Chapter Five
Fictions of Closure

As the last volume of the Vulgate Cycle *La Mort le roi Artu* is not only the final tale in a series of related stories, it is a text that departs significantly from the thematic and stylistic framework of its predecessors to recount the end of the world that they created. In describing the senseless and violent death of the legendary King Arthur, *La Mort* documents the death of the whole world of Arthurian adventure, and appears to mark the definitive close of the digressive and repetitive Vulgate texts that heretofore seemed endless in their attempt to bring the courtly king to life. In this final volume of the Vulgate corpus, many reasons are advanced for the Arthurian holocaust that mercilessly pits the venerable king against his own son and long-term chivalric companions against one another. The disastrous defeat of Arthur's men on the Salisbury plain can be attributed to the adultery between Lancelot and the queen, to Gauvain's fanatical vendetta against Lancelot, to the treachery of Arthur's son Mordred, or to the inability of the aging king to rule his land effectively. However, Bohort offers the most precise formulation of the problem when he explains to Lancelot that war is inevitable since what they have been hiding is now in the open, "Ha! sire, fet Boorz, or vaut pis que devant, car ore est
Lancelot's faithful companion does not here lament the fact of the adultery itself, that Arthur's most valiant knight deceived his king, dishonored his liege lord, and disdained the chivalric code of honesty. What Bohort decries is the disclosure of the love affair between Lancelot and the queen, the revelation of actions that remained relatively harmless until they were seen and known by Arthur and his court.

Bohort's comment is significant for two reasons. First, it establishes clearly that events within this volume of the cycle, in contradistinction to those of the preceding tales, are linked to one another largely by relationships of cause and consequence. By pointing to the cause and effect relation between the entrapment scene and the final Arthurian holocaust, Bohort outlines the mode of narrative composition that dominates the whole of La Mort.¹ This volume of the Vulgate corpus constitutes a particularly good example of Northrop Frye's "hence" narrative in which events are strung together horizontally in inevitable and inexorable sequence.² Beginning with the open resumption of the love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere, the text develops through a complex chain of events whose precise linear succession is essential to an understanding of the tale.

Because Arthur has seen Lancelot's secret depiction of his love for the queen in the Salle aux Images at Morgan's castle, the cuckolded king devises a plot to catch the lovers. Although the plot fails, it results in an unexpected and in some ways unwarranted death sentence for Guenevere. In response to this injustice, Lancelot rescues the queen from death by burning, and during the struggle that ensues he unwittingly causes the deaths of Gaheriet, Agravain, and Gueherret. At this point in the narrative, a thematic shift occurs as the motif of adultery is superseded by the theme of clan vendetta between the lineage of Arthur and the lineage of Ban (Lancelot's family), but the causal chain of events is maintained. Because of Lancelot's impudent seizure of the queen, Arthur and Gauvain are forced
to attack the castle of Joyeuse Garde and to pursue Lancelot to his homeland in Gaunes where they mount a two-month siege. Arthur's absence enables his son Mordred to conspire against the king who, having lost his two best knights—Gauvain as a result of wounds sustained in a battle against Lancelot, which are later reopened in a military encounter with the Roman army, and Lancelot through banishment—is without defense. The final battle on the Salisbury plain where Arthur and Mordred take each others' lives is a direct result of Arthur's previous absence, provoked by Lancelot's abduction of the queen, which in turn was elicited by Arthur's questionable sentencing of Guenevere, a byproduct of the plot to trap the lovers, which was inspired by the pictures on the walls of the Salle aux Images. The narrative of *La Mori* thus develops along a direct line of consequential actions that link the love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere to the ultimate dissolution of the Arthurian realm. Different from the nondiscursive format of the previous romances in which the order of events was less important than their associative similarity, the order of episodes in *La Mort* is locked into a distinct and inalterable hierarchy of cause and effect.

The second feature of Bohort's sympathetic lament that deserves our attention is its insistence that the final holocaust results not from Lancelot's adultery *per se*, but from the act of making it visible to others. Disaster ensues when the lovers' hidden actions are removed from the protective realm of ambiguity and placed in the harsh light of definitive and undeniable fact. Their adultery, like that of Tristan and Iseut, can thrive when it is concealed from view because it depends on the necessary gap between what the lovers say and what they actually do, between what others think to be the case and what really happens between this knight and his lady. The lovers' dilemma in *La Mort* results, according to Bohort, from their inability to maintain this *écart* between word and deed, from the impossibility of covering their deviant actions with equally deviant or deceptive speech.

Thus, the two facets of Bohort's commentary are neatly en-
twined: the lovers’ failure to keep their illegal liaison secret is inherently linked to the relentless logical progression of events in *La Mort*. The end of their infamous love affair should be seen in relation to the inauguration, within *La Mort*, of a radically different narrative mode. Whereas the preceding tales in the Vulgate Cycle depend, in large measure, on motif patterns in which there are many *signifiants* for a single *signifié*, in which uncertainty and ambiguity are *de rigueur*, *La Mort* strives in all cases to establish a single, accurate version of the event in question. Although the love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere remains stormy in the preceding volumes of the corpus—it is interrupted at times because of Lancelot’s lengthy travels, suspended temporarily because of his quest for the Holy Grail, and threatened occasionally by female rivals of the queen—on the whole their adultery flourishes. The obstacles that stand in its way can always be surmounted in a text that is open-ended and ever-expansive. Each new threat to the love affair simply provides an impetus to continue the tale until the lovers are somehow reunited.

However, the elaborate *détour* of motif patterns that tell a long and rambling tale by indirection is replaced in *La Mort* by the predominance of temporal sequence that advances the tale straightaway to a single-pointed, logical end. And just as adultery can only thrive on the disjunction between words and their referents, the legendary world of King Arthur can only be kept alive through indirect and disjunctive prose: through the repetition and variation of allomorphs that constantly reverse the inexorable course of events by releasing knights from prison, reviving wounded victims, and restoring sight to the blind. To tell this tale of repeated entrapment and release in straightforward, cause-and-effect prose is to end the story. The literary world of King Arthur’s knights, which is fabricated in the preceding texts through the accretion of various kinds of narrative layers—through the repetition of allomorphs in the *Lancelot*, the overlay of adventure and “interpretation” in the *Queste*, or the echo of authorial voices and rival subtexts in the *Estoire* and the *Merlin*—is dismantled in this volume by linear narrative
progression that attempts to adduce a single, overt meaning. The previous emphasis on cloaking meaning in many types of garb is here reversed as we witness the revelation of hidden truth, the painstaking disclosure of what lies beneath the plush narrative wardrobe. In this case the layers of metaphor, repetition, ellipsis, and self-contradiction are no longer increased but slowly peeled away.

In addition to its principal narrative development, La Mort contains a shorter series of interlocked episodes centering on the dilemma of Guenevere which, as in the main chain of events, results ultimately from the adultery theme. Guenevere's misinterpretation of two key events—Lancelot's wearing of the Demoiselle d'Escalot's sleeve at the Winchester tournament and the presence of Lancelot's shield in the same lady's castle—causes her to believe that her lover had been unfaithful and to banish Lancelot and his men. As a result, when she is subsequently accused of killing Gaheris, the queen can find no defender and faces the threat of accepting guilt by default. In this instance, as in the previous examples, the causal progression from one event to the next provides the mechanism of narrative development. If Guenevere had not misread the signs of sleeve and shield from the Winchester tournament—signs that were related to her by intermediaries—she would not have banished Lancelot so hastily and could have relied on his aid to prove her innocence in the matter of Gaheris's killing.

This sequence makes clear the close relation between the logical progression of events in La Mort and the question of interpretation that is central to this text. That Guenevere is shown in these examples to misunderstand the significance of the lady's sleeve and Lancelot's shield implies that there may be only one true reading of these signs, that the participants in this romance can be either correctly informed or tragically deceived. Clearly distinct from the preceding volumes of the cycle in which the meaning of repeated incidents is often metaphoric and associative, meaning in this text results largely from the opposite impulse: from the desire to eliminate the écart of metaphoric expression that lends a rich ambiguity to individual
terms. Rather than following Geoffrey of Vinsauf's advice that
an author should present a single meaning under multiple
linguistic forms, that he should dress his message in varied
apparel, the author of La Mort seems to suggest that there is only
one way of representing an event accurately. In this text the
role of literary discourse is not to tell and retell an incident in as
many versions as possible, but to reduce what are considered
contradictory versions of an event to a single, definitive inter­
pretation.

This is the function of both trial scenes: the judicial duel in
which Lancelot fights to defend Guenevere against the accusa­
tion that she murdered Gaheris, and the single combat between
Lancelot and Gauvain over the death of Gaheriet. In both cases
the trial by ordeal is designed to establish a one to one relation­
ship between word and deed, between what the accused pro­
fesses to have done and what he did in fact. As Alfred Adler has
pointed out, the associative multiplicity that characterizes the
Augustinian backdrop in the Queste is superseded in La Mort by
a more Aristotelian tendency toward differentiation through
crucial distinctions. Portraying the characters' perceptions as
partial and therefore faulty, La Mort attempts at every turn in
the narrative to sort out a definitive interpretation from a
number of conflicting possibilities. The famous scene of the
poisoned apple and the subsequent efforts to establish Guene­
vere's guilt or innocence illustrate well the existence of dif­
ferent levels of potential meaning within a single act. Those
who judge Guenevere's role in poisoning Gaheris are split
between the eye witnesses who saw her give the apple to the
victim and watched him die, and those who seek to determine
the intention behind the act. Participants of the first group are
certain of the queen's guilt because they saw her commit the
crime; those of the second group assert that she would be guilty
only if she killed Gaheris intentionally ("en traïson et a mon
escient" LMA, 86), but innocent if the act were not premedi­
tated. Gauvain voices both opinions alternately. First, when
refusing Arthur's request to defend Guenevere in battle against
Gaheris' brother, Mador de la Porte, Gauvain states that he
would be dishonored by aiding a suspect he knows to be guilty since he witnessed the crime. Later, at the actual battle between Lancelot and Mador, Gauvain tells Arthur that Mador will lose the fight since the queen never had treachery in mind.

Whatever its outcome the purpose of the trial is to reduce the multiplicity of viewpoints that surround Guenevere's fateful deed, to erase the uncertainty that prevents a precise and accurate understanding of what really happened. The judicial duel serves to streamline the complex questions of intent and action into a simple either/or proposition. Either Guenevere is guilty because she gave the apple to Gaheris, or innocent because she acted in ignorance, without knowing that the apple was poisoned. Although crucial distinctions between individual opinions concerning the event suggest that conflicting interpretations might be possible, the result of both trial scenes is to dismiss some readings of the event as false while validating only one view as true. Guenevere is deemed innocent even though she handed the poisoned apple to Gaheris who ate it and died; Lancelot is judged innocent of killing Gauvain's brother, Gaheriet, even though many witnesses saw him deliver the fatal blow at the Joyeuse Garde. Whereas the other romances of the Vulgate Cycle frequently advance conflicting motivations for a single act, or attribute contradictory meanings to an individual event making no attempt to identify one reading as more accurate than the other, La Mort seeks more often to minimize ambiguity in favor of certainty.

This can be seen in two key incidents that involve King Arthur's assessment of the lovers' adulterous liaison. On one occasion Arthur interprets Lancelot's belated arrival at the Winchester tournament as proof of his lack of involvement with the queen. Lancelot's surprise appearance is erroneously used by the king to refute Agravain's correct accusation that the couple has fallen into adultery: "Et tout ice me fist a croire Agravains vostre freres; si me tenisse ore bien a honni, se ge l'eüse creü de sa mençonge; car ge sei or bien que se Lancelos amast la reïne par amors, il ne se fust pas remuez de Kamaalot, tant com ge fusse hors, einz i fust remés por avoir de la reïne sa
volonté” (LMA, 29). In another incident Arthur misjudges Lancelot’s willingness to return Guenevere to him at the Pope’s command as proof of the lovers’ innocence: “Sire, fet Lancelos, se ge amasse la reîné de folc amóur, si com l’en le vos fesoit entendant, ge ne la vos rendisse des mois et par force ne l’eūssiez vos pas. –Lancelos, fet li rois, vos en avez tant fet que ge vos en sei bon gré” (LMA, 158). Because the reader has been advised of the lovers’ guilt in the matter of adultery and Guenevere’s innocence in the apple incident, textual judgments to the contrary in La Mort appear faulty and misguided. The text is thus able to develop an elaborate interplay between the audience’s omniscient or “true” point of view and the wide range of possible but incorrect interpretations offered by individual characters in the narrative. In contrast to the other romances of the cycle in which perception and deception are presented as complementary facets of a single phenomenon—in which the Grail is capable of either blinding or restoring impaired sight, and those who see most clearly are also victimized at times by partial vision—the effort in La Mort is to analyze and dissect the act of perception by distinguishing misleading appearance from reliable fact.

And as the veracity of visible events is slowly eroded and shown to be unreliable, there is a concomitant emphasis on verbal expression as a means of correcting the faulty clues derived from visual images. In a long series of examples, the inaccurate perception of an incident is corrected by clarification in words. Guenevere’s misreading of the sleeve and shield as signs of Lancelot’s love for the Demoiselle d’Escalot is righted when a boat arrives bearing the lady’s dead body and a note explaining that her suicide resulted from Lancelot’s refusal to reciprocate her love.8 Arthur’s understanding of the pictures depicting the lovers’ adultery in the Salle aux Images is similarly incomplete until Morgan explains to him the exact meaning of these images.9 In addition the king learns of the current status of the love affair, which is described as having been resumed openly, only when Agravain and Mordred tell him of it.11 Arthur’s banishment of Gauvain underscores fur-
ther the importance of words over perception. Gauvain is barred from Arthur's court because he failed to tell the king of the amorous encounters which, according to the narrator, had been visible to everyone.\textsuperscript{12}

In these incidents the privileging of verbal expression to determine the truth of an event contrasts starkly with the process of retelling that characterizes patterned motifs in the other volumes of the Vulgate corpus. The use of language in \textit{La Mort} is less self-referential and repetitive. Here the characters' visual perception of an event and the subsequent verbal explanation of it cannot be read as complementary incidents that echo one another in form or content. Locked within the predominantly linear narrative mode of \textit{La Mort}, these instances of verbal exchange are characterized rather as correctives to faulty interpretation, as replacements of former misapprehension. In all of these cases, verbal expression is advanced as superior to visual images because it is shown to be less ambiguous, less likely to give rise to polysemy and misunderstanding.

In the same vein, the mistaken identities that are so frequent in the other Vulgate romances occur only temporarily in \textit{La Mort} before being clarified by verbal explanation. After the Winchester tournament, the Demoiselle d'Escalot explains to Gauvain that the second brother in the family of Escalot was actually Lancelot in disguise (LMA, 27), and Morgan tells the unsuspecting Arthur that although he does not recognize her, they are sister and brother.\textsuperscript{13} Lancelot disguised in white arms to combat Mador de la Porte is eventually recognized by his verbal offering of mercy.\textsuperscript{14} While undercutting the ability of visual signs to convey information accurately, this text repeatedly substantiates the communicative power of words.

Whereas narrative coherence among the patterned motifs in the other Vulgate texts is determined largely on the basis of what is missing, on the latent meaning that is not stated explicitly in the text, meaning in \textit{La Mort} results from the opposite process. Dramatic coherence here stems from a logical and concerted effort to make everything apparent so as not to be deceived by what is hidden: to reveal all, as Bohort says in the
beginning of the text. But there is a built-in flaw in this literary project. For it is after all the revelation of what is hidden, the disclosure of the lovers' adultery, that launches the inexorable sequence of events that leads to war and destruction, causing the inevitable end of the Arthurian world and the stories that recount it. *La Mort* has the unique distinction of being a romance that lacks the central feature of other romances: *aventure*. This final volume of the Vulgate Cycle has no *aventure* because there is nothing à venir, no future, no chance occurrence, no hope for a reversal in the inflexible chain of tragic events.\(^{15}\)

There is, rather, a tendency from the beginning of this text to attenuate the possibility of sudden shifts in character development or unexpected changes in narrative sequence by reducing the options open to individual characters. Whereas many characters display a disquieting ambivalence of feeling at the outset of the romance, an ambivalence that stems for the most part from conflicting allegiances, they are forced, as the narrative progresses, to choose between contradictory options and take a single course of action. Gauvain, who is a close and loyal supporter of both Lancelot and Arthur, is compelled by the Joyeuse Garde incident to side with Arthur against Lancelot-turned-enemy (LMA, 158). The barons, who have sworn homage to both Arthur and Mordred, eventually support Mordred's claims against those of the king; and Mordred's conflicting roles as son and traitor are finally reduced to the status of simple enemy.

Lancelot, on the other hand, does not conform to the single-minded purposefulness of this text and his actions remain, as a result, both illogical and problematic. Although he is depicted as an adulterer, a criminal, and an outlaw, Lancelot is honored throughout the romance by the title that later appears on his tombstone, "LI MIEUDRES CHEVALIERS QUI ONQUES ENTRAST EL ROIAUME DE LOGRES" (LMA, 263), and he ascends to heaven at the moment of his death (LMA, 261). As a key figure in the themes of adultery and treason, Lancelot functions concomitantly as savior and destroyer of all. His adultery with the queen, which constitutes a direct infringe-
ment of his chivalric allegiance to Arthur, is contradicted by his repeated generous and protective gestures toward the king. Lancelot politely allows Arthur to rest before undertaking the battle of the Joyeuse Garde (LMA, 140), refuses to fight back when Arthur attacks him personally, and prevents Hector from beheading the king who has been unhorsed in battle (LMA, 152). The same self-effacing generosity is displayed in Lancelot's merciful treatment of those he defeats in single combat (Mador de la Porte and Gauvain, LMA, 106, 189), and in his offer to undertake both expiatory pilgrimage and homage as a means of reconciling the hostility between Gauvain and himself (LMA, 190).

Within the realistic framework of *La Mort*, where the narrative proceeds logically from one event to the next, where distinctions are clearly drawn between truth and falsehood, and incongruous detail is reduced to a minimum, the paradoxical behavior of Arthur's favorite knight appears unpalatable, even absurd. One is hard pressed to explain how a knight who flagrantly commits adultery with his lord's wife and triggers a war that destroys the entire realm, all the while obstinately asserting his innocence, could be held up by the medieval audience and author(s) as the most valiant knight, the paragon of chivalric virtue.

In contrast to the realistic role played by other characters in *La Mort*, it is apparent that Lancelot's actions must be read metaphorically rather than dramatically. His dual nature functions much like the prisoner-liberator couplet of the earlier romances where composite characters often display complementary and antithetical traits. Similar to the patterned, typed characters who are at one time prisoner and prison guard or captive and liberator, Lancelot offers the disconcerting visage of chivalric champion and antichivalric hedonist. At odds with the streamlined and logical framework of *La Mort* in which all other characters are forced to eliminate contradictory motives from their behavior, Lancelot's highly stylized mode of action clashes abrasively with the text in which it is recounted.

There are a few other enigmatic and puzzling incidents in *La
Mort that serve no apparent function in developing this narrative along its purposeful linear course, but which can be explained in terms of the pattern structure that dominates the previous romances. The incident immediately following the Winchester tournament, for example, in which Gauvain and Gaheriet encounter a wounded knight carried by two squires (LMA, 19) appears superfluous since it bears no necessary relationship to the previous disappearance of Lancelot, the subsequent episode at the castle of Escalot, or any other event in the balance of the tale. Analysis of this incident in terms of the pattern structure described in chapter 4, however, reveals it to be a functional part of the wound-disguise mechanism included in the Veil pattern. The episode of the debilitated knight plays an imagistic rather than a dramatic role, and can be explained in its relation to a small group of literary allomorphs that are closely associated throughout the cycle of tales. The initial link between the wound and disguise is established in La Mort when Lancelot arrives at the Winchester tournament in disguise and is then wounded by Bohort (LMA, 15).

As in similar cases discussed in chapter 4, the wound here reinforces Lancelot’s disguised status, his undisclosed identity. The wounded knight that Gauvain and Gaheriet pass after the tournament simply provides another variant on the same pair of allomorphs, for in addition to being wounded this knight is disguised to the extent that his identity remains unknown: “Lors demanderent aus escuiers qui cil estoit que il aportoient. ‘Sire, font il, ce fu uns chevaliers. –Et qui l’a navré, font il, en tel maniere? –Seingneur, font li escuier, uns pors sauvajes que il avoit acueilli a l’entree de cele forest’” (LMA, 20). This unnamed knight can be seen to function, in a sense, as a substitute for the missing Lancelot. Gauvain and Gaheriet are searching for their wounded and disguised companion; they find instead another wounded knight whose identity is hidden.

The associative link between wound and disguise reappears in two other significant incidents in La Mort. After being banished from the court and relegated to temporary anonymity,
Lancelot is again wounded, this time in the thigh by a hunter's stray arrow (LMA, 79). The reason for this wound, which is dismissed in the text as accidental, can be explained by the tendency of the pattern structure to maintain an association between disguise (in this case anonymity) and wounding. The subtle intrusion of this patterned couplet into the generally discursive structure of *La Mort* can explain as well Lancelot's otherwise unmotivated reluctance to reveal his identity to the knight from Arthur's court who relates Guenevere's need for a defender (LMA, 93). In terms of the pattern network that links anonymity with the wound, this detail constitutes a natural development of the previous two-fold description of Lancelot. It adds a third associative layer to his attendant wound and his anonymous status outside of Arthur's court.

Another somewhat incongruous detail points to the association between the prison and immobile weapons characteristic of the Prison pattern. When Lancelot is banished from Arthur's realm and sent into exile in his homeland of Gaunes, he responds to Arthur's order by sending his shield to be hung on the wall of Saint Stephens cathedral in Camelot. Since Lancelot will definitely be in need of a protective shield during the upcoming siege of Gaunes, the relinquishing of his weapon seems to have symbolic rather than logical motivation. It bears obvious resemblance to the episode of Arthur's capture at Camille's castle in the *Lancelot* when Arthur's weapons are raised high above the castle walls to signal his captivity (3:411) and to the incident at the Tertre Devee in which the prisoners' weapons are hung in an adjoining hall (5:236; M, 5:95-96).

In both of these incidents, images of immobile weapons serve as functional allomorphs of the prison motif, creating a two-fold evocation of the captive status of Arthur on the one hand and the hill prisoners on the other. If one applies this pattern structure to the incident of Lancelot's immobile shield in *La Mort*, the relinquishing of Lancelot's armor could be seen as an allomorph of his forced exile into Gaunes, itself a kind of imprisonment. The shield episode appears puzzlingly illogical
in relation to the rest of this tightly constructed tale, but its presence can be explained as an integral and functional part of a vestigial pattern network.

With the exception of the examples noted above, instances where plural motifs are used to relate one meaning or concurrent causes are given for a single event are rare in *La Mort*. Once distinctions are drawn between true and false interpretations of an event, between real and imaginary meaning, the signifier can no longer be equal to the signified and the existence of multiple metaphorical equivalents for a single event becomes impossible. The oscillatory mechanism of the previous romances, in which past and future were continually balanced in an ambiguous present and linear progression was countered by three-dimensional narrative ornamentation, is replaced in *La Mort* by an unrepeated pattern of ascent and decline encapsulated in the motif of the wheel of fortune. A woman in Arthur’s dream explains to him: “Voire, fet ele, tu le voiz, n’il n’i a granment chose dont tu n’aies esté sires jusques ci, et de toute la circuitude que tu voiz as tu esté li plus puissanz rois qui i fust. Mes tel sont li orgueil terrien qu’il n’i a nul si haut assiz qu’il ne le coviegne cheoir de la poeste del monde” (LMA, 227). Fortune’s wheel, which has carried Arthur to the top of the world, will now cause his fall into oblivion, just as the romances of the Vulgate Cycle that recount the ceaseless deeds of the Arthurian heroes will end with a final volume that seals the Arthurian tomb forever. The critical act of withdrawing the sword from the stone, which was accomplished by the young King Arthur in the *Merlin*, an act that marked the opening of an entire chivalric era, is matched in *La Mort* by Girflet’s casting Arthur’s sword into the water, returning it to useless immobility. This definitive version of the sword and the stone motif will not be followed by future withdrawals of weapons from sheaths, by future liberations of knights from prison or paralyzed victims from near-death. At the end of the funerary march of words that leads to the final Arthurian holocaust, stasis prevails and words lose their power to bring the legendary king back to life. The soap-opera time of the previous Vulgate romances, in which
episode followed episode in a seemingly endless flow of events, is here replaced by the apocalyptic time of a cataclysm to which there is no possible sequel.

One feature of metaphorical language is that the referent to which it alludes is never mentioned directly since something else is used to take its place. It is in this sense that the language of metaphor can be considered a discourse about the missing term, the element that is absent and unstated but understood nevertheless to be the ultimate referent of the words in question. Considered from this point of view, the first four tales of the Vulgate Cycle can be seen as a metaphorical description of the death of Arthur which is not related until the final volume. In the earlier texts, we find a seemingly harmless account of Arthur's life and the varied exploits of his valiant knights. And yet this tale of Arthurian adventure is interspersed with an elaborate network of patterned motifs that signal different forms of captivity. In addition to the incarceration of knights, ladies, and the inhabitants of whole towns, we witness the captivity of those who are rendered immobile by blindness and interminable wounds, those who suffer from death-like paralysis, and those who are described specifically as being entombed. If metaphor serves as a mirror of the world, as Geoffrey of Vinsauf thought it did, as a distancing mechanism in which images are deferred and deflected slightly, then we could understand the patterned motifs of the Vulgate Cycle as an elaborate literary détourn, a means of deferring the death of Arthur, which is the real subject of these tales. In this sense what was suggested indirectly throughout the protracted tales of Arthur's life is here finally stated overtly. And it is with that overt statement of Arthur's death that this long cycle of tales necessarily comes to a close.

Thus Arthur dies when artifice ceases, when the exacting and legalistic form of truth advanced in this final volume of the Vulgate Cycle attempts to close the gap between what is seen and what is said, between what really happened and how events were reported. Accordingly, the final lines of La Mort attest to a desire for textual closure, attempting to establish this text as the
definitive account of Arthur's demise: "Si se test ore atant mestre Gautiers Map de l’Etoire de Lancelot, car bien a tout mené a fin selonc les choses qui en avindrent, et fenist ci son livre si outreemnt que après ce n’en porroit nus riens conter qui n’en mentist de toutes choses." Here we are told that Walter Map has brought the tale to an appropriate end and that any further additions or elaborations will only amount to lies. This insistence on truthful accuracy is the precise opposite of Merlin's "truth" which is based, as we have seen, on marvel and magic, exploiting the semantic detour that language creates. Merlin's truth is that of the artificer, a truth that underscores difference and demonstrates how things do not ever match their appearance.

Yet despite the emphasis throughout La Mort on tying up loose narrative ends and advancing the tale toward a definitive close, we also find in this text the kind of truth exemplified by ambiguity and plural readings. When, in the closing moments of the tale, Girflet watches Arthur board a mysterious ship filled with ladies and guided by "Morgain la fee," it appears that Arthur does not in fact die (LMA, 250). Taking his horse and armor along with him, he strides galantly into the ship as if to continue his chivalric adventures in another land. The end of Arthur's life, attested by the finality of the words written on his tombstone, "CI GIST LI ROIS ARTUS QUI PAR SA VALEUR MIST EN SUBJECTION .XII. ROIAUMES," is thus undermined by the enduring possibility that Arthur may return. And such a return would simultaneously undercut the finality of the cycle's supposed narrative end marked by Map's claim to textual closure. In fact, Map's authoritative boast is attenuated by the very suggestion contained within it that others may undertake to continue this tale. Arthur's entombment beneath the stone bearing his name is similarly in doubt since Girflet does not witness Arthur's burial in the cemetery but is told of it by a prudons. The tomb is described significantly as merveilleuse (LMA, 251), the adjective used to characterize both Morgain's fairy ship and Merlin's romance tales.
Thus Arthur dies but not completely, and the text ends by offering the possibility of yet another tale.

The moment of literary closure is here cast in a mode of narrative open-endedness. Not unlike the many textual genealogies, which provide enigmatic signposts for reading these romance tales, this last volume of the Vulgate Cycle ends by making assertions that pose their own questions. We are left to wonder whether King Arthur is really dead or alive; whether the story will cease or recommence. This is a kind of narrative suspense that calls into question our perception of events, catching us in a literary trap of compelling illusion that offers ambiguity as a viable alternative to verifiable truth.