Chapter One
The Poetics of Rewriting

If we take at face value the textual genealogy that is advanced in the five-story corpus of Arthurian tales known as the Vulgate Cycle, we might understand these texts to be the result of the oral deposition of King Arthur's knights. Having returned from their individual heroic adventures, the knights of the Round Table are said to have recounted their feats aloud to the inhabitants of the court in the presence of Arthur's scribes. The scribes, in turn, committed the tales to writing, creating thereby the text we read. Indeed, throughout the prose Lancelot we are reminded that Arthur's knights ride all day in search of adventures that might be told, often finding no deeds worthy of this honor, "si chevalcha tote jor sans aventure trover qui a conter face." Just why certain adventures are worth recounting, recording, and remembering is never made explicit. The texts in which they are preserved cannot be taken as documentary accounts of events in either the sixth century or the High Middle Ages, for the incidents recorded here are extremely stylized and repetitive. A typical chivalric encounter is one in which a knight comes to a castle where he must vanquish a guard on a bridge and swear to deliver the castle inhabitants. Once inside,
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the potential liberator comes upon a garden containing a pine tree with a horn hanging from it that he must blow before subduing a knight who exits from a tower. The details of this event are not significant in their realistic precision; indeed they offer a generalized and unspecific view of the prison locale. But they become important through repetition, through the fact that they recur typically in similar scenes throughout the lengthy volumes of the prose texts. We are rarely told how one castle differs from the next, or what distinguishes a particular garden, tower, or pine tree from the others. These repeated adventures appear, in fact, to refer more to one another than to any external, mimetic structure.

Could this, then, be what makes an adventure worth recounting in the Vulgate romances: the degree to which it conforms or can be made to conform to other adventures that have already been told? If so, we are confronted with a textual tradition that is doubly fictional: those who tell the tale are active, creative protagonists in their own narrative. And what these hybridized author-heroes recount has already been told to some extent by other knights whose adventures serve as models for later narratives. Each knight's choice of the exploits he will undertake is thus not made on chivalric grounds alone; as authors of their own tales, the heroes of the Vulgate Cycle select those chivalric deeds that fit the mold of established narrative episodes. The strategic scenario that is acted out on the field of literature, as on the field of battle, originates in repetition.

The kind of episodic repetition delineated here is but one example of the ways in which the Vulgate tales are continually rewritten. The narrative reprise characterizing incidents of capture and release in this corpus finds a structural counterpart of wider scope when whole segments of the Vulgate texts are retold in other volumes of the cycle. The Estoire del Saint Graal, which describes the transfer of the Grail from the Holy Land to Great Britain, contains several lengthy tales that are also recounted in the Queste del Saint Graal. Although these stories are linked through the repetition of common subject matter, it is not immediately apparent whether they are designed to stand
alone as independent tales, or whether they must be taken together as interdependent narratives. A related question can be asked of certain segments within individual volumes of the cycle: should the "Agravain" section be considered part and parcel of the Lancelot, or should the "Livre d'Artus" be read as inherently tied to the Merlin?

From these few examples it becomes apparent that any inquiry into what constitutes an episode in the Vulgate texts inevitably gives rise to a much larger question: what are the boundaries of textual autonomy or what constitutes a text within this prose cycle? This is a problem common to Arthurian tales in general, and it is symptomatic of the peculiar medieval propensity for inventing continuations of existing narratives. Within fifty years of the composition of Chrétien de Troyes' Conté du Graal, four major rewritings of the Perceval story appeared in verse: the anonymous First and Second Continuations, followed by those of Manessier and Gerbert de Montreuil. And through a parallel phenomenon of narrative elaboration Robert de Boron's Roman du Graal was recast in three successive prose versions: the Didot Perceval, the Perlesvaus, and the Vulgate's Queste del Saint Graal. Similarly, Chrétien's Chevalier de la charrette was expanded into the Vulgate's Lancelot, and the Tristan legends by Béroul and Thomas were reformed into the prose Tristan. And the rewriting that typifies these medieval romances is reinforced on the most basic level by the tradition of medieval manuscript copying famed for generating numerous versions of any one tale.

Thus it is clear that in many different ways the tendency to rewrite was a basic feature of medieval vernacular composition. But this propensity for narrative repetition calls into question the fundamental notions of individual creation and interpretation that we, as post-Romantic heirs to an ideology of originality, often take for granted. The modern concepts of narrative coherence and the well-wrought tale, which imply the assurance of a writer's idiosyncratic authority, are thoroughly undermined in the earlier medieval system. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century view that literary creation was grounded in
the continuous order of repetition offers a challenge to the Romantic order of discontinuous, unique inventions. Whether the Vulgate romances are, in fact, the result of oral storytelling (by Arthur's knights or someone else) is then entirely beside the point. In a tradition that self-consciously erases "points of origin" to dictate points of confluence, the reader's responsibility shifts from the search for a putative "fixed" meaning to the careful assimilation of narrative repetition and exchange.

This is precisely what the seemingly odd textual genealogy presented in the *Lancelot* suggests. When this tale of adventure describes, on repeated occasions, how conformity between narrative episodes is more important than the telling of individualized events, the reader is initiated into the logic of medieval vernacular poetics: a literary system in which rewriting is *de rigueur* and joint authorship outranks original creation. There are, in fact, a series of textual genealogies in the Vulgate romances that serve as a helpful guide for decoding the aesthetic system at work in these tales. By examining them we can see how the process of writing is conceptualized in this corpus of narratives, and can then better understand how to read the repetition to which these tales cling so tenaciously. However, before explicitly mapping out the medieval model of reading, we should consider the way in which the Vulgate's definition of textuality relates to the cultural context of the High Middle Ages. We will then be able to weigh the aesthetic premises of the cycle specifically within the prevailing theological and rhetorical theories of what a text should be. As the first step to developing a poetics of reading for the medieval prose romance, this chapter will investigate how the comments on authorship and textuality contained within the cycle of tales compare with the views of vernacular textuality advanced by the church fathers on the one hand and the precepts of thirteenth-century rhetoricians on the other.

THE AUTHOR IN THE TEXT

Traditionally, scholars have tended to base their evaluations of the Vulgate tales on Romantic notions of the masterwork and
authorial genius. Viewed from this perspective, the Vulgate texts have been read either as degenerate continuations of their laudable predecessors in verse, the well-wrought tales of Chrétien de Troyes, or, alternately, as the literary ancestors of the nineteenth-century novel called by the same name, roman. Yet the conventions of repetition and digression that play a central role in the Vulgate Cycle are clearly not those in force in the novels of Balzac or Zola. By reading the prose romance in line with the later roman, critics have, in fact, generated a host of false assumptions. The search to find within these texts a continuous referential plotline or coherent narrative development has invariably forced the amorphous and rambling medieval tale into an anachronistic nineteenth-century narrative mold.

Using Chrétien as an anticipatory model for subsequent texts is equally problematic since the deft handling of characters and the individualized authorial voice that punctuate Chrétien’s works cannot be considered typical of vernacular literary production in the High Middle Ages. To be sure, this is what studies that take Chrétien as a model have proved indirectly: that the aesthetic criteria behind Erec et Enide and Yvain are not those in force for the Vulgate Cycle. The exemplary choice of Chrétien by critics is determined, in large part, by the relatively early dating of his œuvre, but perhaps more importantly by the fact that he, like authors in the nineteenth century, is known to us by name. It remains a curious fact that the judgments of those who find the prose romance wanting because of its narrative discontinuity turn ultimately on the question of authorship.

Already in the seventeenth century, the epic poet Chapelain contended that the prose Lancelot was a fumier in which one might locate a few literary diamonds; his inevitable conclusion was that the text had been written by a barbarian. In our own century, Pauphilet, Bruce, and Jeanroy have pursued a slightly less offensive tack, attributing the disunity of the cycle of tales to the unmonitored succession of several authors and subsequent redactors. However, in each instance the digressive text is assumed to be the consequence of a lack of authorial control. This focus is maintained in the counter arguments proposed in
recent times by Lot, Frappier, and Vinaver, all of whom posit the existence of a conceptual plan that they attribute to the well-ordered mind of a hypothetical author. Vinaver's comment is typical of this view: "The author of a fully interlaced cyclic composition has the entire development in mind, knows where the point of departure is for each ramification — or digression — and how to take us back, if necessary, to the line or curve we previously followed." Although these arguments are designed ostensibly to explain the structural composition of the Vulgate Cycle, to reveal the way in which consistent chronology, entrelacement, and architectural design play a major role in the creation of the long and episodic tales, they are arguments that depend in reality on the function of authorship. What is considered to be an unacceptably repetitious and monotonous narrative structure is validated by the hypothesis that this structure is not the haphazard consequence of textual transmission, but the willed result of an ingenious master.

And yet the voice of this master is nowhere to be found in the Vulgate narratives. The problem is complex because we know so little about the real-life author(s) of these anonymous tales. But if we examine the role of authorship and the process of storytelling as they are portrayed within the Vulgate's tales of adventure, we find an elaborate narrative strategy that suggests authorial control while simultaneously diffusing the possibility of single authorship. The example cited earlier from the Lancelot is a case in point. In this scenario of oral deposition, the original "author" of the tale we read, the authorial subject inscribed within the text, is clearly not limited to a single individual. Indeed, the narration of chivalric hauts faits can be undertaken by any number of Arthur's knights whose prowess on the battlefield qualifies them as courtly storytellers. In the Queste, on the other hand, the process of storytelling seems, at first, to be circumscribed by the actions of a single named author, Walter Map. At the close of the tale we find the standard description of a compositional process involving knight and scribe extended to include a fictitious author-translator:

Quant il orent mengié, li rois fist avant venir les clers qui metoient
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However, in the final line of this text, the authority of its pseudohistorical author is undercut by the ambiguous and wholly fictionalized voice of *li contes*: “Si se test a tant li contes, que plus n'en dist des AVENTURES DEL SEINT GRAAL.” It is clear from this closing line that the narrative of the *Queste* ends when the *conte* stops speaking, when the tale has no more to tell of the Grail adventures. A similar narrative voice accompanies the fictive scenario of oral deposition in the *Lancelot*:

Einsi comme Lancelot disoit sez aventures furent elles mises en escrit, et pour ce que si fait estoient greignor que nus de ceues de laiens, lez fist le roys mettre par lui seul, si que des fais Lancelot trova l'en j. grant livre en l'aumaire li roy Artu après ce qu'il fu navrés a mort en la Bataille de Salesbieres, si comme *cils contes le devisera cha avant* (Sommer 5:332, my emphasis).

If the *Queste* and the *Lancelot* portray author-heroes who are neatly embedded in the fictional world of romance, both texts also take the process a step further by fusing the teller with the tale itself. Although in the *Queste*, written documentation derived from the knight’s oral accounts is associated with a single (if bogus) author, Walter Map, Map’s contribution to the process becomes evident only in the epilogue that mentions his name. In the body of this text, as in the *Lancelot*, it is not an authoritative “je” but the voice of *li contes* that speaks to us directly. The epilogue itself reiterates this schema of oral communication between the original author of the tale (Bors) and his audience — whether medieval or modern — effectively reducing Map’s role to that of *scriptor*. When Bors speaks to the entourage of listeners at Arthur’s court, and *li contes* relates the same tale to later readers, it appears that Walter Map merely records the voice of Bors so that it can be reproduced at a later date by yet another voice. The potential authority that we
might attribute to the cycle's named author is thus greatly attenuated by the overtly fictionalized voice of *li contes* which accompanies and encloses it.

A similar configuration of authorship characterizes *La Mort le roi Artu*, a volume of the Vulgate corpus that places particular emphasis on the process of recording information in written form. Yet even this written documentation is relayed to the reader by the voice of the tale: "Lors se part li vallet de Lancelot et s'en va seur son roncin la plus droite voie qu'il pot vers Kamaalot, et fet tant qu'il vient a la cort le roi Artu. Mes atant lesse ore li contes a parler de lui et retorne as trois freres monseigneur Gauvain Or dit li contes que." Here again, it is neither King Arthur's knight nor the ostensible author-translator who speaks to us from the pages of the written record, but the vaguer, noncorporeal voice of *li contes* itself.

The concerted displacement of the Vulgate's supposed author becomes particularly clear in the *Estoire del Saint Graal* where the tale is said to assume all the characteristics of a live storyteller. *Li contes* is described as speaking, becoming silent, beginning a subplot, returning to an earlier narrative thread, and leaving one character to turn to the adventures of another. In short, this *conte* serves as both source and teller of the story that we read, usurping thereby the roles that are generally played by the author of a work and the narrator who recounts it. Here, as in the *Queste* and the *Mort Artu*, the act of literary creation is ascribed to a tale that tells itself, and the ostensible author is shown, like Bors in the *Lancelot*, to be only one of several textualized voices.

Throughout the *Estoire*, in fact, the first-person narrator, *je* (alternately *jou*) and *li contes* are presented as interchangeable narrative voices sharing one literary plan. When we read, for example, "Or dist li contes a celui point que Syméons en fu portés ensi comme jou vous ai deviset" (3:235), or "Mais or se taist a tant li contes de la ducesse et retourne sour les messages dont jou vous avoie commenchiet à conter" (2:427), it is clear that the voice of the tale intervenes repeatedly in the
narrative that the authorial “I” has begun. Yet in the end, references to *li contes* far outnumber the few comments made by *je*, with the result that the voice of the tale effectively replaces that of its author—narrator.

This is the most overt example of a phenomenon that manifests itself in different ways throughout the Vulgate corpus. Taken together, the textualized author-heroes, the fictitious named author, and the intrusive voice of *li contes* provide ample evidence that the “author” of the Vulgate Cycle exists first and foremost “in the text.” Although the name(s) of the cycle’s creator(s) have disappeared, their presence is supposed only through the elaborate narrative fictions that the historical author(s) devised for the purpose of hiding or effacing the traces of individual invention.

As a result it becomes impossible to trace a clear textual genealogy from an original author to his translator to the medieval public. If “*je*” is the author of the original record of Bors’s speech, to what extent did Walter Map appropriate this narrative voice and its textual material when he used these records to “*fere son livre,*” and to what degree did he rewrite the preceding tale? Of further difficulty: if Map was working for King Henry “qui fist l’estoire translater de latin en francois,” did he, Map, compose a narrative that was later translated at Henry’s request or was Map’s job that of translator alone? This supposed record of textual transmission is actually based on a complex conflation of many “authors” and several texts. The plural authorial voice that results echoes, to a large degree, the plurality of textual *ressorts* in the romance storyline. On the issues of both textuality and authorship then, the Vulgate romances invent narrative scenarios that obfuscate logical explanation. In place of a linear story line and the defense of single authorship that we have come to expect from postmedieval fiction, these texts advance a dynamic strategy of textuality that is anchored in repetition, fragmentation, and diversity, a type of writing that cultivates narrative *reprise* and authorial reduplication in place of unity and univocity.
THE THEOLOGICAL MODEL COLLAPSED

This is nowhere more evident than in the third textual genealogy offered in the Vulgate tales. In this case the theological model of univocal truth and original creation is posited only to be undermined by a series of authorial voices, much in the manner that Bors’s invention and Walter Map’s authority are shown, in the other tales, to be fragmented and partial. In the *Estoire* the author of the tale figures as a character in the narrative whose role it is to copy a book that was written previously by Christ.22 When the *grans maistre* hands the author a book containing the story of the Holy Grail, he directs this writer specifically to “escrire le livre que jou t'ai baillet” (2:38). The verb *escrire* is used here in the sense of transcribing a text that has already been committed to writing. The author is to copy a book that was begun by God, “et ne t’esmaie de chou que tu ne fêisses onques tel mestier que nul oevre ne puet estre mal faite ki par moi est commenchié” (2:38). Since this author is merely a vehicle for the transmission of a sacred text to an audience, he claims to be nothing more than an invisible scribal hand and insists that his name be withheld from his text, “ne velt que ses noms soit de tot en tout descouvers” (2:5). His task is to reveal and relate (*il descouverra et dira*) a story that has been revealed to him by the supreme creator, God, “que Diex eust par lui descouverte si haute cose et si haute estoire com est cele del Graal” (2:4).

This is the traditional medieval view of literary invention according to which God is conceived to be the only true author and all creation is accomplished in accordance with the singular voice of Divine authority. In this system, which emphasizes unity at the expense of diversity, the appropriate role of literary endeavor is limited to the faithful copying of an officially-sanctioned work.23

However, when we are advised repeatedly in the course of the *Estoire* that the source of this narrative is not Christ or the *grans maistre* but the secular voice of *li contes*, it becomes impossible to read this text as an inscription of the Sacred Word.
Distinct from *li livre* that Christ asks the "author" to copy, *li contes* is presented, in the other volumes of the cycle, as the incarnation of a narrative voice whose function overlaps repeatedly with the equally ambiguous voices of *je*, Bors, and Map. In place of the singular Word of God, we are confronted throughout the cycle with the plural and often contradictory voices of vernacular textuality. Within the *Estoire* itself the dilemma is articulated specifically in terms of a tension between the Divine voice of God and the secular voice of romance.

If, through this narrative tension, the *Estoire* raises some very pointed questions about the appropriate function of literary texts in the Middle Ages, the *Merlin* carries the process even further by deftly transferring the role of the master Creator to Merlin, the master of artifice. As a new version of the author-hero seen previously in the character of Bors and Arthur's other knights, Merlin dictates his story to Blaise who combines, in a single volume, tales from the Bible and events from Merlin's own life. Blaise records "les amors de Jhesu Crist et de Joseph tot einsi com eles avoient esté" along with the tale of Merlin's conception:

> coment deables, après ce que ces choses furent toutes avenues, prinrent conseil de ce qu'il avoient perdu lor pooir qu'il soloient avoir seur les homes, et coment il prophete lor avoient mal fait, et por ce avoient porpalé et acordé ensemble coment il feroient .1. home (p. 74).

The true story of Christ's miracles is thus joined with the true tale of Merlin's marvels, and the resultant book is compared with the authority of the apostles. As Merlin explains to Blaise:

> Et toz jorz mais sera ta poine et ton livre retrait et volentiers oïz en toz leus. Mais il ne sera pas en auctorité, por ce que tu n'ies pas ne puez estre des apostoles, car li apostole ne mistrent riens en escrit de Nostre Seingnor qu'il n'eussent veu et oï, et tu n'i mez rien que tu en aies veu ne oï, se ce non que je te retrait (p. 75).

Here nominal deference is paid to the eye witness apostolic account which is said to carry more weight than a tale that is told (*que je te retrait*). But the very terms of the comparison belie a
desire to grant equal authority to the fictional mode, a desire that is borne out by a host of statements like:

"Et t'oevre sera toz jorz mais, tant com le siecle durra, retraite et volentiers oie” (p. 99)
"et tu avras tant de bonnes oeuvres faites que tu devras estre avec els [Joseph of Arimathea and his followers] en lor compaignie" (p. 100)
"Et saiches que tes livres sera encorez molt amez et molt prisiez de maintes genz qui ja ne l'avront veu" (p. 100)
"si avra non toz jorz mais, tant com li mondes durerà, tes livres li LIVRES DOU GRAAL et sera molt volentiers oiz” (p. 101)

As the “author” of this long-lasting and popular fiction, Blaise is clearly not the faithful scribe who reverently copies Scripture: instead of recording the Word of God he transcribes the words of Merlin. The univocal authority of the sacred text is thus countered by a clear emphasis on the power of the vernacular tale; li contes, not God, is proclaimed as the source and guide used by the narrative je in this text. When the narrator digresses from his tale he explains how the contes itself leads him back to the tale at hand: “De ces .II. enfanz ne vous doi je plus parler tant que li contes m'i ramaint” (p. 82).

The theological model of literary creation that is advanced in the Estoire is thus systematically subverted throughout the Vulgate romances by a host of “authorial” figures. Merlin and the other author-heroes of King Arthur's court, the bogus author-translator Walter Map, the vernacular scriptor Blaise, and the richly ambiguous voice of li contes all compete for a portion of the authority traditionally reserved for the medieval Godhead or accorded, in later centuries, to the inspired genius.

TEXTUALITY AS REWRITING

Taken together, the constellation of fictional voices in the Vulgate romances provides a clear outline for the textual program of these prose narratives. In contradistinction to the evocation of sacred writing as originary creation, the vernacular romance repeatedly characterizes its own writing in terms of re-creation. Writing is here presented essentially as rewriting since the source of the narrative we read is not a transcendent or
transparent body of absolute truth but yet another “text.” For Arthur’s knights the intertext or antecedent story that guides the creation of their tales lies in those episodes previously recounted at King Arthur’s court. For Walter Map it is found in the written record of chivalric deeds housed in the archive at Salisbury. Blaise composes his text from Merlin’s dictation, and even Merlin’s oral account draws intermittently on Biblical material. There is, in this scheme of things, no claim to creation ex nihilo; all literary invention is depicted as the recasting of other tales.

From this perspective one might be tempted to characterize the textuality of the Vulgate romances as a system of intertextuality in line with the model proposed by Michael Riffaterre.28 However, the kinds of rewriting that typify individual volumes of the Vulgate corpus form a narrative system of much broader scope: rewriting is here not limited to the simple reprise of previous texts but includes repetition of material within a single text. It motivates the recurrence of typed episodes, generates multiple authorial voices within one tale, and initiates the Queste’s restructuring and renarration of Biblical material. Although there is, in each of these cases, a certain intertextual dynamic, the semiotic function of rewriting in the Vulgate romances remains fundamentally distinct from the function of intertextuality in Riffaterre’s scheme. Whereas Riffaterre’s intertextual readings seek to uncover an invariant hypogram hidden within given literary texts—that is, a metatext that can be used to solve the riddle of the text—the process of rewriting in the Vulgate romances admits no such form of literary closure. On the contrary, the role of successfully decoding the agrammatical or illogical surface of a literary text in order to reach its hidden message, belongs, in the Middle Ages, to the theological tradition. As exponents of the secular sphere, purveyors of pluralism and literary diversity, the Vulgate romances call into question the very principle of accuracy in the decoding of texts and the possibility of finding a metatext that subsumes the totality of conflicting textual details. In fact, one of the functions of the constant rewriting in the Vulgate corpus is to
remind us at every turn that the role of the vernacular text in the medieval period is not to convey a single, hidden message. These are texts, as we have seen, that continually eschew the kind of absolute authority that might make such a message possible.

Within the medieval scheme of things, the Vulgate tales chart instead a move from Theology to Rhetoric, a shift from Augustine’s notion of signs as arrows pointing to something else (aliud aliquid) to a validation of signs per se where the “arrows” curve around and point to themselves. But they do so in a very special way. When Riffaterre asserts that signs refer only to other signs, his purpose is to show how we can extract meaning from an extended semiotic network. When the Vulgate romances defer our reading from one typed episode to the next, or from one authorial voice to another, they constantly displace the current narration onto a series of fragmented and partial intertexts that can never be added up to make a coherent whole. If we combine all the parts of Merlin’s supposed dictation to Blaise: the stories of Christ, of Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail, of the reign of Uther and Pendragon, and of Merlin’s exploits and his prophecies, we do not come up with what should logically result. The Livres du Graal they are said to compose is of very different composition. There are many false clues in this literary puzzle and all of the parts do not fit. Similarly, the proposed process of textual transmission from Bors to an anonymous scribe to Walter Map cannot be made to account for the ambiguous and overlapping voices of je and li contes. Whereas Riffaterre’s use of intertextuality serves to unlock the secrets of a hermetic text, the Vulgate’s process of rewriting shows instead how any reading of these texts is necessarily problematic because the hidden message they are said to contain is continually displaced from one textual fragment onto the next. Although the Estoire promises to follow Divine authority, it calls attention, through the use of multiple voices, to the impossibility of reproducing God’s word in fiction. Similarly, the Lancelot, which purports to tell the history of King Arthur, reveals, by a series of narrative ressorts, the largely fictional
nature of this pseudohistory. The Queste in like manner claims to offer definitive allegorical interpretation but actually provides no more than a series of narrative analogues, some Biblical and some contemporary.

In all of these cases, the use of literary repetition serves to validate the notions of sign, image, and appearance in the Vulgate narratives, proclaiming the significance of literary displacement over and above the fixed theological truth that these texts mimic and continuously transform. Textuality in the Vulgate romances is thus a complex process that advances systems of theological significance—the phenomena of authority, interpretation, and representation—and systematically dismantles them, substituting words for the Word and books for the Book. The process of rewriting here counters the notion of the definitive sacred Text with the more relative and subversive concept of many partial texts or intertexts.

THE CHURCH FATHERS

The rivalry suggested in the Vulgate romances between Merlin’s book and that of the apostles—that is, the implicit discrepancy between Blaise’s copy of Merlin’s marvelous tales and the hypothetically true account of the religious copiste in the Estoire—bears witness to a medieval controversy over the distinction between Rhetoric and Scripture which extends from the third through the thirteenth centuries. Generally formulated in terms of the contrast between Verbum (the Word of God) and verbum (the word of man), the issue of two distinct strategies of textuality is made particularly clear in St. Thomas’s discussion of the book. Evoking the unbridgeable gap between words, which are likenesses of something else, and the Word of God, which is an essence, Thomas asserts in De veritate that God’s uncreated nature can never be called a book.31 There is an essential distinction to be made between the preverbal existence of God and a linguistic system that necessarily involves mediation. This distinction is used typically to explain why only God has the power to create, whereas the artist using words can merely represent. St. Thomas gives the example of human
speech in which the vocalized, material word represents the mental word that precedes its utterance. But there is no such mediation between the Eternal Word and the Incarnate Word, which are said to be one and the same. In the theological tradition, the Son is thus not a figure of the Father, according to Thomas, in the same way that writing is a figure for its referent. Whereas the former system is based on presence, the latter connotes absence. Literature, consequently, can never attain the plenary status of the Word.

Within the medieval Neoplatonic tradition, the literary artifact is seen, moreover, as posing a threat to the Truth of Scripture. This fear of the *verbum* is evident from the time of the early Church apologists, who renounce the entire Graeco-Roman tradition of profane letters in favor of ecclesiastical truth. In the twelfth century, this sentiment is echoed in the works of such writers as Alain de Lille who denounces poetry as a craft that cloaks falsehood with a pretense of credibility, or as an art that hides a kernel of truth beneath a false exterior. Typical of the early Christians, Lactantius decries pagan literature as "sweets which contain poison"; Alain recasts these words when claiming that poets bewitch their listeners with a "melody of honeyed delight." In both cases the battle between language and Truth is presented in terms of words that deceive and seduce the reader as opposed to words that point toward transcendent meaning. Here, the essential danger in reading the vernacular text results, in the main, from the arbitrariness of signs that can have many meanings and the lack of a standard against which to interpret them. To read a text literally is to embrace the plurality of its words rather than privileging a single, hidden sense. This dilemma is given its most succinct formulation in Augustine's recasting of St. Paul's argument that the letter kills but the spirit gives life. A similar devaluation of the *verbum* becomes commonplace among religious thinkers in the High Middle Ages. It finds expression, for example, in St. Bernard's *ministerium verbi*, his admonition that the Christian rhetorician always put human speech to the service of Divine speech, making sure not to allow words to betray the Word.
The controversy between Rhetoric and Scripture is wide-ranging and cannot be discussed here in detail; however, it encompasses three issues that are especially pertinent for our study of textuality in the Vulgate romances: (1) the concept of textual idolatry as a trap or a prison; (2) the notion that language seduces; and (3) the belief that the creation of literary artifice constitutes an infraction of the natural order of things. When Augustine denounces textual idolatry in *De doctrina christiana*, he does so by suggesting that St. Paul's condemnation of idols should be applied to imaginary signs, and by condemning the love of all things in and of themselves. The former statement clearly applies to words in general. The latter concerns both literature and sophistic discourse: those "fables, falsehoods, and lies" that delight men instead of leading them beyond the text to the Word, and the kind of speech in which truths are "ornamented with a frothy nexus of words." Both types of discourse exploit the power of the *verbum* in order to seduce the reader into loving words instead of loving the truths they represent. Thus Augustine warns repeatedly in *De doctrina* against the "sweetness of discourse," which he associates with the transitory joy of temporal things, the very attractive but "perverse sweetness" of enjoyment. Whence the assertion that taking a text literally amounts to a kind of "carnal understanding," since all words are conceived by a desire that is never satisfied. Only the Word of the Creator is conceived by a love that sustains (caritas). Undue enjoyment of the literary artifact amounts, then, to idolatry, an assault on the theological system in which the love of temporal things must be kept subservient to the love of the Divine Word. Literature threatens this hierarchy by seducing its readers into preferring the temporal to the eternal.

This is what prompts Hugh of St. Victor to call the work of the artificer "adulterate," that is to say, deceptive or tricky. But Hugh takes the process one step further, denouncing literature's attack on the natural order of things. Whereas the work of Nature brings forth and actualizes the work of God, according to Hugh, the work of the artificer only imitates Nature. This is
because things contain within them a resemblance of the Divine Idea, but words are merely the signs of man's perceptions. For Hugh and many of his contemporaries, the danger in reading is that of wandering from the straight path of spiritual meaning into the error of grammatica or literature. To take the text literally is to commit an error against both the work of Nature and the Divine work.

In the view of these medieval theologians, then, the vernacular text lays a dangerous trap through its tendency to idolize signs that necessarily deform truth, deceive and seduce the reader, and ultimately subvert the natural hierarchy of creation. Not surprisingly, all of these traits are personified in Merlin, the master artificer and fictional paradigm of authorship in the Vulgate romances. Not only does Merlin assert that his fancifully "deceptive" tale of Arthurian adventure has the authority of Scripture, he conspicuously elevates the fictional narrative to the level of a sacred text on two occasions: once by proclaiming that his book will combine his own life's story with that of Christ as we have seen (Mer, 73-74), and a second time by asserting that this same book will fuse the story of Joseph and the Holy Grail with the secular exploits of King Arthur:

\[
\text{celui Joseph cui il fu donez en la croiz. Et quant tu avras bien travaillié por lui et por ses execors et por ses hoirs qui de sa lingnijee sont issu et tu avras tant de bonnes oeuvres faites que tu devras estre avec els en lor compaignie}
\]

\[
\text{Et saiches bien que onques nule vie de genz ne fu plus volentiers oïe de fols ne de saiges que sera cele dou roi qui avra non Artus et des genz qui a ce tens regneront. Et quant tu avras ce tout acompli et lor vies retraites, si avras deservi la grace que cil ont qui sont en la compaignie dou vaissele que l'en apele Graal (pp. 99–101).}
\]

Merlin's text represents an overt deformation of God's Truth, a recasting of Biblical material into the mold of Arthurian merveilles. And the "author" of this marvelously "truthful lie" is shown to break the natural order in a significant way.

Analogous to Christ who is born of woman alone—his father being God—Merlin is also born of woman alone; but his father is the Devil. From this origin in deviant sexuality, Merlin
generates what would have been viewed by medieval theologians as a distinctly perverse text, a text born literally of an error that makes it stray from the straight path of Divine Truth onto the more digressive and dangerous path of plural narrative truths.\textsuperscript{51} Yet the kind of textuality that Merlin as the "adulterate" artificer creates is not condemned in the Vulgate romances but glorified in the extreme; it is hailed as a new truth. Merlin can, in effect, be seen as a master artificer who proclaims the triumph of Rhetoric over Scripture. As such, his performance is symptomatic of the revolution in literary theory that took place in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, just prior to the composition of the Vulgate Cycle (1220–35). At this time the controversy between Scripture and Rhetoric took a decisively secular turn with the publication of the \textit{ars poetriae}, a series of six treatises on literary composition that privilege the eloquence of words maintaining only minimal regard for the Word.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{THE RHETORICIANS}

Whether these rhetorical treatises, which pertain specifically to composition in verse, letter writing, and preaching, exerted a direct influence on vernacular prose writers of the thirteenth century cannot be ascertained. What is clear, however, is that the ideas presented by the medieval rhetoricians were current in literary works from the twelfth century on.\textsuperscript{53} The significance of the \textit{ars poetriae} derives from their return to an emphasis on rhetoric that had dominated the trivium after the Fall of Rome; this shift of interest helped to foster the climate of literary inventiveness in which French vernacular composition flourished. In the works of Matthew of Vendôme, Gervase of Melkley, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, and John of Garland in particular, the guiding principle for both reading and writing is not Truth but artifice. As literary theoreticians these men instruct medieval authors how to cultivate beauty of expression in order to induce pleasure in the reader.\textsuperscript{54} The essential ingredient stressed here is the mode of expression rather than the message to be conveyed. Matthew and Geoffrey both specify that the
criteria for arranging and embellishing a tale (dispositio and elocutio) should depend principally on the aesthetic effect that the author wishes to produce. As the art of Grammar changed in the High Middle Ages from the descriptive enterprise of Priscian and Donatus to the prescriptive studies of thirteenth-century rhetoricians, the mainstream of medieval grammatical instruction focused on methods of ornamenting a narrative through the use of figures and tropes. All writers of the ars poetriae urge authors to go beyond the "ordinary usage" of language by employing "colors of rhetoric," which are also termed "permitted faults." Purposeful deviations from the norm of language usage thus became acceptable. By the end of the twelfth century, grammarians distinguish actual grammatical "faults" (barbarisms and solecisms) from the lesser vices of figures and tropes that are justified as useful to eloquent expression.

The significance of the ars poetriae for our study of the Vulgate romances is twofold. Within the elaborate slate of techniques that are suggested in these treatises as means of developing a narrative, amplificatio, the method of expanding a tale, plays a major role and includes various kinds of repetition. What is perhaps more important, however, is that these rhetorical texts are anchored, to a large degree, in principles of deviation. Whereas the theological tradition stresses the importance of copying the sacred Word exactly, rhetoricians valorize individual invention, explaining how to take source material (generally in Latin) and transform it through expansion, abbreviation, and ornamentation. Invention is thus based on the rewriting and reworking of previous texts. The task of the author is not to respect the autonomy of his source but to tamper actively with its contents.

In this light the Vulgate romances can be seen to lie at the nexus of two opposing medieval traditions that define the role and status of the vernacular text. With the development of the ars poetriae early in the thirteenth century, former denouncements of literary creation as a medium of falsification are
countered by the assertion that poetry possesses an aesthetic authority all its own. In the Vulgate romances, the tension between these opposing views is thematized in stories that purport to tell biblical truth, valorizing all the while the subversive creation of secular narrative.

The focus of these textual contradictions falls alternately on competing poles of authority and invention or tradition and change, and the solution proposed by the prose romance lies squarely between the extremes. It finds its essence in re-creation, in the varied process of rewriting that eschews exact copy without embracing unique invention. By emphasizing authorial reduplication and textual pluralism, the complex process of rewriting found in the Vulgate romances insistently calls attention to repetition with a difference.

MEDIEVAL TEXT PRODUCTION

This kind of literary repetition is symptomatic of the larger phenomenon of text production in the Middle Ages and as such must be read against the cultural backdrop of two related processes: the method of recasting texts that develops out of the tradition of translatio studii, and the mouvance of medieval manuscripts. It is well-known that the majority of vernacular authors in the High Middle Ages based their writing on some preexisting matéria in either Latin, French, or another language. Their texts also contain frequent comment on the very process of literary borrowing, explaining how their work either copies dutifully or diverges purposefully from its texte-origine.60 Whereas the earliest French romancers base their narratives on Latin sources—on Statius' Thebais, Virgil's Aeneid, an account of the Trojan War by pseudo-Dares and pseudo-Dictys, or various accounts of the life of Alexander the Great—Marie de France turns to Breton lais explaining that her choice is conditioned by the lack of available classical material:

. . . començai a penser
D' aukune bone estoire faire
E de latin en romanz traire;
Mais ne me fust guaires de pris:
Itant s'en sunt altre entremis!
Des lais pensai, k'oiz aveie.\textsuperscript{61}

What is significant here is that both Marie and the authors of the \textit{romans antiques} see their literary task as one of adapting a previous text, of transforming an existing narrative into something new. This practice, as we have already noted, had the widest currency in the Middle Ages. It is evident in Chrétien’s reworking of Ovidian texts to create his \textit{Philomena}, parts of \textit{Cligès},\textsuperscript{62} and his lost Ovidian poems, as well as in the recastings of Ovid’s tale of Narcissus found in the \textit{Roman de la Rose} and Chrétien’s \textit{Perceval}.	extsuperscript{63} The constant tendency to rework previous narratives can thus be further understood as an extension of the classic form of \textit{translatio studii} as described in the prologue of \textit{Cligès}: that is, the explicit transfer of knowledge from the ancients to medieval France.\textsuperscript{64}

However, the kind of literary borrowing that occurs in the transposition of classical texts into medieval French is but one example of a much more generalized process of rewriting that takes many forms. A different sort of narrative recasting is enacted in the transformation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s \textit{Historia Regum Britanniae} into Wace’s highly elaborated “translation,” the \textit{Roman de Brut}, which is then reworked into Layamon’s heavily revised English version. Rewriting occurs in a more concentrated form when it does not involve translation from one language to another, when, for example, epic songs are rewritten from assonance into verse in the thirteenth century and subsequently reworked in prose in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In yet another type of recasting, many twelfth-century verse romances are transformed into lengthy prose versions in subsequent decades. Several volumes of the Vulgate Cycle, the \textit{Lancelot} and the \textit{Queste} in particular, are to some degree at least rewritings of tales that were already current in the works of Chrétien, just as the prose versions of the \textit{Estoire del Saint Graal} grow out of Robert de Boron’s \textit{Joseph d’Arimathie}.

In each of these cases, successive authors generate their texts
by imitating concrete models, turning the text into something more than what it was previously but underscoring in so doing the importance of maintaining a literary ancestry. At times this textual genealogy is made explicit as when Marie de France specifies that her rhymed tales result from Breton songs, or when Chrétien either makes reference to works that precede his texts or explains that his romans are transformations of earlier contes d’aventure. Whether these attributions are fictitious or accurate should not concern us. They are significant to the extent that they reveal a concept of literary creation that is specifically medieval, outlining narrative invention as a process of embellishment and amplification that allows a tale to grow and change, taking on varied forms over a lengthy period of time, but remaining somehow recognizably the same. Vernacular textuality is, as a result, necessarily grounded in plurality. Since invention is not dependent upon the originality of a single author, re-creation of a text is not considered to be a deformation of the original but an attempt to augment both the volume and the meaning of a previous work. This is, in essence, a hermeneutic process that invests writing with the capacity to reveal part of the greater sense that is locked in the language of the original text. Not only could the medieval author read between the lines of his model texts, he could write between those lines as well, adding, as does Merlin, both factual and imaginary material to his source.

It is through this process that the text becomes, to a degree, the author’s own invention without ever really losing its former character. When Chrétien boasts in Erec et Enide that his version of this tale is superior to all others, or when Béroul insists that his version of the Tristan material is best, we can hear the pull between individual invention and traditional re-creation. The authority proclaimed by these writers is, to a large extent, a fiction of authorship much like the role of unique creator ascribed to Walter Map in the Vulgate texts. And, as was the case with Map, these twelfth-century writers’ claims to authorial invention are consistently attenuated by the reality of rewriting that characterizes their oeuvres. In addition to overt
references to the author's matièr, which underscore the use of antecedent stories, frequent mention of the patron for romance texts serves similarly to defer the burden of literary creation from a single author to a wider group of "inventors." In many cases the patron is designated not only as the recipient of the work in question, but as an unofficial coauthor who either provides the author's source material or whose taste and wishes indirectly condition the manner in which the new tale is cast. The connection is made overtly in the prologue of Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrette* where the extent of his contribution to the writing of the text is never clearly distinguished from that of his patron, Marie de Champagne. Similarly, Chrétien's text is linked enigmatically to that of his continuator, Godefroi de Leigni (vv. 7098–7112).

In fact Marie, Chrétien, and Godefroi participate ambiguously in the creation of a somewhat amorphous *texte en devenir*, an ongoing narrative that can be coauthored by several minds simultaneously, or initiated by one writer and later taken up by another. To a degree this process is characteristic of all medieval tales that are rewritten over time. When Béroul's *version commune* of the Tristan legend is remodeled by Thomas, for example, the original narrative is not divided between two authors as in Chrétien's *Lancelot*; rather, two texts are bound together through the mechanism of a tale retold, a narrative repeated with variation so that it bears a distorted resemblance to the predecessor that it both recalls and leaves behind. As with Chrétien's *Charrette*, no single author has unique claim to the Tristan material, and the conglomerate text enjoys no distinctive or sacred autonomy. Although Godefroi insists that Chrétien has authorized his continuation of the *Lancelot*, and Béroul proclaims the authority of his version alone, these statements that appear to validate authorial control actually belie the prevalence of a literary tradition in which constant rewriting is *de rigueur*. The vernacular text is regularly viewed as an open-ended document, always capable of being "continued." The relation between Béroul's *Tristan* and Thomas's text cannot be seen as a relation of source and copy or one of original and
Within this system of literary rewriting, the very distinction between original and copy is radically undermined: Thomas's *version courtoise* is both a copy of Béroul's *Tristan* and the original used for Gottfried's later rewriting of the tale. The same holds true for many medieval texts; Marie's "Fresne," which comes from a Breton *lai*, is in turn transformed in *Galeran de Bretagne*, just as the *Queste*, which grows out of Chrétien's *Perceval*, serves subsequently as the impetus for the Vulgate's *Estoire*. Literary invention in this period typically looks to the past while preparing the future. Merlin's task in the Vulgate romances is not dissimilar: his text recounts past deeds that also foretell those to come.

It should be emphasized, however, that the general process of recasting tales that characterizes the production of vernacular texts in the Middle Ages is not synonymous with the system of rewriting that we have charted in the Vulgate romances. The two phenomena are related to the extent that each involves the reformulation of a literary narrative. However, whereas *translatio* constitutes a form of literary borrowing that takes a pre-existing *texte-origine* and recasts it into a contemporary *récit*, rewriting in the Vulgate romances involves the more localized displacement of the current *récit* onto a series of subsequent narrative analogues. Thus, when chivalric adventures in the *Queste* are "glossed" by hermits who recount parallel tales from historical and biblical sources, these episodes are first written in a chivalric mode, and then rewritten in another, textual register. The authorial voice of Bors as Arthur's official storyteller is similarly displaced onto the analogous, accompanying voices of Walter Map, *je*, and *li contes* as we have seen, just as any knight's attempt to free prisoners from captivity in the Vulgate corpus is recast in a series of stock narrative feats. Whereas *translatio studii* and the more general phenomenon of narrative recasting that surrounds it in the Middle Ages deal with narrative *reprise* between two independent narratives, rewriting in the Vulgate Cycle exists primarily within a single text or textual corpus. It is, in short, a method of weaving a tale through repetition, either through the recurrence of typed episodes, the
reprise of authorial voices, or the telling of an adventure and its subsequent, interpretative retelling. What the Vulgate's rewriting shares with the more general medieval phenomenon in which narratives are reworked from one author to the next is an understanding that the text is never fixed or finished: elements of the prose narrative can be reformulated regularly, just as an individual version of a tale is only one version, only one of many possible renditions. In both cases the predominant aesthetic is one of pluralism.

MOUVANCE

This brings us to the process of documentation in the High Middle Ages, for pluralism is also the hallmark of medieval textual transmission, a system that itself assures that textuality cannot, in most cases, be reduced to the definitive state of a single, authored work. Editors of medieval texts are well aware that the literary artifact in this period lies somewhere between the plurality of manuscript versions available to us on the one hand, and the lack of a complete textual genealogy for any one tale on the other. That these manuscripts are often from different time periods, different hands, and different geographical locations is complicated further by the inevitable and sometimes considerable gap between the suggested date of a text and that of the manuscript in which it was recorded. Two questions come into play here. One involves the loss of documentation that has not survived through the years, manuscript versions that are no longer extant and that could potentially tell us a lot about the historical transmission of an individual text. The other issue has been largely obscured by the first; it centers on the fact that any text in the medieval period was, by nature, fragmentary. Even if we had access to all the manuscripts that existed in the Middle Ages, we would not necessarily be better able to define the parameters of the text of any one literary work. Rather we would be reminded all the more of the extent to which there was generally no definitive version of the medieval tale. This is the phenomenon of mouvance as Paul Zumthor has described it, a kind of textual variability resulting from the
method of disseminating documents in a manuscript culture.\textsuperscript{78}

In line with this reality, text editors have begun to question the ground rules of their \textit{métier} that traditionally have led to the search for a hypothetical Ur-text, an archetypal manuscript from which everything descends, or to the privileging of a single manuscript deemed to be the best and oldest copy.\textsuperscript{79} Both approaches are based ultimately on authentication through origin—whether on the desire to reconstruct the author's original version or on the insistence that early copies are perforce superior to later ones.

An alternative approach, which has been suggested recently for Provençal lyric, is to abandon the effort to establish the authenticity of a given text, strophe, or version of the poem and accept every text of every poem in every manuscript as valid. Although variants that are paleographically insignificant can be dismissed as scribal error, there are, in this view, no poetically insignificant variants. Every version should be considered as an individual poem bearing its own meaning.\textsuperscript{80} From this vantage point, questions of authenticity are replaced by an interest in maintaining the textual diversity of the manuscript tradition. And in point of fact this kind of investigation suggests that the authorship of the medieval text is less single-minded than we sometimes assume. In the case of Jaufre Rudel, for example, the presumed existence of a single holograph is doubtful; it appears more likely that Jaufré authored several distinct versions of a given poem.\textsuperscript{81}

The process of medieval text production itself then demonstrates how, on a purely mechanical level, the authenticity of a given text is consistently undermined. Although the scribe can add sections to the text he copies, becoming in a sense an author in his own right as he recasts his model into an "original" version of the tale,\textsuperscript{82} the author himself can redo his own work without distinguishing the original from the rewrite. These features of textual transmission simply underscore the degree to which the medieval text tends toward plurality at all levels: in terms of documentation, authorship, and narrative configuration. They stress as well how the subversion of single author-
ship and textual autonomy, which are thematized within the tales of the Vulgate corpus, are firmly anchored in the realia of medieval narrative production.

To grasp the slippery and elusive phenomenon that is the Arthurian prose romance we must be prepared to accept literary pluralism on its own terms, to embrace as givens what have traditionally been considered problems of composition in vernacular romance. For the Vulgate Cycle, this means beginning with the repetition that Lot and his followers would have preferred to jettison in favor of narrative unity: to discover how to reread these texts and how to read the many kinds of rewriting that typify them.

To this end each of the following chapters investigates a different sort of rewriting in the Vulgate romances, demonstrating how in the Estoire and the Merlin the suggestion of authority is recast repeatedly into authorial plurality, how allegory is rewritten into analogy in the Queste, and how representation is transformed into repetition in the Lancelot. In each case we will see how specific instances of rewriting work to undermine tenets basic to both modern literary history and medieval theological Truth. Although these prose romances present a direct challenge to positivistic beliefs in single authorship, truthful interpretation, and accurate representation on the one hand, they also subvert the specifically medieval traditions of Divine Text and Divine Voice, sacred meaning, and biblical representation on the other. The different uses of rewriting in the Vulgate Cycle thus raise significant questions about the very nature and function of the vernacular text in the Middle Ages. Rewriting here serves, in short, to extoll the virtues of a romance text that has the audacity to deform fixed Truth and seduce the reader with the "delicious sweetness" of fiction.