proliferation of narrative voices in the Estoire del Saint Graal and the Estoire de Merlin both mimics and undermines the medieval system of writing based on auctoritas. By advancing a wholly vernacular version of "authority" derived from the citation of fictional texts and fabricated authors, the prose romance deftly subverts the process of textual authentication that the Church Fathers claimed to be theirs alone. Chapter 3 investigates the medieval reading system of interpretative allegory showing how the Queste del Saint Graal effectively mocks theological interpretation by offering a wholly vernacular version of Christian typology.

These initial chapters provide a prelude to discussion of the most obvious aspect of rewriting in the Vulgate romances: the recurrence of stock motifs in the Lancelot. The issue at stake in this volume of the cycle is not authority or meaning but representation, both historical and theological: the accurate recording of past events in fiction, and the accurate reproduction of a transcendent signified. Although this cycle of tales is said, on the one hand, to result from the oral deposition of King Arthur's knights, and to descend, on the other, directly from the "bouce de la véritet," the predominance of narrative ressorts within the text suggests a wholly literary provenance based on allusion to former incidents in the tale. These events are shown
systematically to be devoid of historical referent or theological significance. Rather, it is through narrative repetition that the Vulgate texts proclaim boldly if indirectly the importance of literary creation, legitimizing the role of vernacular romance by underscoring through a sheer mass of words the significance of the *verbum* as opposed to the *Verbum*.

The final chapter on *La Mort le roi Artu* indicates how the last tale of the cycle participates in rewriting of yet another sort, by closing the series without providing a definitive narrative ending. This volume offers in fact the possibility of rewriting in the largest sense by leaving open the chance to continue the narration at some later date.

In each tale of the Arthurian Vulgate Cycle, what we hear stressed repeatedly is the conviction that the "lie" of literature forcefully rivals the Truth of Scripture, that the order of Poetics here strives boldly to gain the authority previously accorded only to Theology. It is precisely to the degree that these texts are rewritten that they proclaim their forcefulness as literary works distinct from, and in competition with the "force des escriptures." This literary rewriting invites in turn a rereading on our part.

At the same time that the issues of authority, interpretation, representation, and closure raise significant questions about the role and function of the vernacular text in the Middle Ages, they also serve to question the ways in which we have read or might read Arthurian romance. The medieval controversy between Rhetoric and Scripture can be seen in this way as a staging ground for more contemporary issues of literary significance. As the tense and tenuous rapport between Divine Text and its literary rival is orchestrated within the Vulgate romances through many kinds of repetition, we are encouraged at every turn to reconsider the importance we accord to concepts of textual autonomy, authority based on authorship, or the attempt to find coherent meaning in medieval literary texts.

Although the analysis offered here is based on individual volumes of the Vulgate Cycle, it has broader implications for Arthurian romance in general: for the verse romances as well as
those in prose, and for the non-Arthurian prose texts. Whereas the specific patterns of repetition and mechanisms of narrative rewriting discussed here do not pertain directly to other medieval prose texts, the issues of textuality, authorship, and the status of the vernacular tale as well as the problem of how to read the repetition in medieval works are germane to the widest spectrum of texts: to tales ranging from the oeuvre of Chrétien de Troyes to the verse continuations of his romances, from the Perlesvaus to the prose Tristan.