Guinevere's Kidneys, or The Lancelot–Grail Cycle and the Rise of Realism

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Woodcut from *Lancelot du Lac*, Paris 1513
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One of the most remarkable monuments of medieval literature in any language is the thirteenth-century French Lancelot–Grail Cycle (also called the Prose Lancelot, the Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian Romance, or the Pseudo-Map Cycle—the last because the texts identify the author as Walter Map, who complicated matters, however, by dying well before the cycle was written). Before turning to the subject indicated in my title, I'll situate the cycle and offer a few details about its phenomenal importance.

Following the French verse Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes in the late twelfth century, and several other important Arthurian creations, the Lancelot–Grail Cycle was composed between about 1215 and 1235. As we have it now, the cycle consists of five distinct but intricately interconnected romances. Most scholars agree that the original plan was for three, not five, romances, and those are...
the three that now stand as nos. 3, 4, and 5 in the cycle. The first of those three is the Prose Lancelot (also called the Lancelot Proper, to distinguish it from the entire cycle), which tells the story of Lancelot’s youth, his chivalric adventures, and his love affair with the queen. The subjects of the other two, The Quest for the Holy Grail and The Death of Arthur, are indicated clearly enough by their titles.

But someone soon composed two other related romances and tacked them onto the beginning of the original set, thus creating, as Jean Frappier said, a “retrospective sequel” to the Vulgate edifice. The first of the five, in the order in which they now stand, is The History of the Holy Grail, actually a prehistory of the Grail, foreshadowing events to come. The second is Merlin, the story of the prophet and magician’s role in establishing the Arthurian regime and in helping to bring about the events in the following romances.

The Lancelot–Grail is the Middle Ages’ most remarkable synthesis of the Lancelot–Guinevere story, the Grail quest, and Arthurian prehistory and history. The cycle’s dimensions are as impressive as its influence. For example, the central romance (Lancelot), which occupies about half of the entire cycle, was edited about a decade ago by Alexandre Michau in nine volumes. Not only were these original texts the principal of Malory’s several sources (thereby influencing everything Arthurian done in English since), but the cycle or parts of it were translated or adapted into a number of medieval languages.

If this description makes the cycle sound daunting (or even depressing), that is by no means a purely modern reaction. The seventeenth-century French writer Jean Chapelain pulled no punches: the cycle, he said, “lacks focus, rambles, gives you a headache, and puts you to sleep.” Some modern scholars have not helped much. William

3Quoted in E. Jane Burns’s introduction (I, xv) to Norris J. Lacy, ed. (The latter is the designation for the translation, still in progress, of the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate. The portions of that work cited herein include Burns’s introduction, Rupert T. Pickens for Merlin, Carleton W. Carroll for the passages drawn from the final pages of the Lancelot Proper, Norris J. Lacy for The Death of Arthur, and Martha Asher for the Post-Vulgate.)
Matthews, in an essay entitled “Inherited Impediments in Medieval Literary History,” assures us—without comforting us much—that the Prose Lancelot clearly was not “so deadly” for medieval readers as it is for modern ones, “even to specialists in medieval romance.” More recently, having discovered many of its fascinating intricacies, scholars have looked with considerably more favor on the cycle and have shown appreciation for the power and effect of many of its parts, while most often remaining overwhelmed by its length.

And in all that length, which is to say some two million words, the particular subject of this article, Guinevere’s kidneys, plays a role in only a single episode. But that episode, I believe, is of stunning significance, far out of proportion to the textual space it occupies.

But to explain, we need to return for a minute to Chrétien de Troyes, the greatest practitioner of Arthurian romance (at least in France and perhaps anywhere). He created a literary form that inspired large numbers of authors after him, and his importance is inestimable. But of most interest for our purposes is a feature of his literary characters: they, like the protagonists of the classic western film, appear to possess few if any internal organs. There is for example no indication, during the wanderings of Lancelot or those of Perceval (which lasted over five years), that they or anyone else ever had kidneys or bladders that may need relieving. We know, of course, that the queen had various organs—Lancelot’s interest in her was not purely intellectual—but they are never mentioned; nor are those of her lover. In general, the knights, on the other hand, seem to have had, as did cowboys, a single organ: the heart, the seat of courage, generosity, and love.

But this organic unity (as it were) could not last, and that brings us back to the Lancelot–Grail Cycle. In the Merlin, the second romance of the cycle (Lacy, ed., I, 338), we read of the queen’s abduction and of the plot to replace her by her nearly identical half-sister, known as the False Guinevere. This is a crucial event in the cycle, and there is a reprise of the False Guinevere episode in the following romance, the Prose Lancelot Proper. (More precisely, given the order

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of composition previously mentioned, it was presented first in the *Lancelot* and then recast, but as foreshadowing, in the *Merlin*.) For our immediate purposes, though, the only significant fact about this abduction is that the plot hinges on the ability of Guinevere’s servant or nurse to get the queen out of her room so she can be kidnapped.

This, it turns out, requires no special skill or stratagem: she simply takes the queen outside at night to relieve herself before bedtime. (That, admittedly, is a sanitized summary: the Old French narrator tells us instead that she goes outside “pour pisser,” thus, to the best of my knowledge, using that word for the first time ever in a courtly romance.) Whatever the language, the Prose *Lancelot* cycle, unlike Chrétien’s romances, presents characters who urinate.

This is not a physiological presentation, however, and the main thing of interest about Guinevere’s kidneys is that she has some—but that is itself a shocking innovation, unprepared by anything in the cycle’s major inspiration, Chrétien de Troyes’s *Lancelot*. But now, in the thirteenth century, she has to get up at night. On the face of it, this surely sounds trivial, but it is not: Guinevere’s bodily functions signal a major change in the basic nature and conception of the literary text.

Although our emphasis is on the regal bladder, we could have found other examples, including an occasional servant who urinates or characters who give evidence of other bodily functions. Whatever illustration is chosen—and kidney activity is merely a convenient if slightly unrefined index—the point is that as we move from twelfth-century to thirteenth-century romance, we begin to encounter characters who are more complete, in ways that are both physical and psychological, both beneficial and sometimes tragic. This is not a claim that either kind of romance is better, of course, only that we are moving from one fundamental conception of the literary universe to another. We are in fact seeing the beginnings, in subtle (or perhaps unsubtle) ways, of a literary realism unknown in the twelfth century.

It is apparent that *realism* is a dangerous term that must be used scrupulously and cautiously. We certainly must not confuse it with a Balzacian conception of realism. For one thing, the medieval romance always seems to have assumed that it was talking about a distant,
if not nonexistent, past; the reality described in the stories is not contemporary reality (even though medieval writers updated details of dress, architecture, and custom), and it makes no pretense of being that. Moreover, Arthurian romance, until much later, retains a strong element of the marvelous and of what we could reasonably call "unrealism."

Thus, by the word realism, I am suggesting merely that, just as literary characters begin to behave more nearly as human beings do, so does Arthurian society begin to assume the more complex contours that a real society might present. As a result, problems lose their clarity. Specifically, the thirteenth century begins to embrace and cultivate the complexity and richness, and often the predicaments, of human experience. And that is a good part of what I mean by the rise of medieval literary realism. But those statements require clarification.

Literary art in the twelfth century was by its nature focused and selective. Out of the constellation of effects that might theoretically spring from a single cause, Chrétien and his contemporaries chose the one that fit their plan and intent, and otherwise they simply swept away the literary "clutter" of a full and realistic range of possible effects. Literary life is simpler because a convention of early romance preselects the results of actions.

In such a system (which I am admittedly painting with a very broad brush), duties and loyalties are comparatively straightforward. It is true that Chrétien's romances are constructed around crises and sometimes around the unexpected effects of one's actions. But in his texts the crisis is most often the result simply of a character's deficient understanding and not of a fundamentally complex functioning of his or her world. Only in Chrétien's Lancelot does there appear to be a genuine and intrinsic conflict between, for example, love and chivalry, and it is surely no accident that this is the romance that is extensively recycled and reworked in the central part of the Lancelot-Grail.

Romances in the thirteenth century begin to show us that actions have consequences and that those consequences may not always be predictable or simple. Of course, the change to prose and the far greater length of the Vulgate Cycle both permit and, in a way, require narrative complications. (Or, on the other hand, we might
argue that those complications require the lengthening of romance—and perhaps the vehicle of prose as well.\(^5\)

One of the clearest examples of the change I am describing is economic in nature. It is the practice—and an entirely proper and noble practice within the courtly context—for one literally to “purchase” admiration, affection, and loyalty. Repeatedly, in early romances, we hear of a prince or knight who (and this is a composite but not inaccurate quote) “gave away so much wealth that he eventually won the love of everyone at the court.”

Let me offer a specific instance. It was Chrétien de Troyes who told us that generosity is the queen of virtues. In Chrétien’s second romance, \textit{Cligés}, the emperor’s instructions to his son Alexandre (before the latter leaves his own land for Arthur’s court) are to take a lot of money with him and give it all away:

\begin{quote}

Largesse alone makes one a worthy man, not high birth, courtesy, wisdom, gentility, riches, strength, chivalry, boldness, power, beauty, or any other gift. But just as the rose, when it buds fresh and new, is more beautiful than any other flower, so largesse, wherever it appears, surpasses all other virtues.\(^6\)
\end{quote}

Alexandre follows the advice: he “devoted his efforts . . . to giving and spending liberally.” Soon he had given away so much money that “the king held him in great affection, as did the barons and the queen” (128).

\(^5\)I am persuaded, in fact, that the birth of literary realism coincides in a general sense with the change from verse to prose. It is not entirely clear which is cause and which is effect—it may well be reciprocal—but the adoption of prose as the appropriate vehicle for fictional discourse appears to be closely related to other fundamental changes in the very conception of romance. By its nature, medieval French prose, in an effect reinforced by the change from a synthetic to an analytic structure (that is, by the progressive weakening and eventual loss of a case system), becomes far more dependent on syntactic order, on what we tend to think of as “normal” grammatical and temporal sequence. It thus may be the natural vehicle for the communication of a narrative art that rests on realistic sequence and, with the \textit{Death of Arthur} especially, on a rigorous notion of literary causality.

\(^6\)William W. Kibler, trans., \textit{Arthurian Romances}, 125.
Those who say you can’t buy love must never have read Chrétien’s works, or a good many other romances.

But the effort requires, of course, a phenomenal amount of purchasing power. One might occasionally be tempted to ask just how it is that those who want to buy fame and affection never seem to lack the wealth required to do it. The seemingly perverse but perfectly correct answer is that this is a question we are not supposed to ask. Early romance functioned selectively, in accord with what Laurence de Looze, drawing on Erich Köhler, calls a “wish-fulfillment economics.”

The primary tenet of this economics was the fundamental in exhaustion of wealth. Knights always had enough wealth simply because the thematics of earlier romance precluded its dissipation, while also precluding questions about such matters; in other words, the authors simply posited this plenitude, and because they never asked whether the characters might ever be impoverished, we are not supposed to do so, either.

But in the thirteenth-century movement toward literary realism, such questions become legitimate. And there, we may not only ask whether wealth might be exhausted but learn the answer in dramatic fashion. In romances such as the fascinating Joufroi de Poitiers (I am moving away from Arthurian texts for a moment simply because the illustration is particularly dramatic), the hero and his rival compete in spending money, on the correct assumption that the one who gives away the most money will be most respected and loved. Thus, they

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8 Chrétien may be the originator of this convention. At least it appears to develop at the same time he began to write; that is, it belongs to the first courtly generation. Before the courtly spirit asserted itself fully, there is one twelfth-century example of a king who impoverishes himself by giving away money. That is the young King Arthur in Geoffrey’s Historia (Hammer 152); there he needs money and thus—Geoffrey says almost in passing—attacks the Saxons anew in order to plunder their cities. It may be that Geoffrey is writing when the romance tradition was first forming and the conventions of generosity were not yet set. In any event, his brief passage on the subject appears to be an isolated early instance of the motif; I know of no other examples.
gave away their money, and then they “pawned their horses, hauberks, jewels, and fine clothes, palfreys, packhorses, and saddles, so that nothing remained of all the fine equipment” that each possessed and that permitted him to win friendships and respect. “When each had nothing more to spend, he could not meet his obligations” (see lines 3361–3407; here 3394–3404).

Undeterred, Joufroi “reflected and meditated for a long time about ways to spend more” (3405–07). He finally falls upon a time-honored solution: as the text puts it, “he was the guest of a very rich man who had a beautiful unmarried daughter” (see vv. 3408–11). Need more be said?

The point—of his poverty, not his marriage—is that now actions have consequences that they never had before. Questions can now be asked that were not legitimate before. Characters inhabit a pragmatic world, a realistic universe. In ways that cannot be traced in detail here, the notion of causality is radically remade. This is in no way a casual change; it is a transformation of the very notion and nature of literature, with far-reaching consequences.

Literature and the lives depicted therein suddenly become far more complicated. To return to Chrétien: with the possible exception of his Lancelot romance, he never presented genuine conflicts between loyalty to one’s lord and loyalty to one’s relatives or lady, for example, or between the personal and the public functions of chivalry, or between its personal and altruistic dimensions. Frequently, as I suggested, his characters assume that such a conflict exists, only to be proved wrong. For the most part, Chrétien’s dramas thus deal less with contradictions inherent in chivalry than with characters’ erroneous perceptions. (In his last romance, Perceval, Chrétien goes further in providing a critique of chivalry, but even there he is not really concerned with investigating internal conflicts. His project, which prefigures that of the author of The Quest for the Holy Grail, is far more sweeping: he is illustrating the fundamental inadequacy of Arthurian chivalry as a concept.)

But strange and sometimes tragic things occur as we move toward greater realism. A good many of these tragedies, and numerous near-tragedies, are due to the interplay of conflicting loyalties, a theme
that, as I have said, had been largely foreign to Chrétien. The closest Chrétien came to it was at the end of Yvain, where Yvain and his friend Gawain fight each other (without recognizing each other). But that episode illustrates primarily Gawain’s taking the unethical side of an argument, and, in any case, the two knights are reconciled as soon as they identify themselves.

But in the new literary environment, some of the most reasonable tenets of chivalry produce unexpected results, including battles undertaken against one’s colleagues, friends, and kinsmen. For example, we repeatedly hear that it would be cowardly for a knight to enter a tournament on the side with more combatants. Reasonable enough. But in the Vulgate and elsewhere, it very often happens that the opposite side includes other knights of the Round Table, and one is unwittingly—or sometimes wittingly—led to do battle with one’s own friends and relatives. Chivalry may still be founded on an ideal, but the world of thirteenth-century romance is a much more complex and pragmatic world in which ideals often do not produce ideal results.

A case in point, among many, occurs not long before the end of the Lancelot Proper and illustrates the consequences of a strict adherence to chivalric principles. In this instance Lancelot actually knows that the other side includes Arthurian knights: "When Lancelot heard of his companions from King Arthur’s household, he was sure they were those of the [Grail] quest . . . , but he did not let that keep him from helping the [other side], as he said, because they were fewer in number."

A complicated sequence of jousts and battles follows, and if the summary is confusing, that is because the events are confused. Lancelot is not bearing familiar arms and is thus unrecognized. Mordred is at his side, and although this happens at a time when the text is beginning to predict Mordred’s later treason, he is not yet a full-blown villain; indeed, he is praised as an excellent knight. Nevertheless, readers will doubtless think it odd, in the sequence to

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9Lacy, ed., III, 264; Carroll translation. Later references to this romance are given by page number only, with vol. III understood.
come, to find Lancelot as the ally of Mordred against the best knights Arthur's court has to offer.

The tournament starts, and Lancelot attacks Kay (Arthur's seneschal) and eventually many others, including Yvain. Then Mordred is captured by Gawain (his own half-brother) and by Hector (Lancelot's brother). Then Lancelot raised his sword and struck Sir Gawain [his best friend] on the helmet so violently that he was stunned and shaken. . . . Then Lancelot charged full speed at Hector [his brother!] and struck him such a blow on the arm with his sword that he forced him to release Mordred; then he recovered and with all his strength dealt another blow, so violently that he split the helmet and the iron coif. . . . This mighty blow came flying at Hector, who was so stunned that he fell senseless to the ground. (265)

Now, it is perfectly logical, given Lancelot's incognito and his determination to fight on the side of those who are outnumbered, that he might be found doing battle with friend and kin—but that is just my point: such things can occur naturally, without enmity or intent, in the Vulgate. That is the nature of this text and of this conception of the "real" world. Moreover, it is typical of this text that Lancelot would acknowledge the possibility of fighting against his companions, but equally typical that he does not consider the consequences, the risk to life and limb.

Another possible objection: this is only a tournament. It is not warfare, just sport. But the descriptions (those I have cited and a great many others) of the encounters, the injuries, the violence, make it impossible to take this as a mere chivalric exercise or as harmless pastime. This may be sport, but it is very serious and injurious, potentially fatal, sport. If there is any doubt, consider the following.

The fight continues, and Lancelot sees that Mordred has been captured—again. The captors are Gawain—again—and two of his brothers (Gaheriet and Guerrehet; henceforth their English names,
Gareth and Gaheris, will be used); they “had captured [Mordred] and so beaten him with their swords and trampled him beneath their horses’ feet that Mordred thought he could not escape with his life” (266). This near-fratricidal scene is explainable: Gawain was unable to rip the helmet from Mordred’s head and so did not recognize him. But this explanation, far from justifying the attack, has the primary effect of emphasizing the senselessness of violence.

When they eventually learn, after the tournament, that their victim was their half-brother, they apologize (after a fashion): “If we had recognized you, you would never have suffered any harm from us.”

Lancelot eventually (279) offers the same explanation to Kay: “I didn’t recognize you: in such a place one knows neither friend nor kinsman.” He goes on to inquire about Mordred, and when he learns that Mordred’s half-brothers had beaten him so badly that he had to be returned to court in a litter, “he [begins] to laugh” and says, “That’s what he gets for refusing [to stick with me].” Defeat, humiliation, and serious injury at the hands of one’s brothers are now the stuff comedy is made of. Knights explain to one another why they attacked their friends but rarely or never acknowledge the senselessness of a system that leads them to do so or the harm that can result.

Soon after, Lancelot is attacked by, and defeats, Gawain, Yvain, Sagremor, and Hector (280–81). And battles and mistaken identities proliferate. One battle in particular stands out, though, because identities are not mistaken (286–87).

This is one of the most peculiar and puzzling of such episodes. Gawain sees Lancelot approaching; he recognizes him and calls out, “Sir Lancelot, be on your guard against me”; after which he viciously knocks his friend to the ground beneath his horse’s hooves. The only explanation given is that Gawain did not know that his lance was as strong as it was—scarcely an adequate explanation for attacking his friend.

Then the text says, “It goes without saying that Sir Gawain was sad and upset about what he had done,” and he asks Lancelot’s forgiveness: “Don’t be offended . . . for I did not act deliberately.” But of course, he did act deliberately; he simply thought, apparently, that his
lance would break before doing such serious injury to his friend. In other words, he did not intend to hurt him quite that badly. It might be objected, correctly, that this is a tournament and that one is supposed to attack others, even friends. But the fact that, when people repeatedly do what they are supposed to do, the results are near fatal gives to the text a chilling quality further emphasized by the narrator's neutral tone; in other words, what is most wrong with all this is that narrator and characters alike appear to see nothing wrong with it.

Interestingly, all these events described here come within a few unusually frantic pages of one another and are interrupted only by Bors' visit to the Grail Castle. In fact, when these incidents occur, we are approaching the Grail quest, in which chivalry as it has been practiced at Arthur's court will be shown to be inadequate and largely irrelevant, if not actually destructive. These episodes are obviously preparing for that, and the escalation of such incidents emphasizes the futility, destructiveness, and even absurdity of traditional chivalry. We are witnessing what can be described only as a kind of chivalric entropy.

Let me offer now one of the most dramatic examples of conflicting loyalties, this one taken from the Post-Vulgate rather than the Vulgate. At one point Gareth finds his mother the queen sleeping with Lamorat. We doubtless find his reaction curious: he does not blame Lamorat, because she is so beautiful and so noble that, in his view, it is only natural that a man should want to sleep with her. On the other hand, the queen enjoys no such extenuation: having disgraced her family, she deserves to die, and the dutiful son Gareth kills her.

It is notable that, despite our possible reaction to this reasoning, there is no indication that the narrator considers it defective. The

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10 The Post-Vulgate is fundamentally a reworking of the Vulgate Cycle, done just a few years later and with much of the Lancelot and Guinevere material deleted and the Grail material enhanced. The passage in question is in vol. V of Lacy, ed. (translated by Martha Asher). Because that volume is awaiting publication, it can be cited only by chapter number: 60.
critical point here is that even sound reasoning, as this curiously appears to be, can lead one to commit a despicable act. As if that were not enough, his matricide brings Gareth into serious conflict with his brother Gawain. The latter swears that he will avenge the killing, and his actions too appear to have the approbation of the narrator: in other words, they are simultaneously an appropriate and a destructive chivalric response. Consequently, when two knights—brothers—respond to crises exactly as they should do (insofar as the narrator allows us to draw a conclusion), they find themselves on opposite sides in an impending battle, potentially to the death.

Others are then drawn into the situation. Gareth and Gawain’s brother Agravain and their half-brother Mordred side with Gawain because they dislike Gareth. The other brother Gaheris loves Gareth dearly and takes his side even though he is distraught over their mother’s death. As a result, Agravain and the others proclaim their enmity for Gaheris as well as Gareth and then for Lancelot’s brother Hector, because he had demonstrated his concern and friendship for Gareth. Finally, Lamorat (their mother’s lover) arrives and, surprisingly, takes the killer’s—Gareth’s—side in the battle, further confusing lines of allegiance. The situation is spinning out of control and drawing characters into the conflict for a variety of reasons, some of them having little or nothing to do with the crime itself.

With these ridiculous battle lines drawn, a fierce fight takes place, and all the brothers are seriously injured. This battle is due primarily to divided loyalties, but also to other causes such as complications inherent in the chivalric code. Indeed, when Gareth wishes at one point that he could avoid war with his brothers, he is told that it would be cowardly to do so; thus, even notions of chivalric honor and courage contribute to the strife.

Two observations are important here. First, as I said, even actions and reactions considered proper for knights can be the provocation for disrupted friendships, alliances, and loyalties. It is no longer true, as it had once been, that there is a reasonably clear link between the appropriateness of a knight’s chivalric instincts and his contribution to the social good. Second, the Post-Vulgate goes well beyond the Vulgate in
these regards. In the earlier cycle, the cataclysm is set in motion when Lancelot rescues the condemned Guinevere and accidentally kills Gawain's brothers, thus incurring his enmity. But since the Post-Vulgate does not make the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere serve as the impetus for catastrophic developments, the crisis is purely a crisis of chivalry, and a crisis of literary realism, not a punishment for sin or treason.

But the Post-Vulgate is not alone in taking realism to a new level: even the last romance of the Vulgate Cycle, the *Death of Arthur*, does the same, for it focuses starkly on the tragic effects of accidents, of conflicting loyalties, and of the weakening of Arthur, a king who is now largely indecisive, ineffective, and increasingly desperate in his attempts to hold his court and his system together. We have been told that the knights who return to Arthur's court after the Grail quest are those who had accomplished nothing; in other words, the court is now, to put it bluntly, a refuge for failures, and Arthur is a distinctly marginalized monarch.

Chivalric adventures had been brought to an end by Galahad's accomplishment of the quest, and in order to maintain his knights' fighting fitness, as well as to bolster morale, Arthur fills the void with tournament after tournament. The practice may maintain his knights' skills, but it is a bloody and costly way to do so. Knights had always been injured in tourneys, so that is nothing new. What is new in the *Death of Arthur* is the persistent impression that tourneys and chivalric activity have been cut off from any useful function. They are largely meaningless exercises; they are simple (but destructive) pastimes. And they are, as I suggested, a desperate ploy on Arthur's part to preserve and perhaps reassemble the remnants of a once-glorious system of social organization and moral action.

But of course it cannot work, because the Arthurian world is decaying from within, and that decay is both conceived and portrayed through a new literary realism. The king's death is predicted at the beginning of the *Death of Arthur* and accomplished at the end. There are frequent predictions concerning what is called, by narrator and characters alike, the "war that will have no end." Bors first predicts it, and Lancelot soon echoes his prediction: "Now we can be sure that we'll never have peace with King Arthur or with Gawain . . . for this
is the beginning of the war that will have no end” (Lacy, ed., 125). And although the ultimate cause of this cataclysm is the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere, the immediate cause is another conflict of chivalric loyalties.

Since Lancelot had killed Gawain’s brothers, albeit accidentally, family honor required Gawain to take up arms against his closest friend Lancelot. And Arthur, fully aware of the tragedy being prepared, is curiously powerless to do anything about it; indeed he seems almost resigned or indifferent, and so he too finds himself the enemy of Lancelot, his best knight and best friend. The few decisions that are being made now are made by other knights, but not the king. And for the most part, the characters are being carried along by the current of events in which decisions are ineffective or impossible.

As we approach the end of the Vulgate Cycle, we are also moving closer to the modern notion of realism—or perhaps even of naturalism—as emphasis settles on the real and often brutal effects of a world animated by forces beyond the control of reason or even of human will. It also makes reading the final romance of the cycle a decidedly depressing experience.

With sufficient time, we could trace this movement further, and, by the end of the Middle Ages, find romances in which the knights of the Round Table go around merrily killing one another in the absurd expectation that their martial skills will win Arthur’s admiration and gratitude, whoever the victim may be. Their attitude appears to be: “See how many of your [Arthur’s] knights I’ve killed? How will you reward me?” And sometimes, with equal absurdity, Arthur responds just as they expect him to.

Even though Chrétien de Troyes dramatized misconceptions about the nature of chivalry and, in his *Perceval*, began to emphasize the marginalization of the Arthurian ethos, his romance world is far from what it would become at the hands of later authors. But the differences are by no means limited to thematic matters or the conception of Arthur; I think there can be little doubt a fundamental change is taking place in narrative fiction itself.

The narrative universe of the Vulgate bears little resemblance to that of Chrétien’s romances, though only thirty years separate them. The cycle borrows and reworks numerous themes and motifs from
Chretien, but the texture, the meaning, the presuppositions of the two are entirely different. And the difference, which deserves far greater attention than I have given it here, is that the thirteenth century, the Vulgate Cycle in particular, has recourse to a literary realism unknown to the previous century. Literary life is now far more complex—and different in such a way that never again can Arthurian fiction have the same resonances and the same character it had at the hands of Chretien de Troyes.

Finally, I would suggest that the development of realism, as I have defined it here, is not simply the creature of the cycle’s author or authors, but is primarily a function of the period. I believe we could easily enough trace it through other romances and through artistic creations in other media and even through the thinkers of the time.

But we may seem by now to have forgotten the queen’s kidneys. As I said at the outset, the main thing interesting about them is that they exist. But once an author gives Guinevere kidneys, she will never be the same again. Nor will be the very notion of the literary text. If she has kidneys, they will function; when they do, she will go outside; then she can be kidnapped; and then any number of things can happen. From a single cause can stem multiple effects, not all of them predictable, and this is the most tangible index of the rise of literary realism. Hereafter, although he may still make his presence strongly felt, the author will now be a less conspicuous and controlling architect of literary drama than he once was. The medium in which he is now working precludes the kind of selectivity Chretien was able to exercise. And once King Arthur enters the age of realism, his court, incarnating an ideal that belonged to another time, can never be the same.

References
