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*Arthurian Fictions: Rereading the Vulgate Cycle* by E. Jane  
Burns (review)

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cio's *triumph* of Love finds his counterpart in *The Legend of Good Women*, which, like the Boccaccian *triumph*, mixes first-person involvement in contemporary politics with praise for ancient ladies. In the Boccaccian text, as in all these Chaucerian poems, the narrator hungers perennially for fresh experiences, and yet (unlike the Dantean *pellegrino*) he seems to learn nothing from them. Boccaccio's final, climactic cantos shift us to the climax of *Troilus and Criseyde*, where the impulse to seek virtue through love (sexual satisfaction) is pitted against the conquest of love through virtue (sexual abstinence). The *Visione's* judgment on fame seems, finally, to cast a shadow over the road to Canterbury and the pursuit of vernacular authorship. April brings green grass and a season for fame; September brings Death and Judgment (33.22–27):

It is true that some, more valorous than others,  
 merited fame; yet even if the world endure,  
 their glorious names shall die.  
 For fame is like the grass  
 which Aries pushes forth for you; then,  
 later, Libra arrives and turns it dry and brown.

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E. JANE BURNS. *Arthurian Fictions: Rereading the Vulgate Cycle*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985. Pp. 208. \$22.00.

In *Arthurian Fictions: Rereading the Vulgate Cycle*, E. Jane Burns does just that—reread the Cycle, and her reading is not one which will delight traditionalist critics. What she does is largely reject all previous accounts of the Vulgate Cycle and argue for a completely new interpretation based on the principles of rhetorical ornamentation, specifically that of *repetitio*. The key to the Cycle lies not in allegory or *entrelacement* but in repetition of and variation upon a limited number of narrative structures by which the text is in effect constantly in the process of retelling, actually reproducing itself as *text*. Thus, the purpose of the Vulgate writers was not to legitimize a basically profane story by imposing a loose allegorical frame upon it and pretending to divine or semi-divine authority, but to promote the generation of the text itself and apparently revel in the very act of literary

creation — to produce the very idolatry of words condemned by the Church Fathers:

[I]t is through narrative repetition that the Vulgate texts proclaim boldly if indirectly the importance of literary creation, legitimizing the role of vernacular romance by underscoring through a sheer mass of words the significance of the *verbum* as opposed to the *Verbum*. [P. 5]

Further, according to Burns,

The Truth of Scripture is thus replaced with many competing fictional truths as the *auctoritas* of the biblical Word is overshadowed by the authoritative voice of *li contes*, and what purports to be an allegorical sense is absorbed into the fiction of romance. [P. 79]

If Burns had said that this was what the Vulgate writers had done *in effect*, I would have little objection, but she goes on to claim for the writers a subversive and deliberately heretical *intent* through the use of repeated episodes to “thematize and thereby appropriate into fiction the derogatory judgments advanced in the Church Fathers’ condemnation of literature” (pp. 80–81).

Arguing against theory of structural unity of the Cycle advanced by Vinaver, Lot, Frappier, and others, Burns maintains such claims for unity are in error because numerous episodes fail to fit clearly into such a plan, and that what appears to be allegory is merely analogy, a variant retelling, even in the *Queste*. What Burns is saying in effect is that because the plan is imperfect, there is no plan, that since the allegory is flawed, there is no allegory.

However, after systematically working her way through the romances, Burns succeeds only in finding a sort of pattern to the seemingly endless repetitions and variations:

It is difficult to define the Vulgate patterns *per se* since they are never found or seen *in toto*. . . . A pattern could be described, in one sense, as a narrative register or template, a preverbal abstract entity that has an endless variety of positive realizations. All that we see are the individual realizations of it, the verbalized allomorphs. Yet, the pattern remains undefinable and indescribable apart from its manifestation in these motifs. [P. 140]

Ultimately she settles upon a general pattern of imprisonment or binding and freedom, a pattern so broad that it is scarcely better than no pattern at all. What cannot be made to fit such a pattern? What is the Bible but the tale of the magical binding of man (the Fall) and his ultimate release (Redemption)? What is any love story but a tale of binding followed by eventual release through the realization of that love, death, etc.?

Although Burns understandably finds Vinaver's account of the Vulgate Cycle unsatisfactory, I see no reason to doubt that it is substantially correct. *Entrelacement* does seem to describe the phenomenon accurately, and it is possible to discern a clear overall structural pattern, however flawed. True, the allegory does frequently break down with a number of the individual episodes seeming to be simply thrown in, but the same can be said of virtually any clearly allegorical composition, the *Fairie Queene*, for example.

While Burns' thesis is intriguing, I simply cannot believe it. There can be little doubt that the Vulgate writers were engaging in a bit of pious fraud to produce their work and make it entertaining and at the same time morally edifying to Christian readers and auditors. But to assume on the writers' part a subversive and heretical intent to deceive and seduce their audience seems to me to be claiming entirely too much. Why not let the purpose of the romancers be what it seems — to tell the whole history of Arthur and the Holy Grail, as the generally accepted order of composition implies? If the Vulgate writers were attempting to delay the end of the cycle, as Burns claims, then the *Mort Artus* should have been the last segment composed, but such was not the case. The late continuation of the *Merlin* and the additions to the *Lancelot* came later, their purpose apparently to fill gaps in the story, a purpose that makes sense only if the writers were following some definite plan and trying to achieve the very sort of unity that Burns denies.

Another weakness in Burns' study is her failure to examine parallel examples beyond the Vulgate Cycle in the same light. Although this would have diverted her focus from her subject matter, it would have strengthened her argument considerably. However, it cannot be said that Burns is unaware of the greater implications of her thesis. She states: "[T]he issues of textuality, authorship, and the status of the vernacular tale as well as the problem of how to read the repetition in medieval works are germane to the widest spectrum of texts (p. 6)." If she is right — and she *may* be, regardless of what traditionalists like myself may think — then we must alter completely our current notions of medieval composition and of the medieval mind as well.

As much as I may disagree with Burns' basic premise, I am not blind to the considerable merits of her work. She does provide an alternative method of assessing the Vulgate Cycle, proposes a number of problems that need solutions, and probes more deeply into the romances than anyone has done before. Her pointing out of narrative correspondences, thematic patterns, and parallelism between individual episodes—with accompanying detailed charts—will save the reader of the Vulgate Cycle months of labor. Although some of Burns' insights seem overly ingenious, many of them are instructive, and some are truly brilliant. One may disagree with much in *Arthurian Fictions*, but it is a work that no scholar of the Vulgate Cycle can afford to ignore.

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J. A. BURROW. *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*. Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1986. Pp. xi, 211. \$39.95.

Burrow's book is an intellectual history of late classical and medieval ideas concerning the process of human growth and aging, and a survey of Old and Middle English literary texts which are concerned with these themes. There is much to praise in the book; Burrow is learned and imaginative, writes lucidly, and often has illuminating things to say. Particularly interesting is his discussion of the complexity of medieval Christian ideas concerning age. In medieval Christian thought, age is not necessarily venerable, and one should not take youthful folly for granted; but on the other hand, Christian thinkers argued that the physical disadvantages of age can have spiritual advantages. Age is thus not simply a lamentable consequence of the fall. Again, Burrow's discerning discussion of the emergence of a "cult of youth" in connection with the development of the corpus of courtly literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is an interesting historical insight which seems both plausible and original.

Some questions need to be raised, however, about the implicit structure of the argument. While it is conventional to study Old and Middle English literature in sequence for obvious linguistic reasons, it seems questionable whether one can assume much literary continuity between the two periods.