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The Ends of Romance in Chrétien and Chaucer: Unresolved
and Unfinished Texts in the Middle Ages

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
English Literature

Cardiff University

2020

Abstract

This thesis examines the ends of the finished and unfinished romance works written by Chrétien de Troyes and Geoffrey Chaucer, and argues that finishing a romance is a cumulative and complex process; completion is not essential to the meaning or value of romance in the Middle Ages; engagement with these texts is exclusive from any need to see them completed, and unfinished romances have distinct functions from complete works in the literary tradition. While plenty has been written on Chrétien's continuations and the endings to Chaucer's poems, no scholar has brought them together in this context or recognised that their works were shaped by similar issues, or that they were equally invested in an aesthetic that favoured openness, unresolved tension, and multiplicity prior to the production of their unfinished texts.

Chapter 1 argues that the series of 'illusory' ends over the course of Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* creates a complex unity of form and content that transcends the bipartite and tripartite models of poetic structure typically proposed by scholars. Chapter 2 tests different models for the mode of thematic inconclusiveness Chrétien develops across *Cligès*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain* and finally argues that, in each romance, the poet's use of antithesis precludes secure closure. Chapter 3 explores the narratology of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, alongside the four main continuations, to elucidate the extensive and multiple ways in which the romance is unfinished beyond the absence of discourse after line 9234.

Chapter 4 looks at the dynamic of opening and closing across Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, and argues that Theseus's efforts to establish order in his chaotic world creates a series of temporary endpoints that reveal the extent to which humans are limited in their ability to impose final meaning on the world. Chapter 5 investigates how Chaucer's incongruous treatment of the romance genre in *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* determines the unfinished state of the tales. Finally, the conclusion considers the value of unresolved and fragmentary texts, offers some new perspectives on approaches to textual completion in medieval romance, and considers how the fragmentary romance fared in early print culture.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Rob Gossedge and Ad Putter for their expertise, guidance, and encouragement over the last four years. Their combined knowledge and meticulous attention to detail has helped this thesis immeasurably. Special thanks go to Rob who has been a constant source of support through both my postgraduate and undergraduate degrees, and who has shown tremendous faith in me over the past ten years. I would also like to thank Irene Morra and Derek Dunne for their comments and feedback on earlier drafts of my work, as well as Megan Leitch, Leah Tether, Becky Munford and Martin Coyle who have all provided me with invaluable advice during my time at Cardiff and Bristol. I must also thank Marianne Ailes, from whom I received training in the reading and translation of Old French. Thanks also to Rhian Rattray for her continued support.

For financial aid, I am indebted to the South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, for the award of a three-year doctoral studentship and a grant to present my research at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, as well as to the School of English, Communication and Philosophy, who funded my trip to the International Medieval Congress in Leeds.

Thank you to all the members of MEMORI for the opportunity to discuss my research in a welcoming and compassionate environment. Thanks also to all the other staff and students of ENCAP, SHARE, and PSYCH who have been a friend to me over the last four years.

I also want to thank Fiona and Paul, just for being Mum and Dad, and to whom I know this project has at times seemed never-ending, as well as my sister Hannah and brother Josh, all my wonderful friends, but especially Hattie, and finally my uncle Peter, who never got to see this research in its finished state.

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Introduction: ‘th’ende is every tales strengthe’: Romances as ‘end-determined’

In his seminal lecture series on the ways we use fictions to make sense of our world, Frank Kermode suggests that romances are ‘end-determined’, that every episode of a romance, like all sense-making fictions, ‘exists under the shadow of the end’.¹ If medievalists accept Kermode’s idea that all parts of the romance draw their meaning and value from the end, how, then, are such literary fictions changed when the ending is missing? What significance and narrativity can romances have without one? While it is unlikely that any poet set out to write an unfinished text, romances without endings did circulate in the medieval period, and many of them, like Chrétien de Troyes’s *Conte du Graal* and some of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, not only survived but enjoyed enormous popularity in the Middle Ages and beyond. Taking as its case studies the work of the French court poet Chrétien, writing in the twelfth century, and that of Chaucer, the nominal father of English Literature, writing in the fourteenth, the two parts of this thesis investigate why such texts might have appealed to medieval readers and the different factors, beyond the poet’s death, that may have influenced their unfinished state. By first seeking to understand the strategies romance poets adopted to achieve closure, and what made a conclusion satisfactory, it further investigates the different types of unfinished and unresolved romances, and how and why previously effective methods of ending were only partially successful in or not suited to the unfinished works; how the lack of an ending complicated the already complex form of romance, and whether this subset of unfinished romance works had something special or different to offer from completed ones.

The idea that fictions are ‘end-determined’ originates in the writings of Aristotle, who defined history and poetry antithetically: history is, as a series of contiguous or successive

¹ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 5-6; also inferred by Suzanne Kocher, ‘Desire, Parody, and Sexual Mores in Hue de Rotelande’s *Ipomedon*’, in *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, ed. by Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 447.

events, organised paratactically, whereas poetry is unified, intelligible, and based on the subordination of the parts to the end of the whole.² As Suzanne Fleischman writes, a medieval chronicle ‘often wishes to tell a story, but typically fails to do so for lack of narrative closure’.³ In fact, the related Aristotelian notion that completeness was bound up with perfection and, by extension, beauty was highly potent in medieval Western thought, and gave rise to Augustine’s idea that aesthetic ‘unity was the form of all beauty’.⁴ This might be why the art of concluding a text receives special emphasis in the poetic treatises (*artes poeticae*) and literary works of the Middle Ages. For example, in his thirteenth-century *Poetria Nova*, influential rhetorician Geoffrey of Vinsauf advises poets to ‘finis, praecursor idoneus, intret/Primus et anticipet sedem, quasi dignior hospes/Et tanquam dominus’, to accord the end the place of honour or elevate it to the position of ‘the host’, the controlling principle of the text.⁵ Though these *artes poeticae* do not contain, as A. C. Spearing writes, ‘any very subtle or sophisticated thought on the nature of literature [...] they are of great interest for the basic assumptions they state, or sometimes consciously imply, about what poems are’, and would have influenced medieval narrative compositions.⁶ Indeed, Geoffrey’s recommendation is echoed in Book II of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1380s)

² Lionel Gossman, ‘History and Literature’ in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. by Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 9 ff; see also Suzanne Fleischman, ‘On the Representation of History and Fiction in the Middle Ages’, *History and Theory*, 22 (1983), 278-310 (pp. 292-3).

³ Fleischman, p. 284; citing Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 5-27 (p. 9, 19f).

⁴ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by Hugh Tredennick, vol. 1 (Loeb Classical Library 271; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), pp. 267–69; the Latin reads, ‘Omnis porro pulchritudinis forma unitas sit’: St. Augustine of Hippo, Epistle 18, *Patrologia cursus completus series Latina*, vol. 33 c. 85., ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: Les Ateliers Catholiques, 1865); cited in Władysław Tatarkiewicz, ‘Medieval Aesthetics’, in *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 60.

⁵ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, in *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle: Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge*, ed. by Edmond Faral (Paris: Champion, 1923), pp. 194-262, ll. 113-15; for the modern English translation see Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, trans. by Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967), p. 19.

⁶ A. C. Spearing, ‘Introduction’, *The Knight’s Tale, from the Canterbury Tales*, ed. by A. C. Spearing (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 33-4.

when Pandarus outlines his techniques of composition to Criseyde as he plots a happy conclusion for the ill-fated couple, explaining that tales are ‘al for som conclusioun’ and ‘th’ende is every tales strengthe’.⁷

In view of the apparent distinction of ending in the literature of the Middle Ages, it makes sense that strong closure, in the sense of a climax of plot and meaning together, is a feature of some medieval romances. In many of the Old French and Middle English romances, the poets reunite the hero with his community, marry him to his lover, crown him as king, or follow him to his death, bringing the narrative to an emphatic close before explicitly positing the ‘fine’ or ‘endynge’ of their poems through a recapitulation of the story, an invocation to God, or by praising their patron, apparently conscious, along with the scribes, of the need to assure readers that there is nothing more to add.⁸ But the ends of romance are not always straightforwardly optimistic. The centres of interest in the genre tend to be love, adventure, prowess, maturation, and the security of the kingdom, and its narratives typically involve some quest, obstacle, battle or love-affair away from the court, usually with some element of ritual or the fantastical, which tests the hero and possibly the heroine in a way that demonstrates the ideal code of conduct for the aristocracy. And while many of these romance plots evolve towards the triumphant crowning marriage, the ‘consolidation and regeneration of the family history’, as David L. Jeffrey puts it, which returns the hero to security and establishes him in a principal social role, the end of a romance can also introduce

⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 77, II. 259-60.

⁸ In the Sneyd manuscript, the epilogue to Thomas of Britain’s *Tristan* reads ‘Tumas fine ci sun escrit’: see *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas, poeme du XIIIe siecle*, vol. 1., ed. by Joseph Bédier (Paris: Firmin Didot et Cie, 1902-5), p. 416, l. 3125; cited in Constance B. Bouchard, ‘The Possible Non-Existence Of Thomas, Author of *Tristan and Isolde*’, *Modern Philology*, 79.1 (1981), 66-72 (p. 67); the poet of *Lybeaus Desconus*, possibly Thomas Chestre, ends the romance by asking Jesus Christ to ‘Grawnte us gode endynge’: see *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. by Eve Salisbury and James Weldon (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), l. 2205; for a more detailed summary of the elements which commonly form the conclusions of romances see A. C. Spearing, ‘Narrative Closure: the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 111-115.

a sense of fatalism and impending catastrophe.⁹ Especially in the context of Arthurian romance, in which ‘fulfilment is inseparable from [the] breakdown’ of the kingdom and the passing of Arthur, as Jane Gilbert explains, ‘once the endgame is included [...] a sense of fatality dominates’.¹⁰ The narrative poetry of love and adventure, then, can embrace both optimism and apocalypse, a sense of stability, progress and hope, or, conversely, one of frustration, failure, and despair; either way, Jeffrey writes, it is ‘thinking always about the ending’.¹¹

However, there are many examples of romance that do not develop strong closure, ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, since just as many works of Old French and Middle English romance, such as *Lanval*, *Le Bel Inconnu*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, end with more questions than they answer. Indeed, the romance genre is complex, plural, and heterogeneous, it was continually evolving as its conventions were rewritten and adjusted, and closure does not seem have been one of its inherent features.¹² Nevertheless, the sense of stability and resolution fostered in the ends of romances like Thomas’ *Tristan*, *King Horn*, the Vulgate *Mort Artu*, and *Lybeaus Desconus*, whether through ‘crowning marriage’ or death, together with the advice of the medieval rhetoricians, might explain why many unfinished medieval romances were continued and completed by later writers, often more than once – among them, Chrétien’s *Le Chevalier de la charrette* (*Lancelot*) and *Conte du Graal* (*Perceval*), Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*, Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Willehalm*, Guillaume de Lorris’s *Roman de la Rose*, and Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*. While the widespread

⁹ David L. Jeffrey, ‘Literature in an Apocalyptic Age; or, How to End a Romance’, *Dalhousie Review*, 61 (1981), 426-46 (p. 431).

¹⁰ Jane Gilbert, ‘Arthurian Ethics’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 154-70.

¹¹ Jeffrey, p. 436.

¹² This is something ‘Gothic-structure’ theorists like Charles Muscatine, D. W. Robertson, and Robert M. Jordan showed some time ago: see Muscatine, , *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 167-73; D. W. Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1967).

practice of continuation points towards a general ‘desire’ for completion, it also indicates that a significant number of the romance texts produced during the Middle Ages were left or at least encountered in an incomplete or fragmentary state, and suggests a cultural climate in which readers of these texts, especially those with an interest in creative production, were continually considering whether a literary text was satisfactorily finished, whether its formal and thematic structures culminated in a conclusion appropriate to the work.¹³

From a material perspective, continuation was less a pastime than a necessity in the High and Late Middle Ages, when texts were not only more fragile but more difficult to replicate. Since the process of manuscript production was time-consuming and costly, a medieval text might exist only in a single copy on a parchment-based codex, and was thus more vulnerable to the elements and at greater risk of loss or damage through human error. As Timothy L. Stinson has recently noted, ‘Loss, damage, and incompleteness are endemic to Middle English literature’, and we need only look to Beroul’s *Tristan* and the *Roman de la Rose* to see this is equally true of twelfth- and thirteenth-century French literature.¹⁴ There were undoubtedly some cases in which the author died before finishing the work. In fact, Matthew of Vendôme includes death in his list of ways that a poem might end: a *preoccupata conclusio* occurs when death anticipates the conclusion, but, he writes, an ending caused by death is more accurately described as a *terminatio*.¹⁵

¹³ The thirteenth-century grammarian and poet John of Garland lists ‘inconueniens operis conclusio’ [‘a conclusion inappropriate to the work’] as one of the vices to avoid in a poem: John of Garland, *The ‘Parisiana Poetria’ of John of Garland*, ed. and trans. by Traugott Lawler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 88-9; also cited in Siobhain Bly Calkin, ‘Endings in the Auchinleck Manuscript’, in *The Auchinleck Manuscripts: New Perspectives*, ed. by Susanna Fein (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), pp. 156-175 (p. 162).

¹⁴ Timothy L. Stinson, ‘(In)Completeness in Middle English Literature: The Case of the *Cook’s Tale* and the *Tale of Gamelyn*’, *Manuscript Studies*, 1 (2017), 115-34 (p. 118).

¹⁵ Matthew of Vendôme, *Ars Versificatoria: The Art of Verse-maker*, trans. by Roger P. Parr (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 1981), p. 105; for the Latin, see Matthew of Vendôme, *Ars Versificatoria*, ed. by Edmond Faral, pp. 191-3.

Death was not the only threat to the integrity of a medieval poem, however. Part of a manuscript could be lost through fire, scribal redaction, negligence or decay. But the fact that both poets under consideration in this study – Chrétien de Troyes and Geoffrey Chaucer – left more than one romance unfinished across their careers, and more still thematically open-ended, suggests the circumstances that produced these texts were more complex than reductive assumptions allow for.¹⁶ For instance, some of the unfinished works in question here – Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* – are incredibly intricate and discursive ‘episodic’ texts which seem to generally resist order and coherence. It is feasible, then, that these works grew simply too long and complex to be closed via the means of textual closure available to poets in the medieval period. While these specific poems seem to have been overly ambitious retirement projects, which may have occupied Chrétien and Chaucer right up until their deaths, it is questionable whether all the different components could have been satisfactorily reconciled and brought to completion even if the poets had somehow lived a further twenty years.

It is equally possible that some fragments were abandoned as and when the poet grew weary of the material, or the circumstances of their patronage (as Chrétien), or professional commitments (as Chaucer), changed, and they turned to other interests. Yet Chrétien’s *Lancelot* and *Le Conte du Graal*, Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, and *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole generated some of the most enduring symbols, characters, and motifs in the medieval literary imagination: the adulterous love triangle, the Holy Grail, the fool knight and the pilgrims en route to Canterbury. In these cases, abandonment in the sense of Paul Valéry’s oft-quoted inference that completion is only ‘la rupture d’une reflexion, que

¹⁶ *Le Chevalier de la charrette* and *Le Conte du Graal* in Chrétien’s case, and Chaucer famously left some of his other works unfinished, including the *Legend of Good Women* and the *House of Fame*: for a detailed discussion of these works in this context: see Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998).

la fatigue' is not a satisfactory explanation.¹⁷ The idea that these two highly esteemed poets may have simply abandoned the works due to 'difficulties' with the form or material seems no more reasonable, however.

Composing the ending to a medieval romance would have come with its own special set of pressures and expectations. As A. C. Spearing explains,

the end is not merely a boundary; it is expected somehow to complete or sum up the meaning of the whole. The end is the goal, the purpose of the entire work [...] The end must be justified by criteria internal to the narrative itself: it must emerge from inside the work, as the satisfactory completion of its intrinsic pattern or development.¹⁸

Yet as Spearing goes on to argue, at the same time it seems to be 'generally taken for granted' that endings are achieved in a 'mechanical way', by the imposition of formulaic conventions and devices.¹⁹ Instructions on how to finish a narrative poem and the 'specific devices' available for this purpose were to be found in the *artes poeticae*, the treatises on poetry developed by Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthew of Vendôme in the thirteenth century, derived from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* attributed to Cicero. On ending a poem, Geoffrey recommends that the poet make retrospective reference to the body of work, use a proverb or an *exemplum* (an extended metaphor), and finally link the conclusion to the beginning.²⁰

In *Ars Versificatoria*, Matthew suggests a few more possibilities: he proposes a recapitulation of the meaning, an emendation to the work, a plea for indulgence, a

¹⁷ In an essay on his poem *Cimetière marin*, Valéry writes that completion is comparable to 'the letting-go of a tiring idea'; the full passage reads: 'Aux yeux de ces amateurs d'inquiétude et de perfection, un ouvrage n'est jamais achevé, [...] mais abandonné; et cet abandon, qui le livre aux flammes ou au public (et qu'il soit l'effet de la lassitude ou de l'obligation de livrer) est une sorte d'accident, comparable à la rupture d'une réflexion, que la fatigue, le fâcheux ou quelque sensation viennent rendre nulle' [In the eyes of those who anxiously seek perfection, a work is never truly completed – a word that for them has no sense – but abandoned; and this abandonment, of the book to the fire or to the public, whether due to weariness or to a need to deliver it for publication, is a sort of accident, comparable to the letting-go of an idea that has become so tiring or annoying that one has lost all interest in it]: Paul Valéry, 'Au Sujet du *Cimetière marin*', *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 234 (1933), 399-411 (p. 399).

¹⁸ Spearing, 'Narrative Closure', pp. 109-10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁰ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, trans. by Nims, pp. 22-3.

demonstration of pride, an expression of thanks, or praise of God.²¹ John of Garland, also writing in the thirteenth century, elsewhere advises the use of recapitulation, an exemplum or proverb to derive an ending, which could also come ‘purely from the poet’s pleasure’, while Robert of Basevorn, like Geoffrey, finds that a repetition of the beginning at the end makes for an elegantly intricate finish.²² Though many of the recommendations in the Latin treatises are exemplified in vernacular texts, as this thesis will try to show, the rhetoricians do not accommodate the great variety of endings across medieval poetry, nor was finishing a medieval romance as straightforward as their treatises imply: the vernacular romances especially show that road to the ending was not single or linear.

There are several reasons for this: the need for the poem’s conclusion to be integrated into the structure of the whole, the tilt towards non-linearity in medieval fictions, and the multiplicity of narrative threads in romance. Rosemarie P. McGerr and Barbara Herrnstein Smith show that for medieval and modern writers alike, ‘closure involves a complex set of ideas about the entire structure of a text and not just what appears in the conclusion per se’.²³ In other words, the process of finishing a poem is not limited to ‘the end’ but requires the poet to pick up the thread of an organising principle sustained throughout. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner highlights the non-linear quality of medieval textuality, with its drift of ‘continuity and discontinuity, as it locates the play between closure and open-endedness on a multi-dimensional continuum operating on many different levels of text and context, form and meaning’.²⁴ The coexistence of these rival impulses to closure and deferral seems more prevalent in romance than other forms; as Patricia A. Parker writes, romance ‘simultaneously

²¹ Matthew of Vendôme, trans. by Parr, p. 105-6.

²² John of Garland, trans. by Lawler, pp. 89-91; see Robert of Basevorn, *Forma Praedicandi*, in *Artes Praedicandi: Contribution à l’histoire de la rhétorique au moyen âge*, ed. by Th.-M. Charland (Paris: Publications de l’Institut d’études médiévales d’Ottawa, 1936), p. 310.

²³ McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books*, p. 26.

²⁴ Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 15.

quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object'.²⁵ In this respect, romance was an ideal space in which to test alternative models of completion, and to expand the possible significations of medieval fictions.²⁶ In fact, with its multiplication of narrative concerns, the romance calls for shifting perspectives and multiple interpretations in a comparable way to Umberto Eco's 'open' work, which is never fully 'closed'.²⁷

Indeed, the presence of an epilogue, a prayer, praise of a patron – or any one of the other 'formal devices' for closure proposed by the rhetoricians – does not necessarily insure that the poem will leave readers with a lasting sense of closure, since such appendages are not always enough to explain and mitigate the problems generated by the text. And so a romance might feature one of these 'devices' for closure, but might still manifest inconclusiveness in the denouement that invites debate. In the *Bel Inconnu*, for example, Renaut de Beaujeu holds the anticipated end to ransom (according to his own poetic logic): in the epilogue, he defends his decision to marry Guinglain to 'the wrong woman', the Blonde Esmerée, but promises a sequel reuniting him with his true love, the Pucelle aux Blanches Mains, on the condition he receive a 'biau sanblant' from his patroness.²⁸ This 'naughty' epilogue, as Alice M. Colby-Hall calls it, not only serves to demonstrate the normative expectation for the hero to marry the woman he loves, but shows that a strong formal or extradiegetic indication of the 'end' is not always sufficient for closure.²⁹ The issue of closure in romance, then, is 'many-leveled'.³⁰

The ubiquity of unfinished works across the period, the fact that both Chrétien and Chaucer left more than one unfinished poem despite their canonical status, and the challenges

²⁵ Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 4.

²⁶ See also Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, p. 4.

²⁷ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 9-10, 24, 60.

²⁸ Alice M. Colby-Hall's translation is 'favourable glance'; for a full account of Renaut's experiments with conventions of resolution, see Colby-Hall, 'Frustration and Fulfillment: The Double Ending of the *Bel Inconnu*', *Yale French Studies*, 67 (1984), 120-134.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³⁰ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, p. 7.

inherent in ending a romance well suggests that there was something other than the death of the author or loss of the manuscript involved in the production of these unfinished romances, something else in the complications of their formal and thematic structures that determined or at least contributed to their unfinishedness. Through close reading grounded in medieval and modern literary theory, this thesis will explore both the complete and incomplete romances of Chrétien and Chaucer to investigate, from a textual perspective, how and why some of their romances are unfinished or interpretively open-ended and what the cultural values and functions of these unfinished texts were for, despite their incompleteness, the works in question not only survived but thrived in the later Middle Ages and the centuries afterward. This may be because a text without an end, a text in which meaning had not been fixed, could serve a multiplicity of meanings, purposes, and interpretations in a way that a closed text could not, offered an opportunity for perpetual debate over the value and meaning of the work, and inspired immediate cultural production in the form of continuation and adaptation. It is interesting that some of these continuators, such as the early continuators of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, went on to produce unfinished works themselves, having presumably tried to adopt the principles of their predecessor. This project will, then, also necessarily examine the aesthetic considerations of the unfinished poems; whether, for instance, a certain set of principles gave rise to an unfinished text, or whether there was something about the episodic form of romance that created conditions more favourable to the production of unfinished texts. This thesis will ultimately seek to show that 'the end' is but one of a tale's strengths and, in the work of Chrétien and Chaucer, an unfinished romance has many other strengths, values, and applications.

0.1 The Two Big C's of Medieval Romance Literature

This thesis will counterpoint the complete Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes – *Erec et Enide*, *Cligès* and *Le Chevalier au lion* (*Yvain*) – with his unfinished and continued ones – *Lancelot* and *Le Conte du Graal* – together with some complete and incomplete iterations of romance in *The Canterbury Tales: The Knight's Tale*, *The Squire's Tale*, and *Sir Thopas*.

These vernacular texts, the first composed c. 1169 and the last sometime over the course of the late 1380s and early 1390s, span three centuries and originate from both France and England, making for an unusual anthology of medieval romance that is by no means exhaustive. There is undoubtedly room for expansion into the incomplete versions of *Tristan*, *Willehalm*, the *Roman de la Rose* and *Horn Childe*, among others. But Chrétien and Chaucer, with the first writing in France in the formative years of courtly romance and the latter on the other side of the channel two centuries afterward, go some way toward demonstrating that incompleteness was a characteristic of romance writing long before Chaucer, and that the production of unfinished romances was not idiosyncratic to one language, place, or epoch. Together they represent only a small sample of romance writing from this period, but these specific poets were chosen for the major contribution each made to the evolution of romance, and because their works, and especially their unfinished works, contain landmark moments of the genre, and several potential ‘first encounters’ in the French and English vernaculars: Lancelot’s passion for Guenevere, the Grail, the marvels at the court of the eastern Other, the frivolous knight.³¹ Moreover, despite the considerable time period between them, as the originator of French courtly romance and the nominal father of English poetry, Chrétien and Chaucer are two of the major players in the medieval romance genre, and because both of

³¹ ‘First encounter’ is the phrase Paul Strohm uses to describe the medieval audience’s experience with unfamiliar material: see Strohm, ‘Chaucer’s Fifteenth-Century Audience and the Narrowing of the “Chaucer Tradition”’, in *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Daniel J. Pinti (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 101-26 (p. 116).

them seemed to have a issue with bringing texts to an end, there is a strong argument for reading them alongside each other.³²

Both Chrétien and Chaucer were generic innovators within their respective languages in the vernacular. Yet, despite this, both produced especially unfinished romance texts, poems without any semblance of an end. These works in turn generated a huge body of materials, as continuators, adaptors and redactors sought to variously continue, complete and rearrange the fragmentary texts. Chrétien's romances inspired the *Perceval* Continuations (three redactions of the First Continuation, the Second Continuation, Gerbert de Montreuil's Continuation and the Manessier Continuation), together with the 'prologues', *Bliocadran* and the *Elucidation*, and more indirectly, the Lancelot-Grail or the Vulgate Cycle, possibly Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie (Estoire du Graal)* and the Didot *Perceval*, as well as the 'translations', Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein*, Wolfram's *Parzival*, *Sir Percyvell of Gales*, and *Ywain and Gawain* in English.³³ There was a similar explosion of continuations and additions to Chaucer's *Tales*, John Lydgate's *Prologue to the Siege of Thebes* (the *Siege of Thebes* is itself considered a 'prequel' to *The Knight's Tale*), *The Ploughman's Tale*, *The Cook's Tale*, *The Canterbury Interlude and Merchant's Tale of Beryn*, the appendage of *Gamelyn* to the *cd* group of manuscripts and various other spurious links, as well as Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the continuation of *The Squire's Tale* written by John Lane, the lesser known modernisation of the tale written by George Ogle and Samuel Boyse, with a conclusion added by Joseph Sterling in 1785, and Richard Wharton's *Cambuscan* written in

³² Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, p. 6; Stinson, p. 120.

³³ Rupert T. Pickens notes that Robert drew on the same Grail sources as Chrétien: Rupert T. Pickens, "'Mais de çou ne parole pas Crestiens de Troies...': A Re-examination of the Didot-*Perceval*", *Romania*, 420 (1984), 492-510 (p. 493); see also W. A. Nitze, 'Messire Robert de Boron', *Speculum*, 28.2 (1953), 279-96.

heroic couplets.³⁴ Moreover, it is also possible to observe the influence of the *Tales* in John Milton's *Il Penseroso*, John Lyly's *Endymion*, and many others.

Considering their comparably dynamic influence over the production of medieval fictions, it may not be incidental that, from a textual perspective, the Old French and Middle English poets complement each other in numerous ways. Their works of romance, finished and unfinished, raise the same implicit issues of narrative construction: narratological crises give rise to multiple 'endpoints'; unfulfilled promises establish and subvert expectations; ironic counterpoints undermine absolutes; multiplicities and polarities of meaning are placed in dialogue; single-voiced discourse is dispensed with, and both poets harness different types and levels of structure and style whilst embracing a diverse range of figures, scenarios, and tropes from the surrounding literary traditions. But, most significantly for the purpose of this research, both poets repeatedly resist or reject formal and thematic closure. Indeed, even prior to the composition of their conspicuously unfinished works, inconclusiveness forms part of the aesthetic developed by Chrétien and Chaucer in their earlier forays into romance writing. While I will explore the works of the poets as individuals, strikingly similar questions and issues appear under different names across the chapters; in fact, as this thesis will show, there are important parallels between the implicit and explicit manifestations of inconclusiveness in their variously finished and unfinished romance narratives.

Undoubtedly the most significant parallel is that the works of both poets, especially their unfinished works, produced immediate and lasting receptions from readers, writers, and scholars. This is because the fragmentary texts were incorporated into the manuscripts by the medieval compilers and, judging by the wealth of responses that survive from continuators

³⁴ On the *Siege of Thebes* as a 'prequel': see John M. Bowers, 'The Tale of Beryn and The Siege of Thebes: Alternative Ideas of *The Canterbury Tales*', in *Writing After Chaucer*, pp. 201-225 (p. 214); group *cd* according to the classifications of J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert: see *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, vol. 2 (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 496.

and adaptors, they were received with enthusiasm by the medieval and, at least in Chaucer's case, Renaissance public. In the end, these unresolved romances had just as much staying power as completed contemporary works. Moreover, the fact that later writers continued to extend and end these works suggests that they were more richly productive over time. Of course, the culture of scribal intervention and compilation, and the practice of continuation, meant that unfinished works were often received as part of a 'complete' volume; Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski goes as far as to say that without continuation texts 'perceived as incomplete, would be forgotten'.³⁵

But the manuscript evidence implies that some poems were read in a fragmentary state in the Middle Ages, or included paratextual material indicative of this condition: four manuscripts, three thirteenth and one fourteenth century, present the fragment of *Le Conte du Graal* either alone or alongside unrelated texts; J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert identify six manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* in which *The Squire's Tale* was originally followed by a varying number of blank leaves rather than an explicit, presumably left to accommodate a missing part, but eventually cut out.³⁶ The absence of pre-Renaissance continuations of *The Squire's Tale* suggests that the tale was read as an unfinished work in the medieval period, and one fifteenth-century reader, Jean de Angoulême actually records his experience of that

³⁵ The practice of compilation continued even after the emergence of print technology; Wynkyn de Worde, for example, printed an early edition of *The Canterbury Tales* in compilation with John Lydgate's *Assembly of Gods*: see Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and their Books 1473-1557* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 94; Blumenfeld-Kosinski writes that 'continuation is one of the most worthwhile poetic tasks, since it establishes and maintains a tradition without which the initial deeds, those in the text perceived as incomplete, would be forgotten': Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 'The Poetics of Continuation in the Old French "Paon" Cycle', *Romance Philology*, 39.4 (1986), 437-47 (p. 446).

³⁶ The French manuscripts are the thirteenth-century MS B (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 354), MS C (Clermont-Ferrand, BMI, 248), and MS F (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 2943), and the fourteenth-century MS H (London, College of Arms, Arundel XIV): for a full list of manuscripts, see Thomas Hinton, *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien de Troyes's Perceval, the Continuations, and French Arthurian Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 246-9; *The Canterbury Tales* manuscripts are MS Harley 7335, Additional 35286, Harley 1758, Hatton Donat 1, Rawlinson Poetry 149, Rawlinson Poetry 223: see also John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, vol. 1 (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 232.

‘valde absurda’ tale in one Paris manuscript (BnF angl. 39).³⁷ The circulation of incomplete and unfinished texts may have stemmed from ‘the medieval awareness’ of the poet’s *oeuvre*, but nonetheless it seems that the public were happy to read the fragmentary works of poets alongside their complete ones.³⁸ Evidently, in some quarters, there was an acceptance if not an enjoyment of unresolved and unfinished works, concomitant with any need to see them completed.

Nevertheless, both medieval and modern editors have sought to frame and reframe the *oeuvres* of both poets, ostensibly to make them more intelligible and aesthetically palatable to the reading public. This has been particularly true of the five Arthurian romances and *The Canterbury Tales*: among the early editors, there was clearly a desire to rationalise and minimise the visibility of their fragmentation as they strove to recover the ‘complete’ text.³⁹ For instance, the thirteenth-century scribe of MS R (Paris, BNF, fr. 1450) tried to narrativize Chrétien’s five romances by placing them in the middle of the *Roman de Brut*, Wace’s verse history of Britain based on Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*.⁴⁰ Similarly, the order of *The Canterbury Tales* has been shuffled and reshuffled countless times to suit particular, often time-specific conceptions of the poet’s theme and meaning. In the fifteenth century, for example, the text was called upon to help stabilise the precarious Lancastrian

³⁷ For a fuller account of Jean’s comments on the ‘very strange’ tale, see Paul Strohm, ‘Jean of Angoulême: A Fifteenth-Century Reader of Chaucer’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 72 (1971), 69-76; see also Strohm, ‘Chaucer’s Fifteenth-Century Audience’, p. 114.

³⁸ For more on medieval ideas of the poet’s *oeuvre*, to which the fragments were just as important as complete copies of texts: see Keith Busby and Christopher Kleinhenz, ‘Medieval French and Italian Literature: Towards a Manuscript History’, *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*, ed. by Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 215-242 (p. 221).

³⁹ For more on how scribes were motivated by completeness and intelligibility, see A. S. G. Edwards, ‘Middle English Literature’, in *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research*, ed. by D. C. Greetham (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995), pp. 184-203 (p. 184); see also Stinson, p. 118-19.

⁴⁰ The scribe of MS A (Paris, BnF, fr. 794), also thirteenth century, conversely framed the *Brut* with Chrétien’s romances, *Erec* to *Yvain* before Wace, and *Le Conte du Graal* along with the Short Redaction of the First Continuation and the Second Continuation: see Hinton, *The Conte du Graal Cycle*, pp. 246-9.

regime and promote the English language as part of a growing nationalism during the more tumultuous days of the Hundred Years War; in addition, as an English text ‘committed to [...] religious orthodoxy’, it offered a timely response to the propaganda of the Lollards, who used homely English as a tool in their quest to reform Christianity.⁴¹ But in the immediate aftermath of Chaucer’s death, the text did not exist as a single unified entity, and was in a state of total disarray, having been apparently retouched by the poet right up until his death.⁴² The early process of redaction likely fell to his son and, later, speaker of parliament, Thomas Chaucer, who would have been tasked with organising the commercially troublesome pile of loose leaves, rough and working drafts into the relatively coherent manuscripts produced in the fifteenth century, including the Ellesmere manuscript, which is generally considered to be most authoritative; for him, the completion of *The Canterbury Tales* may have become a political necessity.⁴³

This impulse towards the creation of ‘whole’ texts and narratives is only one side of the story, however. Though some redactors and compilers clearly wanted to deliver a volume with at least the appearance of completeness to the medieval public, unfinished texts were not ‘forgotten’: audiences paid attention to unfinished texts, and there was an appreciation of their cultural potential. At least some medieval poets seemed to recognise this. Chaucer, for instance, ensured *Sir Thopas* and more intriguingly still, as Chapter 5 argues, the fragment of *The Squire’s Tale* would be included in the grander scheme of the *Tales*. Other writers, like the early continuators of *Le Conte du Graal* – who wrote more than twenty thousand lines between them without bringing the unfinished romance to an end – either consciously chose

⁴¹ *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. by John M. Bowers (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute of Publications, 1992), p. 2; see also Derek Pearsall, ‘The Idea of Englishness in the Fifteenth Century’, in *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. by Helen Cooney (Dublin and Portland, Ore.: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 15-27.

⁴² Bowers, *Fifteenth-Century Continuations*, p. 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4; see also Strohm, ‘Chaucer’s Fifteenth-Century Audience’, p. 103 ff.

inconclusiveness, or succumbed to the apparently powerful allure of interminable narrative continuation at the expense of completion. These striking, and diachronic deviations from the formulae laid out by the medieval rhetoricians, who consistently instruct poets to devise strong closure for their works, whether through formal devices or concordance of beginning and end, are the primary impetus for this study, and shape its various concerns and points of engagement, which I will outline in the following section.

0.2 The Mechanics and Value of Unfinished and Unresolved Texts

The central thesis of this study is that completion, in all the material, textual, narratological, formal and thematic senses of the word, is not essential to the meaning, value or discursive operation of romance in the Middle Ages; engagement with these texts is exclusive from any need to see them completed, and unfinished works of romance literature have distinct functions from complete works in the literary tradition.⁴⁴ Equally important to the arguments developed in the following chapters is the observation that the process of finishing a medieval romance narrative, achieving completion and closure for the formal and thematic structures, is both cumulative and complex. As the study of *Erec et Enide* in the first chapter shows, ‘our experience of a poem is not a series of continual frustrations or disappointments that are resolved only at the conclusion of the work’; rather, closure is an impression accrued through smaller moments of return and reunion, which are essentially deferrals of the final narrative resolution, something that medieval writers understood as well as their modern counterparts.⁴⁵ Consequently, there are varying types of incompleteness and inconclusiveness: just as the business of completion is not limited to the concluding portion or closing boundary

⁴⁴ We know from the practice of continuation (when leading to completion) that at least some readers did want to see the texts completed.

⁴⁵ See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 3-4, 223; McGerr, p. 19.

of the text, what is commonly understood to be ‘the end’, and must take account of the entire structure of the work, formal points and thematic moments of unfinishedness might arise throughout a text; unfinishedness is not simply the result of an omission or interruption of the closing lines.⁴⁶

Some medieval romances, including *Le Conte du Graal*, *The Squire’s Tale* and *Sir Thopas*, have no recognisable end whatsoever. These poems might break off *in medias res*, as in *Le Conte du Graal*, which ceases just as Gawain’s envoy delivers an urgent request for the presence of the Arthurian court at his impending combat, and *The Squire’s Tale*, which stops abruptly after a detailed series of projections about the content and direction of the remaining narrative. Notably, while these works ‘terminate’ mid-narrative, they do so on a completed couplet. In contrast, the host of the pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales* interrupts *Sir Thopas* halfway through a verse line; this line also happens to be a stock opening phrase (‘Til on a day –’; VII. 918), which explicitly announces a new development in the tale. In all these cases, then, the closing lines cannot be said to lay any of the groundwork for ending or even gesture towards it, and there are no signals that the ending is just around the corner or even within reach.⁴⁷ On the contrary, all three are quite forthright about the expanse of material that remains to be narrated: there are tensions still to be resolved, enemy knights and giants to be defeated, further stories of birds and eastern nobility to be heard, and elf queens to be located. In these texts, the medieval *Erwartungshorizont* has not been met.⁴⁸ Significantly,

⁴⁶ For more on this topic, see McGerr, p. 19; Smith, pp. 25-6; Michaela Paashe Grudin, ‘Discourse and Closure in the Canterbury Tales’, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 164-182; in relation to this, since the 1980s, critics have grown increasingly sceptical about the ‘totalising powers of organization’ associated with closure: see D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. xiii-xiv.

⁴⁷ All references are to Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor, 2nd edn (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012).

⁴⁸ This concept, coined by Hans Robert Jauss, is explored in the context of romance by Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, *Der Arthurische Versroman von Chrétien bis Froissart: Zur Geschichte einer Gattung* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1980); see also Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart*, trans. by Margaret Middleton

Keith Busby points out, Chrétien's readers are unlikely to have had the same horizon of expectations that later generations like Chaucer's developed.⁴⁹ Leaving aside the tricky issue of expectations, the anticipations and projections present in the unfinished works of both poets nevertheless themselves create a sense of thematic, as well as formal, unfinishedness, and no efforts are made within the texts to conceal this fact.

Yet these sorts of projections, loose ends and outstanding issues are not only present at the end of a text. Indeed, especially in the romances without ends, but also in those that have a recognisable conclusion, 'open brackets' like these may stack up across the narrative and, if they are not closed within the bounds of the text, become points of incompleteness. A romance may secure formal closure, but leave loose ends throughout the narrative, introduce an element that is not followed up or explained, create expectations for eventualities through narrative promises that are never fulfilled, neglect to reconcile major themes or characters, or may simply leave unresolved tension in the closing lines. The Arthurian romances written by Chrétien in the time between *Erec* and *Le Conte du Graal* fall under this last type: *Cligès*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain* all achieve formal closure but cultivate a thematic inconclusiveness in the closing lines. Some romances, like *The Knight's Tale*, which, Chapter 4 argues, is partly about the impossibility of closing literary texts off to reinterpretation and *mouvance*, may implicitly raise the issue of openness throughout the narrative.⁵⁰

Because romances that operate in these ways consciously or unconsciously engage the reader in a search for meaning and narrative details, they are, despite delivering well-defined endings, unresolved, interpretively 'open' texts. Most romances will leave some minor points

and Roger Middleton (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); see also Hans Robert Jauss, 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', trans. by Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History*, 2.1 (1970), 7-37.

⁴⁹ Keith Busby, 'The Characters and the Setting', in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, vol. 1, ed. by Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly and Keith Busby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), pp. 67-8.

⁵⁰ *Mouvance* is the term used by Paul Zumthor to designate the high degree of instability in medieval textual traditions, an 'interplay between variant readings and reworkings': Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 44.

of indeterminacy, or may even leave certain smaller questions unanswered, but it is when this approach to narrative becomes a conspicuous or defining quality of a text that it might confidently be called unresolved. Of course, because textual issues of resolution and closure are experienced by readers in ways specific to their historical and cultural moment, it is important to bear in mind the potential discrepancy between modern judgements as to whether a medieval text is sufficiently closed and what medieval readers might have thought, especially since some of the contemporary audience would have conducted their evaluations of closure via oral transmission at one remove from the text.⁵¹ However, the reception of these texts both now and then as unfinished suggests there is at least some commonality between the medieval and modern perception of textual completeness and resolution.

At this point, I should say something about the way I have been using the terms unfinished, incomplete, unresolved, and inconclusive. To be clear, for the purposes of this study, an unresolved medieval romance supplies formal closure through the construction of an endpoint, using a prayer, exemplum or any of the other devices outlined earlier, but is either thematically or narratologically inconclusive (or both) at the end and possibly at other points throughout the work. The unfinished medieval romance, on the other hand, has neither formal nor thematic closure nor a concluding part, and may also manifest thematic and narratological moments of inconclusiveness at earlier moments in the narrative. The term 'unfinished' implies that the poet stopped writing before they reached the end point for some reason, whether this is attributed to environmental factors like decay or fire, human factors such a scribal redaction or negligence, or a change of circumstance resulting from a change of patronage or profession, conflict, money, or simply because they could not or did not want

⁵¹ For a more detailed discussion of the inherent subjectivity of interpretations of closure in medieval literature, see Smith, p. 2; see also Katherine Marie Olley, 'Continuing Without Closure: Analysing Irresolution in the Old Norse Hildir Legend', *Neophilologus*, 102.3 (2018), 421-37 (p. 423); J. Hillis Miller also exposes the degree to which our sense of closure is culturally and historically contingent, see J. Hillis Miller, 'Narrative and History', *English Literary History*, 41 (1974), 45-73.

to finish. The term ‘incomplete’, on the other hand, suggests the text in question may have once been ‘finished’ but is now missing parts from the beginning, middle, or end due to loss or damage as a result of one of these factors.

While there is a clear distinction, then, both ‘unresolved’ and ‘unfinished’ types implicitly or explicitly leave the reader to fill in the ‘gaps’ and impose their own closure, whether this solicitation comes at the end or from the mid-point onwards. The textual foregrounding of reader-response activity is not typically associated with medieval romance. Although Hans Robert Jauss discusses medieval romance in his essay on genre, other prominent reception theorists, like Wolfgang Iser, focus on texts of the modern and postmodern eras, such as the work of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.⁵² However, from the widespread reception of the unresolved and unfinished works of Chrétien and Chaucer, and the fact that the literary efforts to expand these works continued long after their initial dissemination and circulation, we can gauge that texts with ‘gaps to be filled’ were part of a pre-modern aesthetic that was enjoyed by the medieval public as much as they are in the present day.

Many unfinished texts are alive and well in the public imagination, but the ‘popular’ works of incomplete verse and prose generally date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards: Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*, John Keats’s *Hyperion*, Charles Dickens’s *Edwin Drood*, *The Mysterious Stranger* by Mark Twain and Jane Austen’s unfinished novel *Sanditon*, which enjoyed recent public interest after the story was ‘completed’ for a television adaptation on the BBC. There is a general assumption that these texts are unfinished, not due to any intention of the author or

⁵² Hans Robert Jauss, ‘Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature’, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 76-109; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); in fact, Iser does mention both Chrétien and Chaucer, but only in brief, pp. 40-1, 77-8; elsewhere he suggests that the deliberate use of unresolved ambiguities to encourage the reader to reinterpret a text is a development of modern prose fiction (p. 4).

poet, but rather because of forces outside their control, such as death, or because they were continually working on the piece in question. In fact it seems that in some cases, notably Byron, the writer was simply unsure how to finish the work.⁵³ The common preconceptions around the production of these texts stand in stark contrast to the popular beliefs about some of the unfinished texts that have emerged in the postmodern era. Because of a growing acceptance of, and, even, appetite for unfinishedness, many incomplete works of the last century have developed a cult following or have been lauded as masterworks because of, not despite, their fragmentary state: the unfinished writings of Franz Kafka and *The Pale King* by David Foster Wallace, for instance, have met with critical acclaim. In addition, deliberately fragmented literary works have been hailed as avant-garde and experimental: James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, the final line of which is the beginning of the first, B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, the 'book in a box' whose chapters can be rearranged at will, and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* by Joan Lindsay, who excised the revelatory final chapter at the suggestion of her editor.⁵⁴

That is not to say that the intention of the author always plays a role in the incomplete text of the modern age: many works of popular fiction, such as the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* have been continued or completed posthumously, and, in some cases, such work has been done without the author's blessing.⁵⁵ Moreover, with the rise

⁵³ Writing in February 1821, Byron himself implies that he is unsure as to what will happen later in the later cantos of *Don Juan*, or whether he will even complete it: 'To how many cantos this may extend, I know not, nor whether (even if I live) I shall complete it; but this was my notion. I meant to have made him a Cavalier Servente in Italy, and a cause for divorce in England [...] But I had not quite fixed whether to make him end in hell, or in an unhappy marriage: not knowing which would be the severest': see Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron: Complete in One Volume*, ed. by Thomas Moore (London: John Murray, 1837), p. 652, note 4.

⁵⁴ Despite the original editor Sandra Forbes's notion that the ending to the story should remain ambiguous, the last chapter was published posthumously under the title *The Secret of Hanging Rock* in 1987: John Taylor, 'Introduction' and 'The Invisible Foundation Stone', in *The Secret of Hanging Rock: Joan Lindsay's Final Chapter*, ed. by John Taylor (London: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1987), pp. 2-18.

⁵⁵ Acceptance of posthumous completion and continuation seems to vary among modern and contemporary authors; Franz Kafka asked for his unpublished works to be burnt after his death, but

of new formats, increasing demand for television and film adaptations of literary works, and as the commercial rights and scheduling pressures of production companies have begun to play a larger role in cultural production, some works of fiction, like George R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*, are being continued and completed before the author has finished the writing project.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that both 'types' of incompleteness, intentional and unintentional, are accepted as equally legitimate explanations for unfinishedness testifies to how our thinking about 'what the author might have intended' has shifted since the Romantic and Victorian periods, and testifies to the postmodern taste for unfinishedness. Indeed, in the postmodern age, even those who do not write unfinished or fragmentary works express an interest in incompleteness, or simply leave things unresolved: Jorge Luis Borges's 'Garden of Forking Paths', Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying Lot of 49*, and Wallace's *Infinite Jest* all resist closure in some way. Because of the prevalence of literary forms like interior monologue and free verse in poetry, in which the resources of closure are minimal and the ending is often incidental to meaning, there is an assumption that this is a distinctly modern phenomenon.⁵⁷

contrary to his wishes they were published by his main beneficiary Max Brod, see Gerhard Neumann, 'Script, Work and Published Form: Franz Kafka's Incomplete Text', *Studies in Bibliography*, 41 (1988), 77-99 (pp. 78-9); Terry Pratchett had the hard drive containing his unfinished works flattened by a steam roller, see Stephanie Convery, 'Terry Pratchett's Unfinished Novels Destroyed by Steamroller', *The Guardian*, 30 August 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/30/terry-pratchett-unfinished-novels-destroyed-streamroller>> [accessed 28 February 2020]; Stieg Larsson's partner has said he would have been 'furious' that his *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series has been continued after his death, see 'Stieg Larsson's partner blasts trilogy sequel', *The Local*, 27 March 2015 <<https://www.thelocal.se/20150327/stieg-larssons-partner-slates-millennium-sequel>> [accessed 28 February 2020]; in contrast, *Jack Reacher* author Lee Child has already begun writing novels with his brother, who is set to continue the books after Child's death, see Paraic O'Donnell, 'End of the Real Jack Reacher? Lee Child Passes Pen to His Brother', *The Irish Times*, 20 January 2020 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/end-of-the-real-jack-reacher-lee-child-passes-pen-to-his-brother-1.4145437>> [accessed 28 February 2020].

⁵⁶ Martin was recently quoted as saying that his readers know 'an ending' but not 'the ending' which suggests that alternative endings to the same story are once again being accepted by the wider public, as they were in the Middle Ages: see Martin Scholz, 'Die Leute kennen ein Ende – nicht das Ende', *Welt*, 19 January 2020 <<https://www.welt.de/kultur/literarischewelt/plus205141110/George-R-R-Martin-Game-Of-Thrones-haette-im-Kino-enden-sollen.html>> [accessed 28 February 2020].

⁵⁷ Smith summarises approaches to closure through the ages as follows, 'closure in Renaissance poetry tended to be strong and secure [...] in Romantic poetry to be weak, and in modern poetry it has become minimal': see Smith, pp. 233-4.

However, as this study will argue, textual incompleteness is not exclusively characteristic of the postmodern aesthetic.

In some ways, unfinished and fragmentary texts were better suited to the traditions of textual transmission in the Middle Ages. In manuscript culture, texts were undoubtedly more fluid: books were continually made, unmade, and reassembled with accretions and deletions, making a more receptive and forgiving environment for unfinished texts than the print culture of the twenty-first century.⁵⁸ Indeed, the very format of the medieval ‘book’ tests our notions of material permanence and finality. It is not that medieval textuality is anti-teleological or anti-closural: on the whole, it directs readers towards ‘a point of culmination, establish[es] goals, and arouse[s] expectations’.⁵⁹ Yet when individual texts became part of an ensemble in a larger volume, to which leaves or parts of texts could be attached, substituted for rival versions, or from which they could be torn at the snap of a scribal finger, their words and lines changed or scribbled over, they could never truly be finished; in a real and practical sense, these unstable and adjustable ‘books’ were not whole objects in the same way as a printed book.⁶⁰

Indeed, both Chrétien and Chaucer express concerns about the power of later writers and scribes to add to, alter and misinterpret the sense of their works: Chrétien warns in the epilogue to *Yvain* that any further additions to the story would be a ‘mançonge’ (lie) and Chaucer attributes anything displeasing in his oeuvre to his ‘unkonnyng’ rather than his ‘wyl’.⁶¹ However, this cultural circumstance also meant that unfinished literary texts had a

⁵⁸ On the way in which modern printed editions crystallise the impulse towards perfect, whole texts in contrast to the ‘extraordinary, evidential plurality’ of manuscript culture, see Stinson, p. 132.

⁵⁹ See Smith, pp. 238-9.

⁶⁰ For more on the ‘constant flux’ of the manuscript book, see Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen, ‘Introduction: Manuscripts and Cultural History’, in *The Medieval Manuscript Book*, p. 5.

⁶¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Champion, 1978), p. 207, l. 6808; Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘Chaucer’s Retraction’, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor, 2nd edn (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012), p. 461.

higher likelihood of survival because, even if they were picked up by scribes and redactors with a proclivity for complete texts, they could be inserted into miscellanies or anthologies, and arranged to fit various cultural narratives. When the French romances were subsumed into cycles, the ‘endpoints’, and any omissions, were automatically obscured and issues of resolution were likely overlooked; the ‘whole’ book of *Canterbury Tales* equally concealed the fragmentary nature of individual tales like the *Squire* and *Thopas*, as it does in modern editions. As John M. Bowers observes, ‘no single manuscript, not even Ellesmere, contains all the tale and links to be found in a modern edition with its scholarly confluents’.⁶²

In any case, the various unsettled questions around the finished and unfinished spaces of medieval manuscripts, and whether this kind of ‘book’ could ever be marked as finished in the context of the continual deconstruction and reconstitution of manuscripts, especially in the fifteenth century, are not the focus of this thesis. Rather, my central focus is the specific issues of composition that arise at the end of a romance narrative and in the process of finishing such texts, and the concerns and strategies that shaped both finished and unfinished works, to discover what they reveal about medieval conceptions of closure in romance. By identifying moments of inconclusiveness in finished romances and examining the responses to unfinished ones, I also seek to challenge the idea that completeness and closure are prerequisites for the beauty, cultural value, or enjoyment of medieval romance literature. There is at times a ‘dichotomy, between how aesthetic perfection is theorised and the extent to which incomplete [...] works of art are in fact valued’, and some medieval poets seemed to recognise the expressive quality of thematic inconclusiveness, narratological gaps, and unresolved tensions, and they coexisted with poets of the classical, Aristotelian persuasion.⁶³

⁶² Bowers, ‘*The Tale of Beryn* and *The Siege of Thebes*’, p. 201.

⁶³ Stinson, p. 117; see also McGerr, p. 8.

Though medieval romance is often associated with the optimistic ‘happy ending’, this is only a small part of what could happen at the end of a romance.⁶⁴ There is an appreciation of the fragmentary and inconclusive romance, even if it was not a product of intention, and as readers seek to ‘fill in the gaps’, such texts provide a space for the widening and revitalisation of generic tropes and stylistic conventions.⁶⁵ Some of this is accepted about Chaucer because of his perceived sociological aims,⁶⁶ but it is just as true of Chrétien, and the experiments in form and genre in the work of both poets are calls for imaginative and artistic engagement, even if they are underwritten by social issues. The notion of ‘organic unity’ as a criterion for the ‘best’ romances must confront the fact that the most notable and influential works of Chrétien and Chaucer are their unfinished poems.

0.3 Critics on Chrétien, Chaucer, Continuation and Completion

The unfinished poems of Chrétien de Troyes and Geoffrey Chaucer are among the works that have generated widespread academic interest in the medieval ‘poetics of continuation’, and several critics have investigated the body of materials that issued from incomplete texts and the cultural conditions that fuelled this literary practice.⁶⁷ Most recently, in *The Continuations*

⁶⁴ Highlighting what they see as the unusually ‘mal’ end of *Mélusine*, Jacques Le Goff and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie write that ‘Une des caractéristiques du conte merveilleux, c’est la happy end’: see Jacques Le Goff and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, ‘Mélusine Maternelle et Défricheuse’, *Annales*, 26 (1971), 587-622 (p. 598); Spearing also finds that there is a ‘strong tendency of Middle English Romance to have a happy ending’: see Spearing, p. 112.

⁶⁵ See also Parker, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Which is to say, the horizontal social arrangement of Chaucer’s band of pilgrims, reflective of the new post-feudal, commercial and secular medieval audience of the fourteenth century, leads to fragmentation of the tales within the frame narrative as the various pilgrims, such as the Miller and the Reeve, clash: for more on this subject, see Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), *passim*.

⁶⁷ Blumenfeld-Kosinski discusses this concept at length, pp. 437-47; see also Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, p. 8; further work on this topic in French romance includes, *Continuations: Essays on Medieval French Literature and Language in Honor of John L. Grigsby*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy and Gloria Torrini-Roblin (Birmingham, Ala.: Summa Publications, 1989); Keith Busby, ‘Sir Perceval of Galles, *Le Conte du Graal*, and *La Continuation-Gauvain*: The Methods of an English Adaptor’, *Études anglaises*, 31.2 (1978), 198-202; *Les Manuscrits de Chrétien de Troyes: The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. by Keith Busby, Terry Nixon, Alison Stones and Lori Walters (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993); Brigitta Vargyas, ‘Nuit et peurs nocturne dans le *Perceval* de Chrétien de Troyes et

of Chrétien's 'Perceval' (2012), Leah Tether looks into the processes involved in actually producing a continuation, supplies an innovative reading of the poetic features at the ends of Chrétien's romances, and considers the suitability of the various 'extensions' and 'endings' written to *Perceval*.⁶⁸ Thomas Hinton offers an equally detailed study of the value and function of these endings in *The Conte du Graal Cycle* (2012), which explores how the verse continuations operate as both a centripetal and centrifugal 'cycle'.⁶⁹ These two monographs were preceded by Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner's book *Chrétien Continued* (2009), which examines the dialogue between the unfinished Grail romance and its continuations, and reframes the corpus as a product of 'collective authorship'.⁷⁰ The only earlier book-length studies of the Old French continuations were carried out by Pierre Gallais and Corin Corley in the 1980s, on the First and Second Continuation respectively, but they did not look at them in parallel with Chrétien's text and the continuations; Alexandre Leupin also wrote an important piece on 'La faille et l'écriture dans les continuations du Perceval' (1982).⁷¹ The

ses continuations (cycle du Graal en vers', *La joie des cours: Études médiévales et humanistes*, ed. by Krisztina Horváth (Budapest: Elte Eötvös Kiadó, 2012), pp. 139-148; in relation to Chaucer's works, Brian S. Lee, 'Continuation of the Cokes Tale', *Interpretation and Performance: Essays for Alan Gaylord*, ed. by Susan Yager and Elise E. Morse-Gagné (Provo, UT: Chaucer Studio Press, 2013), pp. 199-210; Andrew Higl, *Playing The Canterbury Tales: The Continuations and Additions* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012); Peter Conrad, *To be Continued: Four Stories and Their Survival* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁶⁸ Leah Tether, *The Continuations of Chrétien's Perceval: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

⁶⁹ Thomas Hinton, *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien de Troyes's Perceval, the Continuations, and French Arthurian Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

⁷⁰ Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued: A Study of the 'Conte du Graal' and its Verse Continuations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷¹ Pierre Gallais, *L'Imaginaire d'un romancier français de la fin du XIIIe siècle: Description raisonnée, comparée et commentée de la Continuation-Gauvain*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988-89); Corin F. V. Corley, *The Second Continuation of the Old French Perceval: A Critical and Lexicographical Study* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1987); there is an earlier unpublished doctoral thesis by Hilmar Wrede, which looks more at the manuscript tradition than the substance of the continuations themselves: see Hilmar Wrede, 'Die Fortsetzer des Graalromans Chrestiens von Troyes' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Göttingen, 1952); and an incomplete study of *Le Conte du Graal* and the First Continuation by Guy Vial: see Guy Vial, *Le Conte du Graal: Sens et unité: La Première Continuation: Textes et contenu* (Geneva: Droz, 1978); Alexandre Leupin, 'La faille et l'écriture dans les continuations du Perceval', *Le Moyen Age*, 88 (1982), 237-269.

corpus as a whole was made more accessible by Nigel Bryant's new edition in translation, with all four main continuations as well as both prologues (2015).⁷²

Some Chrétien studies, such as Ad Putter's 'Story Line and Story Shape' (2004), Richard Trachsler's *Clôtures du cycle arthurien* (1996), D. H. Green's *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (1979), as well as Keith Busby's 'Methods of an English Adaptor' (1978), consider his unfinished romance alongside adaptations and descendants, including *Sir Percyvell of Gales*, the prose or Didot *Perceval* and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Similarly, Rupert T. Pickens, Keith Busby and Andrea Williams's chapter on 'Perceval and the grail' in *The Arthur of the French* (2006) looks at the entire corpus alongside Robert de Boron and *Perlesvaus*.⁷³ In a forthcoming study, Ad Putter will survey the influence of Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romances and the *Perceval* continuations over the literature of medieval England and Scotland.⁷⁴

Bruckner's other influential study on *Shaping Romance* (1993) addresses closure and open-endedness in twelfth-century romance more generally; in the chapter on Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la charrette*, she argues that its paradoxical exposition of courtly love 'both refuses and invites further continuation' because of Godefroi de Leigni's epilogue.⁷⁵ David F. Hult popularised the view of Godefroi as a 'fiction' of Chrétien in 'Author/Narrator/Speaker'

⁷² Chrétien de Troyes, *The Complete Story of the Grail: Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval and its Continuations*, trans. by Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015).

⁷³ Ad Putter, 'Story Line and Story Shape in *Sir Percyvell of Gales* and Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*', in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. by Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 171-96; Richard Trachsler, *Clôtures du cycle arthurien: Étude et Textes*, Publications Romanes et Françaises, 215 (Geneva: Droz, 1996); D. H. Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); also, David C. Fowler, 'The *Conte du Graal* and *Sir Perceval of Galles*', *The Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society*, 12 (1975), 5-20; Rupert T. Pickens, Keith Busby and Andrea Williams, 'Perceval and the Grail: The Continuations, Robert de Boron and *Perlesvaus*', in *The Arthur of the French: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval French and Occitan Literature*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Karen Pratt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 215-73.

⁷⁴ Ad Putter, 'The Popularity of the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes and the Continuations in Medieval England and Scotland' (Confidential Festschrift, 2020).

⁷⁵ Matilda Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, p. 7.

(1989), which generated considerable debate as to whether the ending was in fact a continuation or not.⁷⁶ Hult's study of resistance to closure in the *Roman de la Rose* (1984), along with Alice Colby-Hall's discussion of the end of *Le Bel Inconnu* (1984) helped to standardise the view that there is ample potential for expressive inconclusiveness in the romance genre.⁷⁷ A more recent article by Katherine Marie Olley, 'Continuing Without Closure' (2018), shows just how widespread this tendency towards inconclusiveness was across medieval literature, in this case, the Old Norse Hildir legend.⁷⁸ Douglas Kelly provides a thorough analysis of the end of *Lancelot* in his seminal monograph *Sens and Conjointure in Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (1966).⁷⁹ His work redressed the historic arguments made by Gaston Paris and Wendelin Foerster that *Lancelot* was irredeemably incoherent, and instead demonstrated its 'carefully constructed structural foundation'.⁸⁰ Wendy Knepper's more recent *Theme and Thesis* (1996) offers an interpretation of the ending as a 'recoil movement', and Emmanuèle Baumgartner looks at post-Chrétien literary references to both *Lancelot* and *Yvain*.⁸¹

Prominent Chrétien scholars Jean Frappier, Leslie Topsfield, Norris J. Lacy, and Peter Haidu all analyse the endings to some or all of Chrétien's individual Arthurian romances in their broader discussions of his work in *L'Homme et l'œuvre* (1957, 1982), *Chrétien de Troyes: A Study of the Arthurian Romances* (1981), *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay on Narrative Art* (1980), and *Aesthetic Distance: Irony and Comedy in Cligès and*

⁷⁶ David F. Hult, 'Author/Narrator/Speaker: The Voice of Authority in Chrétien's *Charrete*', in *Discourses of Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. by Kevin Brownlee and Walter Stephens (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), pp. 76-96.

⁷⁷ David F. Hult, 'Closed Quotations: The Speaking Voice in *Roman de la Rose*', *Yale French Studies*, 67 (1984), 248-69; Alice M. Colby-Hall, 'Frustration and Fulfillment', 120-134.

⁷⁸ Katherine Marie Olley, 'Continuing Without Closure', 421-37.

⁷⁹ F. Douglas Kelly, *Sens and Conjointure in the 'Chevalier de la Charrette'* (The Hague; Paris: Mouton, 1966).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁸¹ Wendy Knepper, 'Theme and Thesis in *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*', *Arthuriana*, 6.2 (1996), 54-68; Emmanuèle Baumgartner, *Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain, Lancelot, la charrette et le lion*, *Études littéraires*, 38 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992).

Perceval (1968), respectively.⁸² In addition, Maurice Accarie's 'L'éternel départ de Lancelot: Roman clos et roman ouvert chez Chrétien de Troyes' (1979) studies the progression from the closed and ordered 'conte narratif' to the open-ended 'conte moral' or more mystical quest romance in Chrétien's work, and Elspeth Kennedy (1991) suggests that the ends of Chrétien's romances 'are left resolved on one level but perhaps unresolved on another'.⁸³ Donald Maddox's *Structuring and Sacring* (1978), which explores how 'conjointure' operates in *Erec et Enide*, has also helped to situate my readings of the formal and thematic structures of all Chrétien's poems.⁸⁴ Perhaps the most thought-provoking work of recent years is Peggy McCracken's chapter on 'Forgetting to Conclude' (2011), which uses Lacanian terminology to explore how earlier concepts return 'in the moment of concluding' (or failing to conclude) *Cligès* and *Le Conte du Graal*, argues that arbitrary and inconclusive narrative choices are as important as elegant composition and coherence, and suggests that incompleteness is present in Chrétien's romance *oeuvre* from the beginning.⁸⁵ However, there is no similarly detailed, theoretically innovative analysis of what Chrétien's approach to ending in his finished romances, and the continuations of *Le Conte du Graal*, can tell us about the composition of his unfinished ones. This study will build upon the existing scholarship, reading all of Chrétien's Arthurian romances and the continuations in dialogue with both medieval and modern theory.

⁸² Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: L'Homme et l'Oeuvre*, *Connaissance des Lettres*, No. 50 (Paris: Hatier-Boivin, 1957); Leslie T. Topsfield, *Chrétien de Troyes: A Study of the Arthurian Romances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Norris J. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay on Narrative Art* (Leiden: Brill, 1980); Peter Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance: Irony and Comedy in Cligès and Perceval* (Geneva: Droz, 1968).

⁸³ Maurice Accarie, 'L'éternel départ de Lancelot: Roman clos et roman ouvert chez Chrétien de Troyes', *Mélanges de langue et de littérature médiévales offerts à Alice Planche*, ed. by Ambroise Queffélec and Maurice Accarie (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1984), pp. 1-20; Elspeth Kennedy, 'Failure in Arthurian Romance', *Medium Ævum*, 60.1 (1991), 16-32 (p. 30).

⁸⁴ Donald Maddox, *Structuring and Sacring: The Systematic Kingdom in Chrétien's Erec et Enide* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1978).

⁸⁵ Peggy McCracken, 'Forgetting to Conclude', in *Thinking Through Chrétien de Troyes* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 139-62 (p. 139).

Numerous studies explore the equally rich afterlife of *The Canterbury Tales*, and tend to take a special interest in the immediate responses of the fifteenth century, the influence of Chaucer in the Renaissance, and the activities of the early scribes. Daniel J. Pinti's edited collection, *Writing After Chaucer* (1998), which includes essays by Paul Strohm, A. C. Spearing, and John M. Bowers, considers the varied responses to the perceived omissions in *The Canterbury Tales* in the fifteenth century, as does Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen's slightly earlier collection, *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry* (1991), and Andrew Taylor's chapter on the 'Alternative Endings' to the *Tales* (1998).⁸⁶ In addition, Bowers' edition of the *Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions* (1992) illuminates the various extensions to Chaucer's *Tales* and 'connective tissue' contributed by later medieval hands.⁸⁷ A. S. G. Edwards (2010) explores Chaucerian modes and language in fifteenth-century poetry, as does Seth Lerer (1993), who considers how allusions to the *Tales* in the work of John Lydgate and other poets of the late fifteenth century established Chaucer as the patriarch of English verse, and suggests the 'oppressed' figures of the Squire and Thopas resonated with his imitators.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Daniel J. Pinti (New York: Garland, 1998); *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen (London: King's College Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1991); Andrew Taylor, 'The Curious Eye and the Alternative Endings of *The Canterbury Tales*', in *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, ed. by Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg (London: University Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 34-52.

⁸⁷ *Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. by John M. Bowers.

⁸⁸ A. S. G. Edwards, 'Poetic Language in the Fifteenth Century', in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 520-37; Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); for the reception of Chaucer's wider oeuvre in the fifteenth century, see Paul Strohm, 'Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Writers as Readers of Chaucer', *Genres, Themes, and Images in English Literature from the Fourteenth to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), pp. 90-104; Karla Knutson, 'Constructing Chaucer in the Fifteenth Century: The Inherent Anti-feminism of the Paternal Paradigm', in *Proceedings of the 14th Northern Plains Conference on Earlier British Literature, April 7-8, 2006*, ed. by Bruce E. Brandt and Michael S. Nagy (Brookings, S. Dak.: English Department, South Dakota State University, 2006), pp. 95-106.

More scholars still explore Renaissance continuations of the unfinished tales: John Burrow (1991) looks at how *Thopas* and the *Squire* were handled by John Milton, Edmund Spenser, and Chaucer's other early modern admirers; in Theresa M. Krier's *Refiguring Chaucer in the Renaissance* (1998), Craig A. Berry argues that Spenser's revival of the unfinished *Squire's Tale* allows him to defer resolution in the same way as Chaucer, and most recently, in 'Spenser, Chaucer and the Renaissance *Squire's Tale*' (2019), Jeff Espie suggests that Spenser used the model of creative 'self-revision' Chaucer developed in *The Squire's Tale* to revise the later version of *The Faerie Queene*.⁸⁹ Following Germaine Dempster's important work on medieval 'editors' of Chaucer, recent scholarship has further elucidated the extent to which these redactors glossed over gaps in the order of tales.⁹⁰ Both Andrew Higl (2012) and Simon Horobin (2013) show these scribes habitually playing around with the 'game' of the unfinished poem, and trace the continual relocation of 'problem' tales like the fragment of *The Squire's Tale*.⁹¹

Greater critical interest in the rich legacy of the *Tales* was naturally precipitated by an increased awareness of the issue of textual closure in Chaucer's *oeuvre* from the 1980s and 1990s onwards.⁹² Many scholars have looked at the complex approach to ending and resistance to closure across Chaucer's poetic works, which manifests as 'a spectrum, from the

⁸⁹ John Burrow, 'Poems Without Endings', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 13 (1991), 17-37; Craig A. Berry, "'Sundrie Doubts': Vulnerable Understanding and Dubious Origins in Spenser's Continuation of the *Squire's Tale*", in *Refiguring Chaucer in the Renaissance*, ed. by Theresa M. Krier (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), pp. 106-27; Jeff Espie, 'Spenser, Chaucer, and the Renaissance *Squire's Tale*', *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, 33.1 (2019), 133-60.

⁹⁰ Germaine Dempster, 'The Fifteenth-Century Editors of the *Canterbury Tales* and the Problem of Tale Order', *Modern Language Association*, 64.5 (1949), 1123-42.

⁹¹ Andrew Higl, *Playing the 'Canterbury Tales'*; Simon Horobin, 'Compiling the *Canterbury Tales* in Fifteenth-Century Manuscripts', *The Chaucer Review*, 47.4 (2013), 372-89.

⁹² Critics began to highlight the 'surprising' and 'unsatisfactory' nature of Chaucer's endings, including those in the *Canterbury Tales*: see Elizabeth Salter, *Fourteenth-Century English Poetry: Contexts and Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 116; Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 208; Barry A. Windeatt, 'Literary Structures in Chaucer', *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. by Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 195-212 (p. 195).

fragment to the ambiguous ending designed to invite glossing'.⁹³ The 'discontinuous' ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the interrupted dream visions, and the *Retraction* all indicate that Chaucer toyed with medieval conventions of closure in various ways.⁹⁴ Indeed, few medieval scholars would now contest the idea that his poems express a penchant for thematic inconclusiveness.⁹⁵ This is not to say that his unfinished poems, the ones that break off midstream, should be considered deliberate fragments. In his important lecture on *Poems Without Endings* (1991), Burrow takes issue with modern critical arguments that *The Squire's Tale* and *Cook's Tale*, along with the *House of Fame* and *Legend of Good Women*, are intentionally cut-off; he surveys the textual history, from manuscript copies to adaptations, to show that such modern opinions are the result of a post-Romantic 'taste for the fragmentary' and 'modern suspicion of closure'.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, Rosemarie P. McGerr's study of *Chaucer's Open Books* (1998) demonstrates that all of Chaucer's major works 'inscribe the problem of reading conclusively on many levels', and shows how resistance to closure in his poems precludes unequivocal interpretations and undermines single-voiced discourse.⁹⁷ V. A. Kolve, Donald Howard, Derek Pearsall, Lee Patterson, James Dean, as well as David J. Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley's collection of essays, *Closure in the Canterbury Tales*, all address issues of completion and closure in the larger poem, and critics like Jim Casey (2006) and Timothy Stinson (2017) have investigated how scribes handled the problem of *The Cook's Tale*.⁹⁸ But

⁹³ Stinson, p. 120.

⁹⁴ For a fuller discussion of the major Chaucerian works in this context, see McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*.

⁹⁵ It was fashionable at one stage to argue for the structural closure and thematic unity of the *Tales*, a trend started by Ralph Baldwin's arguments for the unity of the text in Ralph Baldwin, *The Unity of 'The Canterbury Tales'* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955).

⁹⁶ Burrow, pp. 34-5.

⁹⁷ McGerr, p. 2; see also Rosemarie P. McGerr, 'Medieval Concepts of Literary Closure: Theory and Practice', *Exemplaria*, 1.1 (1989), 149-179.

⁹⁸ V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); Donald Howard, *The Idea of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Derek Pearsall, 'Pre-empting Closure in the *Canterbury Tales*:

only a select group of scholars, among them Larry Sklute (1984) and Michaela Paashe Grudin (1992), along with McGerr (1998), provide a more comprehensive discussion of how the text as a whole courts inconclusiveness and how ambiguities often overreach the ‘structural close’ of the poem, though none conduct especially close analysis of *The Squire’s Tale* or *Sir Thopas* in this context.⁹⁹ Kathryn L. Lynch and Brian S. Lee consider how the oriental (Lynch) and oral (Lee) mode of *The Squire’s Tale* makes for an open-ended narrative in contrast to the western rhetorical discipline of *The Franklin’s Tale*, and, most recently, Reena Thomas and Ethan K. Smilie (2019) explore how the tale presents a fragmented reality through its portrayal of the East and argue that Chaucer intended for the romance to be ‘incomplete’ to convey the limits of knowledge.¹⁰⁰ But none fully explores the role genre plays in shaping the text. This study will bridge these gaps in the scholarship by investigating whether the unusual treatment of romance conventions in the *Squire* and *Sir Thopas* has any bearing on their unfinished state.¹⁰¹

Old Endings, New Beginnings’, *Essays on Ricardian Literature: In Honour of J. A. Burrow*, ed. by A. J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 23-38; Lee Patterson, “‘The Parson’s Tale’ and the Quitting of the “Canterbury Tales””, *Traditio*, 34 (1978), 377-79; James Dean, ‘Dismantling the Canterbury Book’, *Modern Language Association*, 100 (1984), 746-62; *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of The Parson’s Tale*, ed. by David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2000); Jim Casey, ‘Unfinished Business: The Termination of Chaucer’s *Cook’s Tale*’, *Chaucer Review*, 41 (2006), 185-96; Stinson, ‘(In)Completeness in Middle English Literature’, 115-34.

⁹⁹ Larry Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer’s Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984); Michaela Paashe Grudin, ‘Discourse and the Problem of Closure in the *Canterbury Tales*’, *Modern Language Association*, 107 (1992), 1157-67 (p. 1159); McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books*; Gareth Lloyd Evans, ‘An Unwitting Return to the Medieval: Postmodern Literary Experiments and Middle English Textuality’, *Neophilologus*, 100 (2016), 335-44.

¹⁰⁰ Kathryn L. Lynch, ‘East Meets West in Chaucer’s Squire’s and Franklin’s Tales’, *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 530-51; Brian S. Lee, ‘The Question of Closure in Fragment V of *The Canterbury Tales*’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 22 (1992), 190-200; Reena Thomas and Ethan K. Smilie, ‘*Vitium Curiositatis* and Stereotypes in Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*’, *Mosaic*, 52 (2019), 129-45.

¹⁰¹ At the time of writing, I was not aware that Gardiner Stillwell argues that in *The Squire’s Tale*, Chaucer was torn between romance and comedy, but was forced to leave the tale unfinished because he could not get either genre going satisfactorily well enough: see Gardiner Stillwell, ‘Chaucer in Tartary’, *The Review of English Studies*, 95 (1948), 177-88.

Derek Pearsall's *The Canterbury Tales* (1985) and Helen Phillips's *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales* (2000) offer meticulous and comprehensive readings of the endings to individual tales, and their insights have been indispensable to the arguments developed in the chapters on Chaucer.¹⁰² The final part of Helen Cooper's *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (1983) and her chapter on *The Knight's Tale*, which show that the ideas at the beginning and ending of the work were neither single nor simple, are just as important to the second part of the thesis.¹⁰³ A. C. Spearing's survey of the various conventions used to end Middle English romance in 'Narrative Closure in *Troilus and Criseyde*' (1987) has proved generally helpful, as has Charles Muscatine's *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (1957), which shows how the poet was influenced by courtly conventions and helps to provide a context for the study of Chrétien and Chaucer in dialogue with one another.¹⁰⁴ There has in fact been renewed critical interest in English and French literary relations in recent times: Cynthia A. Rogers (2016) traces Chaucer's use of repetition to twelfth-century *fin'amors* lyrics and Madeleine Beth Elson (2016) examines Chaucer's engagement with French contemporaries, and suggests he may have adapted elements of their form.¹⁰⁵ But perhaps the most interesting study of the last few years is Jill Mann's essay on 'Beginning with the Ending' (2018), which argues that the play of open-endedness and closure in *The Knight's Tale* characterises human life as a 'sequence of woe and joy without end'.¹⁰⁶ That the

¹⁰² Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985); Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

¹⁰³ Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

¹⁰⁴ Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry*; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

¹⁰⁵ Cynthia A. Rogers, "'Buried in an Herte": French Poetics and the Ends of Genre in Chaucer's Complaint unto Pity', *The Chaucer Review*, 51.2 (2016), 187-208; Madeleine Beth Elson, 'Chaucer's French Sources – Literary and Codicological Play and the Author's Persona' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2016).

¹⁰⁶ Jill Mann, 'Beginning with the Ending: Narrative Techniques and their Significance in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*', in *Romance Rewritten: The Evolution of Middle English Romance*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald, Megan G. Leitch and Corinne Saunders (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 85-102 (p. 102).

incomplete *Canterbury Tales* as a whole ‘weans us away from more traditional concepts of literary closure’, must be true, and closer readings of other individual tales in this study will surely strengthen this point.¹⁰⁷

Despite the growing dialogue between medieval studies and modern theory, tentative and ambiguous narrative endings, which deliver unresolved tensions and fragmentation in place of certainties and singularities, and eschew the verification of expectations and absolutes, are still firmly associated with the inventive finesse of avant-garde modernist and experimental postmodern literature. In that highly influential lecture series *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Frank Kermode depicts modern literary plotting as the source of such closural innovations; for him it is the ‘very modern and therefore very extreme’ novel that falsifies expectations from the outset and posits ‘Rival versions of the same set of facts [...] without final reconciliation’.¹⁰⁸ Kermode uses the anti-novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet to show that this *nouveau roman* “repeats itself, bisects itself, modifies itself, contradicts itself” [...] The book makes its own unexpected, unexpectable designs’.¹⁰⁹ Yet as this thesis will show, these devices and structural tendencies are also present in Chrétien’s and Chaucer’s works and are not exclusive to ‘new novels’ like *Dans le labyrinthe*. Similarly, for Barbara Herrnstein Smith, the interrogation and fragmentation of conclusive meaning is ‘evidently’ a distinction of modern poetry.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, Smith’s evaluation of ‘terminal features’, and other signals of the end in *Poetic Closure* (1968) underpins much of the close analyses developed in the following chapters.

Considering his extensive work in medieval studies, it is surprising that Umberto Eco likewise contends that ‘open’ works of art belong to the twentieth century, and in fact only

¹⁰⁷ McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books*, p. 152

¹⁰⁸ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 18-19.

¹⁰⁹ Kermode, p. 19.

¹¹⁰ Smith, p. 233-4.

references medieval literature as an example of a closed system from which modern ‘open’ works are liberated. In *The Open Work* (1989), Eco cites the fourfold method of Scriptural exegesis – literal, moral, allegorical and anagogical – endorsed by Dante and medieval theologians like Alain of Lille and Hugh of Saint Victor as evidence that medieval fictions represent ‘a range of rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretative solutions, and these never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author’.¹¹¹ But as McGerr points out, Eco does not take into account the fact that, in the High and later Middle Ages, medieval fictions did not always reflect the doctrines of the Christian church – it is clear for example that the theme of passionate, idealised, and adulterous courtly love expressed in Chrétien’s *Lancelot* does not reflect the Christian view of love in marriage – and many poets, including Dante, and Chapter 4 argues, Chaucer, show an awareness of the ‘power of readers’ to reinterpret poems.¹¹² Moreover, the works of theologians like Alain of Lille and Hugh of Saint Victor are not limited to expounding biblical hermeneutics; their treatises contain other key textual and cultural concepts like *conjunctura* and *translatio studii et imperii*, which receive a clear articulation in Chrétien’s *Erec* and *Cligès*.¹¹³ As the following chapters show, medieval poets like Chrétien and Chaucer drew on a range of philosophical, literary and rhetorical materials to guide their approach to textual composition, from Cicero, Horace, Boethius and Isidore of Seville to the medieval Arts of Rhetoric, and not all of their manuals

¹¹¹ Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 6.

¹¹² See for example Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. by Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 34, 316; Andreas Capellanus’s dictum that love was impossible in marriage was probably a playful inversion of the Church’s view that adultery is possible within it; adultery was strictly condemned in the married woman because of inheritance problems, see Tony Hunt, *Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain (Le chevalier au lion)*, Critical Guides to French Texts (London: Grant and Cutler, 1986), p. 53; for more on this implication in Dante’s work, see McGerr, pp. 7-8.

¹¹³ The term *conjunctura* is found in Alain of Lille, and is generally taken to mean the construction of a pleasing, composite *cortex* that incorporates both small and large units of poetry, itself an intricate surface designed to conceal a *nucleus* of truth beneath it: see Chapter 1, ‘Illusory Ends in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Erec et Enide*’, pp. 37, 40-1; *translatio studii et imperii*, on the other hand, is the medieval idea of the cultural transfer of learning and power discussed by Hugh of Saint Victor: see Chapter 2, ‘The Antithetical Endings of *Cligès*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain*’, pp. 72-3, 78-9.

advocated strict fidelity to rigid exegetical principles. Though the concept of the ‘open’ work of romance developed across this thesis is not congruent with Eco’s definition of the open work as a ‘construction kit’, with its ‘infinite possibilities of form, and complete freedom of reception’, the poems in question express some of the qualities that Eco sees as central to this ‘openness’: a view of the world as ambiguous, and a multiplication of possible meanings.¹¹⁴

With respect to poetry, recent work by Sandro Jung (2009) and Andrew Allport (2012), reinforces the view that the deliberate cultivation of inconclusiveness in poetry did not predate the eighteenth century.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, earlier studies by Robert M. Adams (1958), who looks at openness in a range of genres including Greek drama and Renaissance lyric, Balachandra Rajan (1985), and Patricia A. Parker (1979) challenge the view that resistance to closure is a Romantic or modern development.¹¹⁶ Parker also finds deviation from and deferral of closure to be a feature of the ‘late’ romances of the Renaissance, but maintains that such a playful attitude to closure is ‘simply not to be found [...] in the work of Chrétien de Troyes’.¹¹⁷ However, her tentative association between the ‘deviating’ Spenserian romance and the ‘prospective mode of *aventure*’ in Chrétien’s romances implies that there is more research to be done on resistance to closure in earlier forms of romance.¹¹⁸

While comparisons between medieval romances and theories far removed from their historical moment should not be undertaken lightly, the dramatic devices discussed by Aristotle in *Poetics*, Gérard Genette’s work on anachronies in *Nouveau discours du récit* (1983), as well as the general practices developed by reception theorists likes of Wolfgang

¹¹⁴ Eco, pp. 4-6.

¹¹⁵ Sandro Jung, *The Fragmentary Poetic: Eighteenth-Century Uses of an Experimental Mode* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2009); Andrew Allport, ‘The Romantic Fragment Poem and the Performance of Form’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 51.3 (2012), 399-417.

¹¹⁶ Robert M. Adams, *Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); Balachandra Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Parker, *Inescapable Romance*.

¹¹⁷ Parker, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ As McGerr also recognises: see McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books*, pp. 4-5.

Iser, offer a way into reading the aesthetic operation of endings in the ‘earlier’ romances of Chrétien and Chaucer, and shed new light on the different ways in which their works test the boundaries of the genre and further complicate, contradict, dilate or simply do not reach the ‘promised end’, as Parker calls it.¹¹⁹ Much has been written on the continuations to Chrétien’s romances and the endings of Chaucer’s poems, and a handful of critics, including David C. Fowler (1970), F. Xavier Baron (1973), and D. S. Brewer (1974) mention the poets with reference to their commonalities as well as the possible connections between them, including the use of the term ‘vavasour’ and the subject of courtly love.¹²⁰ However, this study is the first to bring them together in this context, and recognise that their works were shaped by similar issues and invested in an aesthetic of irresolution prior to the production of their unfinished texts.

0.4 From Illusory Ends to Incongruous and Incomplete Tales

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The translations of the Old French and Middle English are my own.¹²¹ Chapter 1 argues that the reiterative quality of Chrétien’s *Erec et Enide*, specifically the periodic repetition of ‘illusory’ closural signals, creates a complexity of form and content that transcends the bipartite and tripartite models of poetic structure

¹¹⁹ Aristotle, ‘Poetics’, in *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, ed. and trans. by S. H. Butcher, 4th edn (New York: Dover, 1951); Gérard Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983); Parker, p. 4.

¹²⁰ David C. Fowler, ‘L’Amour dans Le *Lancelot* de Chrétien’, *Romania*, 91 (1970), 379-91; F. Xavier Baron, ‘Love in Chrétien’s *Charrette*: Reversed Values and Isolation’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (1973), 372-83 (p. 383); D. S. Brewer, ‘Chaucer and Chrétien de Troyes’, in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (London: Routledge, 1974); Michelle Sweeney, *Magic in Medieval Romance: from Chrétien de Troyes to Geoffrey Chaucer* (Portland: Four Courts Press, 2000); David Lyle Jeffrey, ‘Courtly Love and Christian Marriage: Chrétien de Troyes, Chaucer, and Henry VIII’, *Christianity and Literature*, 59 (2010) 515-30; P. J. Frankis, ‘Chaucer’s “Vavasour” and Chrétien de Troyes’, *Notes and Queries*, 213 (1968), 46-7; Mary Hamel, ‘The “Franklin’s Tale” and Chrétien de Troyes’, *The Chaucer Review*, 17.4 (1983), 316-31.

¹²¹ Translations of the Old French verse are given in the main body, either in square brackets (long quotations), or standard parenthesis immediately following the quotation (short quotations); translations of modern French criticism are provided in the footnotes.

typically proposed by scholars. This ‘prologue’ serves as a foundation chapter for the rest of the thesis because it deals with many of the medieval and modern theories of composition that underpin the analysis of the remaining works of Chrétien, as well as the Chaucerian texts in the later chapters. Chapter 2 argues that in *Cligés*, *Lancelot*, and *Yvain* stable closure is offset by antithetical allusions to future disaster, authorial switches and marital instability, which modify the tone and significance of the preceding narrative and call for some kind of final reconciliation that never arrives, fostering debate in unexpected ways. These works are made interesting not so much in their radical departure from the paradigmatic end of *Erec*, but in their subtly effective variations upon it.

This sustained effort to open romance to interpretation becomes a more disruptive force in Chrétien’s final romance, in which formal incompleteness disrupts the work more conspicuously. Chapter 3 draws upon the theory of narrative time developed by Gérard Genette to argue that *Le Conte du Graal* is unfinished in extensive ways beyond the absence of discourse after line 9234 because of the lack of returns to significant characters and narrative locations, and the ‘sidestepping’ of vital details. This chapter also looks at the responses of the four main continuators, and juxtaposes Chrétien’s efforts to make his romance more ambiguous and multiple with the efforts of the continuators (in general) to clarify, narrow and close the romance.

The intertextual dynamic of opening and closing across *Le Conte du Graal* corpus is the intratextual impulse of Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*. Chapter 4 argues that *The Knight’s Tale* is composed of a series of temporary and spurious endpoints generated by Theseus’s efforts to establish order in his fragmentary, divinely determined and fortuitously connected world, which ultimately reveal the extent to which humans are limited in their ability to impose final meaning on their world. Finally, Chapter 5 argues that Chaucer’s incongruous treatment of romance tropes in the unfinished *Squire’s Tale* and *Sir Thopas* creates closural problems that

he either could not or did not want to solve. These problematic features – the elision of binary distinctions, the insertion of extraneous elements, and narratological gaps – both determine and contribute to the unfinished state of the tales.

As the following chapters will argue, both poets create multiple endpoints through repetition and analogy, both inscribe a dynamic of opening and closing into their romance narratives, both aim for thematic inconclusiveness, and both produce extensively unfinished romances because they stretch, embellish, fracture and reassemble the genre to the point of collapse, paving the way for its potential renewal. Even as Chaucer acknowledges the end as the tale's strength through Pandarus, his *Canterbury* 'romances', along with Chrétien's Arthurian romances, prove that unresolved and unfinished texts have another set of strengths, values, and aesthetically-pleasing features which are far more complex than has traditionally been understood and deserve to be celebrated as a vital part of the medieval aesthetic. They are not necessarily the result of accident, misfortune, or incompetence, and their status as unfinished texts warrants a more detailed and in-depth inquiry. In exploring these ideas, this thesis hopes to offer some insight into how we as readers understand a text as finished or unfinished, and perhaps offer a more flexible conception of the principles according to which a medieval romance poem is composed, one which does not assume that the end is essential to meaning, and which questions the assumption that medieval literary fictions are always 'end-determined'.

1. Illusory Ends in Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*

1.1 A Very Beautiful Composition

There have been countless attempts to theorise the compositional technique mentioned by Chrétien de Troyes in the prologue to his first Arthurian romance, *Erec et Enide*: 'une mout bele conjointure'.¹ This formulation is often taken as a clue to the poet's compositional technique, but the term *bele conjointure* perhaps more accurately defines its ideal outcome: an elegant sequence or picture consisting of skilfully conjoined but diverse elements. The phrase has long been an issue of contention for Chrétien scholars from Wendelin Foerster and William A. Nitze to Eugène Vinaver and Douglas Kelly.² But whatever its exact signification, most agree that 'conjointure' describes the construction of a pleasing, composite *cortex*, to use D. W. Robertson's terminology, that incorporates both small and large units of poetry, itself an intricate surface designed to conceal a *nucleus* of truth beneath it.³ The uninitiated twenty-first century reader, steeped in a culture pervaded, in general, by novelistic realism and the concomitant inclination to read the denouement as a summation or retrospective clarification of all that has gone before, might unthinkingly expect this *nucleus* to be revealed in the concluding portion of the romance.

Even readers familiar with the prescriptions of medieval treatises on poetic composition, such as those of Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthew of Vendôme, will recall that the end of a medieval poem is vital in establishing its significance, and in making it whole,

¹ All references are to Kristian von Troyes, *Erec und Enide*, ed. by Wendelin Foerster (Amsterdam: Rodophi, 1965), p. 298, l. 19.

² William A. Nitze, 'The Romance of Erec, Son of Lac', *Modern Philology* 11.4 (1914), 445-89 (p. 488); William A. Nitze, 'Conjointure in *Erec*, v. 14', *Modern Language Notes*, 69 (1954), 180-81; Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 36; F. Douglas Kelly, 'The Source and Meaning of Conjointure in Chrétien's *Erec* 14', *Viator* 1 (1971), 179-200 (p. 200); see also Ernst Hoepffner, 'Matière et sens dans le roman d'*Erec et Enide*', *Archivum romanicum*, 18 (1934), 433-50.

³ D. W. Robertson, Jr., 'Some Medieval Literary Terminology, With Special Reference of Chrétien de Troyes', *Studies in Philology*, 48 (1951), 669-692 (p. 684).

complete and meaningful.⁴ It is curious, then, that Chrétien, so accustomed to directing his readers to the origins of his compositions in his romance prologues, does not once comment on his approach to the construction of endings and their significance. In the absence of such direction, it is important to look for traces of Chrétien's method in the ends of his romances, which might reveal how he brought his literary compositions to end, and whether they are designed to reveal some sort of truth. As the earliest surviving of Chrétien's romances, and the origin of *bele conjointure*, *Erec et Enide* is a crucial source of evidence for his early ideas about how Arthurian romances might be brought to an end. In fact, *Erec* shows that finishing a romance is an ongoing process, not limited to the final portion, and a sense of closure is the result of a careful manipulation of language, structure, and theme by the poet at regular intervals throughout his work. Closure is a cumulative impression gained over the course of the romance, rather than something imposed at the end.

In the closing verses of *Erec et Enide*, the 'chevalier plus loé' and 'la plus bele' are formally reconciled with one another and with the representatives of the 'mainte diverse contree' of the Arthurian world (ll. 85, 297, 6644), crowned by the Bishop of Nantes and endorsed by Arthur in a great crescendo of harmony, optimism and beauty:⁵

Li ceptres fu <u>au roi</u> bailliez,	<i>ad</i>
Qui mervoilles l'esgarda;	
Si le mist, que plus ne tarda,	
<u>Li roi</u> Erec an sa main destre;	<i>ad</i>
Or fu <u>il rois</u> si con dut ester.	<i>ad</i>
Puis ra Enide coronee. (ll. 6882-87)	

[The sceptre was handed to the king (King Arthur),/who looked at it with amazement;/then he put it, without delay,/into the right hand of Erec the King;/and now he was king as he ought to be./Then he crowned Enide in turn.]

⁴ *Poetria nova*, trans. by Margaret F. Nims (Toronto, 1967), p. 19; 'Ars versificatoria', in *Les Arts poétiques du XIIIe et du XIIIe siècle: Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge*, ed. by Edmond Faral (Paris: Champion, 1924), pp. 191-93.

⁵ 'The most praiseworthy knight', 'the most beautiful lady', 'many different regions': *Erec und Enide*, ed. by Foerster, p. 250, all translations are my own.

This dazzling and linguistically resonant coronation ceremony is the endpoint of the romance, the culmination of the long series of trials and adventures that constitute the main action of *Erec et Enide*. This specific passage is amplified by the rhetorical play of *adnominatio* (*ad*) on the word ‘roi’: the play on the sound or meaning of a word by a transposition of letters, a change in word-form or case, or by the addition of a prefix.⁶ In the first part of the narrative, Erec defeats Yder in the contest for the sparrow-hawk, thereby winning a beautiful bride and resolving the crisis at court.⁷ In the second part, both Erec and Enide must participate in what at times feels like a self-defeating quest to right Erec’s *recreantise* in marriage. Scholars such as Norris J. Lacy observe that there is ‘every reason for the story to end’ with the ritual of the ‘beisier’ and the subsequent marriage at the close of the first part: or what the poet marked out a ‘li premerains vers (l. 1844).⁸ Lacy’s observation alone indicates that the question of how to interpret the end or ends of Chrétien’s first romance cannot necessarily be answered by an analysis that limits itself to the concluding portion.⁹

Indeed, most critics do not limit themselves in this way. Donald Maddox and Glyn S. Burgess conduct thorough analyses of this last section in their monographs on the structure and themes of the poem, for instance. Yet it remains largely unclear how and why the *Erec* romance carries forward beyond the ‘illusory end’ of the final episode in *li premerains vers*,

⁶ *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, ed. by T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 243.

⁷ For more on the hawk episode, see Paule Le Rider, ‘L’épisode de l’épervier dans *Érec et Enide*’, *Romania*, 116 (1998), 368-393; Jean-Guy Gouttebroze, ‘La chasse au blanc cerf et la conquête de l’épervier dans *Erec et Enide*’, *Mélanges de langue et de littérature médiévales offerts à Alice Planche*, ed. by Ambroise Queffélec and Maurice Accarie (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1984), pp. 213-24.

⁸ Norris J. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay on Narrative Art*, *Davis Medieval Texts and Studies*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1980), p. 72; see also Jean-Paul Allard, *L’initiation royale d’Érec, le chevalier* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1987).

⁹ ‘Critics who have focused on the treatment of endings in medieval literary or theoretical texts [...] have [...] not necessarily considered all of the available evidence about medieval concepts of closure. With an understanding of medieval theory of closure as involving the text’s goal as well as its concluding portion, its thematic as well as its structural end, we have a better context for understanding the ends of all medieval texts, but especially those with “problematic” conclusions’: Rosemarie P. McGerr, ‘Medieval Concepts of Literary Closure: Theory and Practice’, *Exemplaria*, 1 (1989), 149-79 (p. 150).

even when, as Roberta L. Krueger notes, ‘all the requirements for a harmonious conclusion seem to have been fulfilled’.¹⁰ This phrase ‘illusory end’ is my own, used here to denote a potential point of resolution, a point at which the narrative might seem to be coming to an end, but does not. More importantly, perhaps, there is the question of what makes that final coronation ritual superior to the earlier sequences, why this ‘vision of society’ is the ‘most harmonious’ and makes for a more fitting end to the romance.¹¹ This analysis will investigate how Chrétien went about finishing *Erec et Enide*, why his approach produced more than one potential endpoint, and will suggest how these ‘ends’ relate to the *bele conjointure* the poet promises to create in his prologue.

1.2 The Prologue

Perhaps the most famous of Chrétien’s literary openings, the prologue to *Erec et Enide* (c. 1169) might initially neutralise readerly feelings of detachment from the courtly milieu of twelfth-century France. Not only does it appear to offer a kind of hermeneutic by which to read the romance, in the form of self-commentary, but it also seems to aim for transparency in its explanation of the poet’s compositional method. From a ‘conte d’aventure’, namely the tale ‘D’Erec, le fil Lac’ (‘Of Erec, son of Lac’), hitherto disseminated by incompetent *jongleurs*, the poet will construct ‘une mout bele conjointure’ (‘a very beautiful composition’; ll. 13-19). Drawing on the term *iunctura* from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, as well as the medieval treatises of Alan of Lille and Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Douglas Kelly clarifies this terminology: ‘*conjointure* is specifically the result of the interlacing of different elements derived from [the poet’s] source or sources (or, for that matter, from the author’s imagination)’.¹²

¹⁰ Roberta L. Krueger, ‘Chrétien de Troyes and the Invention of Arthurian Courtly Fiction’, in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. by Helen Fulton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 163.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹² Kelly, ‘The Source and Meaning of Conjointure’, p. 199.

D. W. Robertson, Jr. further expands upon the relevant passage from Alan of Lille's *De planctu naturae*, the only other mention of *conjointure* in contemporary material of this nature. He arrives at the following conclusion about 'coniunctura' and its poetic components, the *cortex* and the *nucleus*, terms he borrows from Scriptural exegesis:

The *cortex* of the poem is false, but beneath the surface lies a *nucleus* of truth. The falsity of the exterior is due to the fact that the poet is not a historian. He uses diverse materials from various places. The persons, places, or events he describes may or may not be actual persons, places, or events, but the sequence in which he places them is his own. This new sequence is the *coniunctura*, which should be made, as Isidore says, with a certain perfection or attractiveness. When the *coniunctura* has been made 'cum decore aliquo' [with a certain beauty], an attractive *pictura* results. The *coniunctura* is thus the construction of the *cortex* of the poem, and it was conventionally made so that a *nucleus* of truth lay beneath it.¹³

Chrétien's *conjointure* is more than a straightforward combination of material; it is a 'bele conjointure', made so by the careful manner in which the *matière* is arranged and joined, the coherence of the narrative strands, the superior quality of each syntactical combination of words (this last defines Horace's *iuncturae*), and the resulting 'l'unité interne du sujet', all of which alludes to some sort of latent poetic truth or higher meaning, whether tropological, allegorical or anagogical.¹⁴ Yet despite providing this miniature poetic treatise in the prologue to *Erec et Enide*, which makes reference to his source material and his approach to romance composition, not once does Chrétien mention anything about the way in which he will finish the romance, nor does he provide any corresponding commentary in the closing verses as to how he has brought *Erec et Enide* to its end.

There are certainly a number of possible allusions to the general goal of the text in the prologue:

Por ce dit CRESTIENS DE TROIES
 Que reisons est que totes voies
 Doit chascuns panser et antandre *rr*
 A bien dire et a bien aprandre. (ll. 9-12) *rr*

¹³ Robertson, Jr., 'Some Medieval Literary Terminology', p. 684.

¹⁴ The term 'iunctura' refers to the combination of words in an unexpected or unusual way, or to elegant syntax in general: *Q. Horati Flacci opera*, ed. by E. C. Wickham and H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 242; 'the internal unity of the narrative': Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: L'Homme et l'Oeuvre*, *Connaissance des Lettres*, no. 50 (Paris: Haitier-Boivin, 1957), p. 62.

[Therefore Chrétien de Troyes says/that it is right that everyone/should always think and strive/to speak well and to learn (teach) well.]

Far from inviting his audience to listen for mere sport, *Crestiens* inserts his name into rhyme position and encourages everyone to direct their thought and effort towards ‘bien dire’ and ‘bien aprendre’, towards making the most of their abilities for themselves and for the common good. The goal of the text might therefore seem to be the enlightenment of readers and listeners in this regard, with its beautiful form organised to guarantee recall of its significance, evidenced in this instance by *rime riche* (*rr*); in French, this is a rhyme involving not only the accented final vowel and any succeeding consonants, but also the preceding consonant.¹⁵ This may designate a poet whose sense of completion lies in imparting knowledge to his readers and listeners, whose work is invested in the classically-defined ends of poetry: instruction and delight.¹⁶

However, while these lines might point to an instructive purpose on the part of the poet, they reveal little about how and why the end of the romance is constructed in the way that it is, or indeed why there appear to be several possible endpoints.¹⁷ Moreover, Chrétien’s intentions for the content of the romance are not made explicit; as Leah Tether points out, the love element is not introduced until some time later, and thus readers do not know what to expect from ‘the end’ in terms of plot and narrative. At best there is the implication that a ‘beautifully constructed’ composition will extend to the thematic material as well as the formal, ‘that ends will be tied up and expectations of further adventures will be stemmed by the satisfactory nature of the *bele conjointure*’.¹⁸ It is possible, however, that a clearer

¹⁵ *Rime riche* is a rhyme produced by agreement in sound not only of the last accented vowel and any succeeding sounds but also of the consonant preceding this rhyming vowel: *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Green and Stephen Cushman, 4th edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1190.

¹⁶ Lorna Clymer, ‘The Poet as Teacher’, in *The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1600-1800*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 185.

¹⁷ See Introduction, pp. 1-7.

¹⁸ Leah Tether, *The Continuations of Chrétien’s ‘Perceval’: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), p. 77.

understanding of Chrétien's sense of ending might be gained from a closer analysis of *Erec et Enide*.

1.3 The Coronation Episode

The end of the romance is dominated by the royal investiture of Erec and Enide. At line 6512, the romance abruptly announces that King Lac has died, providing the catalyst for Erec and Enide's ascension to the throne and prompting the devolvement of narrative action into opulent ritual. There follows an ekphrasis, as each grandiose detail of the scene at the court in Nantes is layered one on top of the other, slowly crystallizing into an emblematic tapestry of the narrative motifs: monarchy and knighthood, 'chevalerie' and 'clergie', heaven and earth, beauty and prowess, love and marriage, old order interwoven with new.¹⁹ This static picture of the court is reminiscent of the comparison Ferdinand Lot makes between the romance form and the fabric of a tapestry in his *Étude sur le Lancelot*: 'Si l'on tente d'y pratiquer une coupure, tout part en morceaux'.²⁰ Vinaver makes a similar point: 'The Cycle turned out to be remarkably like the fabric of matting or tapestry; a single cut across it, made at any point, would unravel it all'.²¹

The gathering of Arthur's barons together with the 'contes et dus et rois' of the neighboring nations ('counts, dukes and kings'; l. 6645), the alliance of Erec and Arthur, sealed at the moment Arthur passes the sceptre 'Toz d'une esmeraude anterine' to 'Li roi Erec' ('Wrought from an emerald'; l. 6874), the dubbing of four hundred knights, the exquisite mantles gifted by Arthur, the luxurious furs and precious gemstones, the 'deus

¹⁹ Chrétien mentions 'chevalerie' [chivalry] and 'clergie' [clerical learning] in his prologue to *Cligès*, an aristocratic variation on the medieval concept of *translatio studii et imperii*, the transfer of learning and power from east to west: see Kristian von Troyes, *Cligès*, ed. by Wendelin Foerster (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1910), pp. 1-2, ll. 30-35.

²⁰ 'If one tries to make a cut, it all falls to pieces': Ferdinand Lot, *Étude sur le Lancelot en prose* (Paris: E. Champion, 1918), p. 28; see also Ferdinand Lot, 'Érec', *Romania*, 25 (1896), 588-590.

²¹ Vinaver, p. 72;

faudestués/D'ivoire blanc' ('two thrones/Of white ivory', ll. 6713-4), the harmonious marriage between Erec and Enide, Erec's robe of the cosmos, depicting the *quadrivium* arts of *clergie*, the plentiful post-coronation banquet: far from crowding the verse with 'useless details', as Gaston Paris calls them, all converge into a pictorial representation of the ideal courtly society.²²

At the centre of this poetic canvas sits 'Erec a Enide' atop the ornate gold and ivory thrones; it is here, at the climactic point of the coronation ceremony, that King Arthur gives 'Li ceptres' to Erec and 'la corone' to Enide and they join together in a perfect monarchical symbiosis (ll. 6885-87).²³ This conjunction 'a' is significant because it positions Enide as Erec's equal and not as a mere subsidiary. In *Structure and Sacring*, Donald Maddox adeptly sums up the sense of triumph here:

the conjunctive community so fervently desired by Arthur on Easter finally becomes a reality on Christmas Day: the largest contingent of royalty, nobility and chivalry ever assembled is seated amidst the warmth and conviviality of the banquet hall, where the Arthurian community may at long last celebrate itself in the newly-crowned symbol of its reintegration.²⁴

This lavish inaugural celebration, which sees *conjointure* become both theme and form, is followed by a solemn coronation mass, after which Arthur bids his guests farewell. Thus the tale ends, sealed with a rhetorical flourish of *rime équivoque*, the concordance in sound and spelling of the two different words that form the couplet: 'Et por Erec qu'il ama tant./Li

²² Medieval poets such as Chrétien were expected to have mastered the arts of the 'clergie', the arts of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music): see *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 307-59; Gaston Paris, 'review of Foerster (item 2)', *Romania* 20 (1891), 148-66 (p. 154); Glyn S. Burgess, *Chrétien de Troyes: Erec et Enide*, Critical Guides to French Texts (London: Grant & Cutler, 1984), p. 81; for further interpretations of Erec's robe see Éléonore Andrieu, 'Encore la robe d'Érec (vers 1170?)', *Romania*, 130 (2012), 257-293; Thomas Elwood Hart, 'Chrestien, Macrobius, and Chartrean science: the allegorical robe as symbol of textual design in the Old French *Erec*', *Mediaeval Studies*, 43 (1981), 250-96.

²³ The preposition 'a' in this line 'Erec a Enide' is the same in every edition and is translated as 'with': Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. by William Kibler (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 121.

²⁴ Donald Maddox, *Structure and Sacring: The Systematic Kingdom in Chrétien's Erec et Enide* (Lexington, Ky: French Forum, 1978), p. 172.

contes fine ci a tant' ('And because of Erec whom he loved so much./The tale ends at this point'; ll. 6957-58).²⁵

So what is it exactly about this 'segment', as Maddox calls it, that signals completion?²⁶ There is of course the authorial declaration of the end written above, which completes the final couplet, and which is followed in some manuscripts by a scribal explicit that paratextually marks the close of the narrative ('Explicyt li romans d'Erec et d'Enide').²⁷ Yet the last section of the poem has a number of more complex rhetorical features than this, formal devices which give rise to a sense of closure and signal that the end is near, and which act on a more subliminal level than their self-evident counterparts. First, as alluded to above, the final episode is clearly distinguished from the relatively fast-paced action and dialogue of the quest in the preceding portion by its careful, imagistic delineation of the elements that make up the coronation scene, and thus constitutes a poetic coda to the romance. It is also characterised by a higher concentration of the 'terminal features' Barbara Herrnstein Smith identifies in relation to twentieth-century verse: repetition, alliteration, as well as the similarly emphatic medieval rhetoric-poetic figures *rime équivoque* and *adnominatio*. These last two figures are distinguished from one another in that while *rime équivoque* puns on homophones, and thus relates to phonological identity, *adnominatio* relies on phonological similarity.

All of these can be seen, following Leah Tether, as adding impact to the final lines of the medieval poem.²⁸ The description of Erec's *quadrivium* robe is a principal example of this:

Les dos ont <u>toz vermauz</u> dessore,	<i>fa</i>
Les <u>vantres vers</u> , et la coe <u>inde</u> .	<i>al, re</i>
Iteus bestes neissent an <u>Inde</u> ,	<i>re</i>

²⁵ *The Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 575.

²⁶ Maddox, p. 41.

²⁷ *Erec und Enide*, p. 252.

²⁸ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 151; Tether, p. 80.

Si ont barbioletes <u>non</u> ;	<i>re</i>
Ne manjuent s'especes <u>non</u> ,	<i>re</i>
Que vos <u>diroie del</u> mantel?	<i>al</i>
<u>Mout fu riches et buens et biaux</u> :	<i>en, al</i>
Quatre pierres ot es tassiaus,	
D'une part ot <u>deus</u> crisolites,	<i>r</i>
Et de l'autre <u>deus</u> ametistes,	<i>r</i>
Qui furent <u>assises an</u> or. (ll. 6792-809)	<i>al</i>

[The beasts [on Erec's robe] have vermilion backs,/and green bellies, and an indigo tail./ These beasts live in India,/and they are called barbiolets;/they eat nothing but spices,/ what shall I tell you of the mantle?/It was very rich and fine and handsome:/it had four stones in the tassels,/two chrysolites on one side,/and two amethysts on the other, /which were mounted in gold.]

This short passage alone evidences a surge in the deployment of poetic devices: there are greater incidences of alliteration (*al*); there are also two striking, sequential examples of *rime équivoque* (*re*), as well as repetition (*r*), final syllable alliteration (*fa*) and enumeration (*en*).²⁹

In addition to this section, there are several other clusters of rhyming flourishes over the course of the coronation episode (ll. 6726-34, for example). However, while *Erec* seems to follow Smith's hypothesis, with these closural devices accumulating at the end of the text, creating a sense of 'settled finality, of apparently self-evident truth', such terminal features are not typically in themselves sufficient for an end in the medieval romance.³⁰ Indeed, as mentioned above, there is also the repetition and drawing together of the narrative motifs that appear throughout the text and it is this, together with the impression that the narrative has resolved all of its 'nagging problems' – Erec and Enide are not only happily married but have assumed their rightful positions in the reintegrated Arthurian society as knight-king and beautiful queen – that seems to establish satisfactory closure.³¹ This recapitulation conforms

²⁹ To clarify, the alliteration identified here is not comparable with the English tradition – where alliteration invariably falls on stressed syllables – but rather an example of Chrétien using repetitive consonant sounds for emphasis – as mnemonic devices if nothing else; Jean Frappier has done a substantial amount of work on the patterns of verse in *Erec et Enide*, see Jean Frappier, 'Sur la versification de Chrétien de Troyes: l'enjambement dans *Érec et Énide*', *Research Studies*, 32.2 (1964) 41-9; Jean Frappier, 'La brisure du couplet dans *Erec et Enide*', *Romania*, 86 (1965), 1-21.

³⁰ Smith, p. 152.

³¹ Krueger, p. 164; Maddox, p. 172.

to Cicero's treatment of closure in *De inventione*, the main source for so many medieval treatises on poetry:

Commune autem praeceptum hoc datur ad enumerationem, ut ex una quaque argumentatione, quoniam tota iterum dici non potest, id eligatur quod erit gravissimum, et unum quidque, quam brevissime transeat, ut memoria, non oratio renovate videatur.³²

In short, he argues for the use of summary (provided by the grouping of motifs in *Erec*) and arousal of audience emotion (achieved through character fulfilment). It is these larger components which, over and above micropoetic details, seem to effect completion.

1.4 Li Premerains Vers

Leah Tether identifies a third component in the signalling of closure, that is, the 'bilateral symmetry between the end and the beginning'.³³ Tether names multiple theorists, medieval and modern, who have collectively argued for the creation of closure through the strategic linking of beginning to end, of purpose and conclusion. For instance, in the *Poetria nova* (c. 1208-13), Geoffrey of Vinsauf compares the poet to an architect and advises him 'in pectoris arcem/Contrahe, sique prius in pectore quam sit in ore', to have the end of the text in mind when setting its foundations to paper (ll. 58-9).³⁴ In addition, Robert of Basevorn finds that that the repetition of the beginning at the end makes for an elegantly intricate finish: 'illi curiosissime faciunt qui simpliciter idem principium et finem habent', and he associates such compositional circularity with the perfection of God.³⁵ Far more recently, in *The Sense of an*

³² 'As a general principle for summing up, it is laid down that since the whole of any argument cannot be given a second time, the most important point of each be selected, and that every argument be touched on as briefly as possible, so that it may appear to be a refreshing of the memory of the audience, rather than a repetition of the speech': Cicero, *De inventione*, ed. by H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 150-1.

³³ Tether, pp. 68-71; Smith provides a useful qualification of this symmetry in *Poetic Closure*: 'Formal structure, in these instances, however, is "circular" only in the loosest sense and never more than by analogy to geometric circularity': Smith, p. 27.

³⁴ The translation of the full passage reads, 'as a prudent workman, construct the whole fabric within the mind's citadel; let it exist in the mind before it is on the lips': *Poetria Nova*, ed. by Nims, p. 17.

³⁵ This translates as 'with most elegant intricacy do they finish, who have the same beginning and end': see Robert of Basevorn, *Forma Praedicandi*, in *Artes Praedicandi: Contribution à l'histoire de la rhétorique au moyen âge*, ed. by Th.-M. Charland (Paris: Publications de l'Institut d'études

Ending, Frank Kermode expounds the biblical model of cyclicity that, he argues, has shaped all subsequent fictions ‘whose ends are consonant with [their] origins’.³⁶ In *Erec et Enide*, this mirroring occurs in the sense that the notion of *bele conjointure* Chrétien presents in his prologue manifests itself in the form and content of the ending: the union of Erec and Enide, the ‘conjunctive community’ and the confluence of poetic devices. But this mirroring is not limited to the conjunction of beginning and end. Indeed, the events, images and lexicon of the final segment are echoed in other parts of the romance, and this is what creates the impression of several illusory endings.

The first of these comes at the approximate mid-point of the romance, the end of *li premerains vers*.³⁷ This *vers* is consistently presented as an independent unit, a closed-off section within the romance; so much so, Frank Collins writes, that ‘most summaries of *Erec and Enide* refer to the *premiers vers* as being simply that prologue-like first part of the story which has Erec and Enide meet and initiate marriage’.³⁸ This assumption about the function of *li premerains vers* seems to have largely resulted from the fact that the events clustered around the statement ‘Ci fine li premerains vers’ (‘The first part ends here’; l. 1844) – the return to court, the marriage between Erec and Enide, the ritual of the ‘beisier’ – have about

mediévales d’Ottawa, 1936), p. 310; cited in *The Works of the Gawain Poet: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Patience, Cleanness*, ed. by Ad Putter and Myra Stokes (London: Penguin, 2014), pp. 763-4, l. 2525, n. 2525; Putter and Stokes note that the *Gawain* poet makes a link between the end and the beginning by repeating the first alliterative long line line, ‘Sithen the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye’, in the last, ‘After the sege and assaut was sesed at Troye’ (though notably after line 2525 there is a final bob-and-wheel), and they point out that there are a significant number of other Middle English Romances that link the end to the beginning, including *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Avowing of Arthur*, *Sir Degrevant*, *Octavian Imperator* and *The Awyntyrs off Arthur*: see n. 2525.

³⁶ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 5.

³⁷ ‘Vers’ in Old French could mean ‘stanza’, or ‘laisse’ in a *chanson de geste*, from the Latin ‘vertere’, meaning ‘to turn’: see *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana: Universal Dictionary of Knowledge*, vol. 25, ed. by Edward Smedley, Hugh James Rose and Henry John Rose (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1845), p. 1068.

³⁸ Frank Collins, ‘A Semiotic Approach to Chrétien de Troyes “Erec et Enide”’, *Interpretations*, 15.2 (1984), 25-31 (p. 26).

them an aura of celebration and thematic resolution, a static equilibrium, not unlike the events that characterise the end of the narrative.

However, seen as a mirror of the coronation scene, rather than a redundant initial phase in a mythic *Brautwerbungsschema* or ‘bride-winning’ pattern, the final portion of *li premerains vers* is a vital component in the mechanism of *bele conjointure*.³⁹ It constitutes the first major, or rather the most apparent signal that certain events, episodes, stylistic traits, images and situations foreshadow or recall counterparts elsewhere in the text. In other words, it indicates that *Erec et Enide* is organised by interlace and analogy. To clarify, the structural device of interlace or ‘entrelacement’ derives from Lot’s study of the *Prose Lancelot*, in which he traces many themes and episodes that the poet introduces, drops and resumes on several occasions.⁴⁰ If a text is organised by analogy, on the other hand, a major theme, motif or episode is reflected in a variety of other episodes which share with it certain narrative elements or images. Vinaver indicates that the ‘juxtaposition of analogous incidents’ was the more dominant of these two form-conferring principles in the romance genre.⁴¹ This is certainly true of *Erec et Enide*, in which there is a deliberate and multifaceted symmetry, not only between beginning and end, but also between the ends of a number of episodes between them, both major and minor.

The end of *li premerains vers*, then, has much in common with the coronation episode. The gathering of Arthur’s court, the union of Erec and Enide and their impending marriage, and the crowning of Enide as ‘la plus bele’, all have obvious analogues in the coronation scene. In fact, read in retrospect, the final section of *li premerains vers* plays out like a rehearsal of the final end. There is symmetry between the lavish description of ‘li mantiaus’ and other regalia that Enide wears for her ‘coronation’ (l. 1608), and the later

³⁹ For more on the bride-winning pattern, see Maddox, p. 45.

⁴⁰ Lot, *Étude sur le Lancelot*, pp. 17-30.

⁴¹ Vinaver, p. 105.

description of Erec's coronation garb (ll. 6701-809), as well as the naming of Enide shortly after the end of this section (l. 2031), and Erec's official naming as 'Li roi Erec' in the coronation scene (l. 6874). There is also a clear parallel between the enumeration of 'les buens chevaliers' immediately before Arthur bestows the honour of 'la plus bele' on Enide, and the listing of the kings, counts and dukes at the coronation (l. 6645).

At the level of the poetry itself, there are a number of the devices that were earlier identified as terminal features, as demonstrated by the passage below:

Li <u>rois</u> <u>respond</u> : 'N'est pas <u>manconge</u> ;	<i>al, rr</i>
Cesti, s'an ne la me <u>chalonge</u> ,	<i>rr</i>
Donrai je del blanc cerf l'enor.'	
Puis dist as chevaliers: 'Seignor,	
Qu'an dites <u>vos</u> ? Que <u>vos</u> est <u>vis</u> ?	<i>ad, re</i>
Ceste est et de cors et de <u>vis</u>	<i>re</i>
Et de quan qu'estuet a pucele	
<u>La plus</u> jantis et <u>la plus</u> bele	<i>r</i>
Qui soit jusque la, ce me <u>sanble</u> ,	<i>re</i>
Ou li ciaus et la terre <u>assanble</u> . (ll. 1777-86)	<i>re</i>

[The king makes answer: 'That is no lie;/and upon her, if there is no remonstrance,/I shall bestow the honour of the white stag.'/Then he added to the knights; 'My lords,/what say you? What is your opinion?/This one is in body and in face/And in whatever a girl should have/is the most charming and the most beautiful/that may be found, as it seems to me,/before you come to where heaven and earth meet.]

At this climactic point of *li premerains vers*, when Arthur informs his court that he intends to award the title of 'la plus bele' to Enide, thereby resolving the crisis at court generated by the hunt for 'le blanc cerf', there is a slightly higher saturation of terminal features: alliteration (*al*), *rime riche* (*rr*), *adnominatio* (*ad*) and *rime équivoque* (*re*), though they are notably fewer in number here than in the coronation scene. These clusters of terminal features appear throughout the romance in conjunction with the ends of significant narrative events and generally seem to be indicative of moments of closure. There is only one notable anomaly, when Erec and Enide first meet the count (ll. 3214-62), but even this could be construed as the end of the couple's first round of altercations with enemy knights. There are of course many isolated instances of *rime équivoque*, *adnominatio*, and repetition in Chrétien's octosyllabic rhyming couplets over the course of *Erec et Enide*, and it is not my argument

that these individual poetic devices are unique to the clusters identified in this study.

However, when one of these devices is accompanied by two or more similar devices, and the resulting rhyming flourish intersects with the end of a movement or section in the narrative, they become significant as terminal features.

At the end of *li premerains vers*, as in the coronation episode, these devices seem to bolster the sense of truth, finality, and resolution. Indeed, Erec has simultaneously won Enide's love through his victory at the contest for the sparrow-hawk and brought peace and harmony to the Arthurian society by returning with a figure of unparalleled beauty: on the surface, love, chivalry, and community seem to be perfectly balanced with one another, and Erec has emerged as the ideal courtly knight-hero. And yet, as Laurel Amtower shows, Chrétien's descriptions of Erec in *li premerains vers*, focused as they are on his physical appearance, could suggest that at this point Erec's attributes are merely an 'outward veneer'.⁴² He only appears to have used his prowess for the common good, since the bride/bird-winning game is but a simulation of chivalry that fortuitously leads to the settlement of the debate over 'la plus bele'.⁴³ Appropriately, then, it is only Enide, as a symbol of beauty, and not Erec, the figure of chivalry, who is honoured by the monarch with the 'beisier'. This symbolic union between Arthur and Enide is a further indication the state of affairs here is insufficient for an end: a kiss is not the fulfilment of desire but merely a preliminary stage on the way to final consummation. Thus, formally, thematically, and symbolically the tale cannot end here. However, while the ritual of the 'beisier' is no more than an 'illusory end', which marks the termination of the first stage of the narrative, it would

⁴² Laurel Amtower, 'Courtly Code and Conjointure: The Rhetoric of Identity in *Erec et Enide*,' *Neophilologus*, 77.2 (1993), 179–89 (p. 181).

⁴³ *Ibid.*; for more on the relationship between Erec and Enide and Erec's behaviour see also Liliane Dulac, 'Peut-on comprendre les relations entre Érec et Énide?', *Le Moyen Âge*, 1 (1994), 37–50; William A. Nitze, 'Erec's treatment of Enide', *The Romanic Review*, 10 (1919), 26–37; A. R. Press, 'Le comportement d'Érec envers Énide dans le roman de Chrétien de Troyes', *Romania*, 90 (1969), 529–38.

seem to endorse a bipartite view of the structure, with the second phase of the quest beginning almost immediately after it and ending when the second collective equilibrium of the closing coronation scene is reached.⁴⁴

1.5 La Joie de la Cort

This view of the structure as bipartite is disrupted by the presence of another major adventure, whose final part also possesses the qualities of an illusory ending: the ‘Joie de la Cort’ episode. Again there is a palpable symmetry between the end of this episode and the end of the coronation scene, as well as the end of *li premerains vers*. This is Erec and Enide’s last and greatest adventure, and represents the end of their quest. The equivalent episode in the Welsh analogue of *Erec et Enide* – ‘the Hedge of Mist’ episode in the tale of *Geraint ab Erbin*, in which the hero must face the embodiment of his own morally perilous tendencies, ‘the Knight of the Hedge’ – is, in fact, the end of the text and works to synthesise its various thematic strands.⁴⁵ In Chrétien’s version, Erec must also do battle with a knight in a garden and, when he returns triumphant, he finds that King Evrains and all the people of Brandigan have rushed to court to congratulate him:

Trestoz li pueples i acort,	
Qu’a pié que a cheval <u>batant</u> ;	<i>rr</i>
Que li uns l’autre n’i <u>atant</u> .	
Et cil qui el vergier <u>estoient</u>	<i>rr</i>
D’Erec disarmer <u>s’aprestoient</u>	
Et <u>chantoient</u> par <u>contançon</u>	<i>ad, rr</i>
Tuit de la joie une <u>chançon</u> ;	<i>ad</i>
Et les dames un lai <u>troverent</u> ,	<i>rr</i>
Que ‘le lai de joie’ <u>apelerent</u> ;	
Mes n’est gueires li lais setüz. (ll. 6178-89)	

[All the people hastened there in confusion,/some on foot and some on horse;/without waiting for each other./And those that were in the garden/hastened to remove Erec’s armor/and they all sang in playful competition/a song about the joy;/and the ladies made up a lay,/which they called ‘the lay of joy’;/But the lay is not well known.]

⁴⁴ Maddox, pp. 73-80.

⁴⁵ ‘Geraint son of Erbin’, in *The Mabinogion*, trans. by Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 177.

As in the two previous ‘ends’, the gathering together of people in celebration of a rescinded period of uncertainty and hardship establishes a sense of stability and resolution.

Yet there is a more interesting analogy than this: the discordant arrangement between the knight (Mabonagrains) and his *amie*, according to which the would-be knight-errant must engage every ‘chevalier’ who enters their garden in a trial of ‘armes’ at his lover’s behest, holds up an uncanny mirror to the relationship between Erec and Enide who have, until quite recently, been forced to navigate a number of trials while at odds with one another. More specific to the symmetry between ‘ends’, however, is that the return of Mabonagrains and his ‘damoisele’ to the community of Brandigan at the end of the ‘Joie de la Cort’ episode echoes the two returns of Erec and Enide to the Arthurian court, first as husband and wife and then as king and queen (ll. 6235-355).⁴⁶

Moreover, the implied reconciliation of the Brandigan lovers, after Erec and Enide’s joint intervention, both manifests and affirms Erec and Enide’s reconciliation at the castle of Count Oringles de Limors as the aim of their quest to remedy Erec’s *recreantise*, to strike a proper balance between marriage and chivalry, is achieved (ll. 4920-21). The phrase ‘par *contançon*’ (in italics above), meaning ‘in playful competition’, is interesting in this context; it is the repetition of a phrase used in an earlier description of the way that Enide looks at Erec (l. 1501), and there, as here, it seems to reflect a growing subjectivity in Enide. Its second appearance here might signal the equal agency of Erec and Enide: while Erec shows mercy to Mabonagrains after his defeat, releasing him from his rash boon, Enide comforts the damsel with the tale of their adventures.

⁴⁶ For more detailed accounts of this episode, see Maria Luisa Meneghetti, ‘*Joie de la cort: intégration individuelle et métaphore sociale dans Erec et Enide*’, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 76 (1976), 371-79; H. Newstead, ‘The “Joie de la Cort” episode in *Erec* and the Horn of Bran’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 51 (1936), 13-25; Emmanuel Philipot, ‘Un épisode d’*Erec et Enide: La joie de la cour. — Mabon l’enchanteur*’, *Romania*, 25 (1896), 258-94; Margueritte S. Murphy, ‘The allegory of “joie” in Chrétien’s *Erec et Enide*’, *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*, ed. by Morton Bloomfield (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 109-127.

Despite all this, the ‘end’ here is clearly not a satisfactory one. Like Mabonagrains and his lover in the garden ‘par nigromance clos’ (l. 5692), Erec and Enide are still caught up in the world of marvels and adventure, detached from the Arthurian court, and must return there before they are able to unite beauty and chivalry with monarchy through official ritual. With regards to the formal aspects of the verse, despite the impressive sequence of *rime riche* (*rr*) and the single instance of *adnominatio* (*ad*), there are fewer terminal features here than in the earlier illusory ends, and none of the rhetorical fireworks created by the sequential *rime équivoque* in those passages. There are some rhyming flourishes elsewhere in the ‘Joie de la Cort’ scene (ll. 5404-14, 5760-71), but not on the scale seen in the coronation episode, for instance. One consequence of this is the poetry itself does not give the impression of ‘static equilibrium’ readers might expect from an end. Indeed, Chrétien seems to deliberately avoid the scene-setting and description that might make such equilibrium possible: ‘mes por quoi vos deviseroie [...] la chanbre’ (but why would I describe the bedroom to you; ll. 5571-73). At this point, narrative action is still the overriding force and thus lengthy descriptions are not only inappropriate but wasteful ‘folie’ (l. 5574).

While this is simply an episode that assumes some of the characteristics of an ending, then, its prominence might serve to justify the view of *Erec et Enide* as a triptych, with the poem dividing, writes Norris J. Lacy, ‘quite naturally into three parts, concluded respectively by Erec and Enide’s marriage, their reconciliation, their coronation’.⁴⁷ There is a ‘long-standing dichotomy’ between the notion of Erec as a tripartite romance and the view that the structural division indicated by line 1844 (‘Ci fine li premerains vers’) makes it bipartite.⁴⁸ However, the concept of illusory ends offers a more flexible view of the structure of *Erec et*

⁴⁷ Lacy, p. 75

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-81; see also Z. P. Zaddy, ‘The Structure of Chretien’s Erec’, *Modern Language Review*, 62 (1967), 608–19.

Enide and might therefore go some way to resolving this disagreement: the romance can be viewed either way, depending on how much weight is afforded to each of these illusory ends.

1.6 Minor Illusory Ends

There are further, more minor illusory endings that serve as analogues to the conclusions of the major episodes, and which reveal a far more complex structure than can be explicated by a necessarily reductive bipartite or tripartite view of the narrative. Lacy has argued that those who reach numbers greater than three in their structural division of the romance are basing their conclusions on theme rather than structure.⁴⁰ However, if poetic structure is taken to mean, in part, the formulation and development of a pattern, then an account which regards the episodic reprise of a theme as an organising principle is entirely justified. There are two minor but pivotal episodes, or rather ends of episodes, during Erec and *Enide*'s quest that correspond to one another, and which serve as recollections and anticipations of the 'ends' previously outlined.

The first of these comes after Count Oringles de Limors, believing Erec to be dead, carries his body off to his castle and marries *Enide* against her will. The count strikes *Enide* for resisting her new circumstances, but she refuses to acquiesce:

' <u>Assez me bat, assez me fier!</u>	<i>r, re</i>
Ja <u>tant</u> ne <u>te troverai fier</u>	<i>al, re</i>
Que port oi face plus ne <u>mains</u> ,	<i>re</i>
Se tu or androit a tes <u>mains</u>	<i>re</i>
Me devoies les iauz sachier	
Ou trestote vive escorchier.'	
Antre <u>cez diz</u> et <u>cez</u> tançons	<i>al</i>
Revint Erec de pasmeisons	
Aussi con li hon qui s'esvoille. (ll. 4845-53)	

[‘Beat me, strike me as you will!/I shall never heed thy power/so much as to do thy bidding more or less,/even were thou with thy hands/ fight now to snatch out my eyes/or flay me alive.’/In the midst of these words and disputes/Erec recovered from his swoon/ like a man who awakes from sleep.]

Enide's impassioned refusal to bend to the count's will, a defiant show of loyalty to Erec, miraculously brings Erec back from the dead. The illusion created by Erec's *fausse morte* here might be construed as an analogical realisation of the illusory ends in the narrative structure; much like the romance itself, Erec returns from his apparent end. In a sensational and gruesome feat of chivalry, Erec springs up 'Et fiert parmi le chief le conte' (And strikes off the head of the count; l. 4863), allowing himself and Enide to escape from the castle and gallop away into the sunset. It is a grand finale indeed: 'Ne soiez de rien esmaiee,/Qu'or vos aim plus qu'einz mes ne fis' (Be no more concerned/for I love you more now than I ever did; ll. 4920-21). With regards to thematic resolution, it is a decisive and triumphant end to Enide's ordeal and to the discord between the couple. Formally, and in keeping with the illusory ends previously discussed, there is a flourish in the verse effected by a number of terminal features: repetition (*r*), alliteration (*al*) and another example of sequential *rime équivoque* (*re*). The simile used in the final line quoted above, that Erec is like a man waking from sleep, might seem unnecessary in this context. Yet it creates an analogical, though not logical, connection between the end of this episode and the end of the one that immediately succeeds it.⁴⁹

In the following episode, Erec and Enide run into a friend from earlier in their quest, Guivret, who does not recognise Erec and mistakenly attacks him, causing him to fall down in a deathlike swoon. However, Enide seizes the opportunity to reveal Erec's identity, and Guivret realizes his error: his subsequent words of loyalty, like Enide's before him, mean that 's'est Erec levez' (l. 5086). Once again, there is a flourish of terminal features to signal the end of the movement (ll. 5015-20), and the recognition scene, itself a significant concluding gesture, finishes with an image of Erec waking from a *fausse morte*. As Vinaver indicates, coherence is achieved through the conjunction of analogous events, which simultaneously

⁴⁹ See also Lacy, *Craft of Chrétien*, p. 72.

‘bring[s] to light something which would otherwise have remained unknown or explained’.⁵⁰

In this case, the analogical construction of the romance is indicative of a complex *conjointure* of form and content that transcends and repeatedly frustrates attempts to organise it under the bipartite and tripartite models drawn up by critics like Maddox and Lacy, whilst providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between Erec and Enide as both literary characters and people.⁵¹

Together the minor illusory ‘ends’ of the Guivret and the Count de Limors episodes recall the earlier scene just after the end of *li premerains vers* in which Erec is roused from his sleep, and from his *recreantise*, by Enide’s verbal lament. The ends of these minor episodes also anticipate the revival of the town of Brandigan at the end of the ‘Joie de la Cort’ episode, and later the Arthurian kingdom in the final coronation scene.⁵² These are structurally significant junctures in the progression of Erec and Enide’s relationship and structurally significant points in the recursive pattern of the romance. Three times Erec wakes to hear Enide in a state of turmoil: in the first case her words jeopardise their relationship, and in the second and third instances, Erec rescues Enide and then *vice versa*, removing any remaining doubt about the strength of their reciprocal relationship. In the final two symbolic ‘awakenings’, the ‘Joie de la Cort’ and the coronation, Erec and Enide work together in perfect unison, and in doing so stimulate the revival of two communities. Lacy remarks that this ‘use of the incidents as a method of recapitulation gives to the work a thematic unity’.⁵³ But this repetition of theme and image also creates a structural unity not unlike the effect of

⁵⁰ Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, p. 106.

⁵¹ See also Donald Maddox, ‘Trois sur deux: théories de bipartition et de tripartition des œuvres de Chrétien’, *Œuvres et critiques*, 5 (1981), 91-102.

⁵² This is merely one set of examples of analogic connections that run through *Erec et Enide* – for further examples see Maddox, Lacy and Corinne Cooper-Deniau, “‘Conjointure’ et relation analogique dans *Erec et Enide*”, in *Un transfert culturel au XII^e siècle: “Erec et Enide” de Chrétien de Troyes et “Erec” de Hartmann von Aue*, ed. by Patrick Del Duca (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2010), pp. 21-42.

⁵³ Lacy, p. 80.

mise-en-abîme, whereby a smaller copy of a scene or narrative emerges out of a larger one and so forth.⁵⁴

This chapter has identified four illusory ends in *Erec et Enide*, but this does not necessarily prescribe a quadripartite structure: there are other analogies to be drawn between different episodes in the romance, some of which might contribute to alternative multistructural readings of *Erec et Enide*. Indeed, there are other moments in the romance where clusters of terminal features intersect with the end of a movement or section in the narrative, as at the end of prologue (ll. 15-20); when Erec departs after the contest for the sparrow-hawk (ll. 1269-83); after Erec and Enide are married (ll. 2187-90); when the couple take their leave of King Lac (ll. 2684-701), and when Erec falls fown from his horse in a deathlike swoon (ll. 4608-17). All of these could be characterised as illusory ends. In one particularly ambitious article, Thomas Elwood Hart uses Chrétien's references to Macrobius and the *quadrivium* to argue that the textual dimensions of *Erec et Enide* conform to a sophisticated mathematical design, which he then proceeds to plot on an abstract grid.⁵⁵ In any case, there is undoubtedly a more complex narrative structure at work here than can be organized into a bipartite or tripartite paradigm: this is Chrétien's *bele conjointure*.⁵⁶

1.7 Conclusions

There are two remaining questions about the ends of *Erec et Enide*: what is the significance of these multiple ends, and what drives the recursive movement of the narrative? The first is difficult to answer but might be illuminated by scrutiny of the second. As Sandra Hindman

⁵⁴ McGerr makes a similar point about Guillaume de Machaut's 'Ma fin est mon commencement', which involves mirror-imaging, formal circularity (of beginning and end), and recapitulation: see McGerr, p. 29.

⁵⁵ Thomas Elwood Hart, 'The *Quadrivium* and Chrétien's Theory of Composition: Some Conjectures and Conjectures', *Thomas Elwood Symposium*, 35.1 (1981) 57-86.

⁵⁶ 'It becomes evident that Chrétien was consciously constructing patterns of his own design along the general lines of more traditional patterns, thus transforming fundamental structures for his own purposes': Maddox, p. 15.

observes, most of the extended critical debate on the romance ‘focuses on what the evolving relationship between Erec and Enide as a couple conveys about the ideals of love in a chivalric society’.⁵⁷ For the most part, their relationship seems deserving of the scholarly attention it receives. Indeed, notwithstanding the critics, there is codicological evidence to support the importance of a concord between Erec and Enide. The Paris manuscript (Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 24403, fol. 140v), which is the only extant illuminated manuscript of this romance, includes three miniatures.⁵⁸ The second, central image features Erec and Enide together on a horse: Erec valiantly charges towards a robber in his knightly regalia with Enide sat behind him, face turned outwards in an elegant and beautiful posture.⁵⁹ The episode with which this illumination is associated in the romance contains a rhyming flourish not unlike the terminal features described earlier (ll. 2813-60). This would seem to confirm that this moment held particular significance for the romancer and warranted special treatment by the illuminator. An examination of this vignette does seem to suggest that their relationship is, or was for the illuminator at least, of central importance; even a cursory study of the illuminated manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes’s romances reveals that the depiction of a female character in such detail is unusual.⁶⁰

However, this focus on their relationship is not necessarily a means to present a story of ‘*recreantise* and social rehabilitation, of the struggle of sovereignty between husband and wife, or of the natural evolution of a marriage’.⁶¹ Chrétien’s prologue shows that he was deeply invested in perfecting his poetic practice, and for this reason it seems possible that the

⁵⁷ Sandra Hindman, *Sealed in Parchment: Rereadings of Knighthood in the Illuminated Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 129.

⁵⁸ Erec defends Enide from the robbers, *Erec et Enide*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 24403, fol. 140v: reproduced with the permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale overleaf on p. 59.

⁵⁹ The first of these miniatures depicts the hunt for the white stag, and the last picture shows Erec battling the giants: Hindman, pp. 134-6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-35.

⁶¹ Penny Sullivan, ‘The Presentation of Enide in the “premier vers” of Chrétien’s “Erec et Enide”’, *Medium Aevum*, 52.1 (1983), 77-89 (p. 77).



growing and proper enthalment of Erec with Enide instead represents, analogically, the poet's endeavour to arrange *matière* within an elegant structure, to balance form and content. This is the *nucleus* that lies beneath Chrétien's intricately conjoined *cortex*. While Erec may enter the story as the perfect embodiment of the courtly romance hero, his languidness and uxoriousness is soon exposed: he becomes infatuated with his beautiful wife and fails to make proper use of his abilities. His subsequent attempts to claim dominance over the romance world in fashion that subordinates Enide only serve to endanger himself and his wife. It is only when Erec and Enide work together in harmony, in different but balanced roles, that their relationship becomes effective.

It is therefore not fanciful to suggest that the figures of Erec and Enide come to stand in for chivalric *matière* and beautiful poetic form respectively.⁶² Like the poet trying to

⁶² The word *poète* comes into use in the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, and is first used to describe vernacular poets in the fourteenth century with the primary sense of 'allegorist': *The Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 507.

arrange his *matière* and *sens* into a *bele conjointure*, they must continuously test out their relationship until they find a proper balance, until they are working together for themselves and for the common good, as Chrétien directed in his prologue. It is this burgeoning relationship between Erec and Enide, and between *matière* and form, that drives the recursive movement of the narrative, with each illusory end constituting a failure to achieve true *conjointure* both thematically and structurally. In addition to this, Chrétien simultaneously proves that the conglomeration of semi-independent episodes he presumably found in the older Welsh, or possibly Breton, tales could be brought to a thematically and structurally coherent climax in multiple ways. His comprehensive approach also means that the end of every episode is accentuated poetically, and each of the couple's small successes celebrated in the manner of an ending, which means that closure is built incrementally over the course of the romance.

The title of the romance is therefore entirely felicitous: for while *Erec et Enide* ultimately tells the story of the gradual emergence of Erec as a communal poetic hero, the courtly couple play a pivotal role in accomplishing this. The prologue to Chrétien's second romance, *Cligès* (c. 1176), notably refers to this romance in title as 'Erec et Enide', and not to the singular 'Conte d'Erec', as he calls it in the prologue. In fact, it is quite possible that this variation is purposeful, since Chrétien may have wanted to deliberately conceal Enide's name until the marriage ceremony, gradually bringing her character into sharper focus in line with her increasingly prominent role in the romance. It is therefore a truly fitting end that when Erec finally dons his gown embroidered with the figures of the *quadrivium*, it is Enide standing by his side as both queen and wife. In this moment, learning and knighthood are shown to perfectly complement each other, and Erec finally comes to incarnate, in the words of Karl D. Uitti, a beautiful form of 'vernacularized' chivalry: 'the four Arts of the *quadrivium* adorn this young knight, who, as it were, has just undergone, or lived through, his personal,

and highly chivalric, trivium'.⁶³ The romance finally ends, and can only end, when Erec and Enide are joined in crowning marriage and poetry; when the courtly ideals of love, chivalry, and learning are brought into a harmonious balance with one another.

The *Erec* text helps to establish Chrétien's early ideas about the necessary ingredients for a romance narrative: the courtly couple, whose love is tested and ultimately affirmed through marriage; the adventure, which tests the hero's abilities and promotes his maturation before he is qualified to return to court or establish himself elsewhere as the head of a family or kingdom; and, finally, some element of the marvellous. While the parameters of Chrétien's specific brand of Arthurian romance naturally evolved over time, this thematic criteria is useful in that it helps to illuminate the subtle deviations from this initial model in the middle romances, those dating from the mid-part of his career, and the more extreme departure from it in the later unfinished *Conte du Graal*.

⁶³ Karl D. Uitti, 'Vernacularization and Old French Romance Mythopoesis with Emphasis on Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*', in *The Sower and His Seed: Essays on Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. by Rupert T. Pickens (Lexington: French Forum, 1983), pp. 100-01.

2. Antithesis in the Endings of *Cligès*, *Yvain* and *Lancelot*

2.1 Seeing Double

Of all Chrétien's Arthurian romances, *Le Conte du Graal* is most conspicuously unresolved. Its Perceval and Gawain components are imbalanced, the narrative as a whole lacks unity of action and it is unfinished, trailing off frustratingly *in medias res*. Because of this, *Le Conte du Graal* cannot, and perhaps does not seek to, replicate the *bel* denouement of *Erec et Enide* with its great crescendo of harmony, optimism, and beauty. The end of that romance is an expression of 'wholeness', an ideal *conjointure* embodied by the royal couple and the final picture of the integrated and joyful court. In this way, *Erec* embraces the principle of *universitas*, a belief in 'the basic unity and oneness of God's creation', a central tenet of twelfth-century Renaissance thought.¹ Sitting between these two counterpoints are Chrétien's three middle romances, probably written between 1176 and 1181: *Cligès*, *Le Chevalier de la charrette* (*Lancelot*), finished by Godefroi de Leigni, and *Le Chevalier au lion* (*Yvain*). On the face of it, all three reproduce the 'happy ending' of *Erec*, or at least present themselves as variations on that paradigmatic resolution. At the end of each one, the hero prevails and restores peace: Cligès ascends to the imperial throne, Yvain returns to Laudine, Lancelot triumphs over Meleagant. Unlike *Le Conte du Graal*, these romances have coherent plots and clearly defined endpoints, so there is no immediate sense of inconclusiveness, nor any reason

¹ For more on the origin and use of this term *universitas* in treatises and artistic work of the period, see Leslie T. Topsfield, 'The Inheritance', *Chrétien de Troyes: A Study of Arthurian Romances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-2; also Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, ed. and trans. by Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 1-48, especially pp. 5-8; cf. Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La Théologie au Douzième Siècle*, *Études de Philosophie Médiévale* (Paris: Vrin, 1957), pp. 19-51.

to suspect they represent anything other than fully worked out solutions to various conflicts between chivalry and courtly love in the Arthurian world.²

This chapter, however, will argue that a double vision comes into play at the end of each romance, created by the simultaneous presence of two opposing but balanced perspectives on the outcome. From their extratextual standpoint, the reader sees the arbitrariness of the conclusion; but, looking through the eyes of the hero, they also see with equal clarity how and why he might consider such a conclusion felicitous. Cligès marries his ‘amie et dame’ Fenice and together they rule over the Byzantine empire, overcoming Alis’s earlier attempt to disinherit his nephew by reneging on his oath never to marry.³ At the same time, the lovers are guilty of adultery and treason, and the epilogue states that all future emperors will imprison their wives because of the couple’s indiscretions. Lancelot prevails over the tyrannical Meleagant, who abducts Queen Guenevere and questions her fidelity to King Arthur. But the reader is privy to Lancelot and Guenevere’s affair and they are wise to the broad legitimacy of Meleagant’s accusations. Moreover, in three manuscripts, the epilogue states that Godefroi de Leigni, a novice, finished the romance at Chrétien’s behest, a revelation that reorients our understanding of its composition and completion.⁴ Finally, Yvain

² Chrétien’s works have long been understood as ‘problem’ romances, posing and then solving some kind of conflict or dilemma in relation to courtly love or chivalry: see Eugène Vinaver, ‘From Epic to Romance’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 46 (1964), 476-503 (p. 497 ff); Douglas Kelly, ‘Narrative Poetics: Rhetoric, Orality and Performance’, *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 52-63, especially pp. 60-61; Norris J. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay on Narrative Art* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), pp. 38-66.

³ The relevant lines in *Cligès* read, ‘Mes il l’apele amie et dame [...] Et chascun jor lor amors crut’: all references are to Kristian von Troyes, *Cligés*, ed. by Wendelin Foerster (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1910), p. 184, ll. 6754-59; although this German edition uses the ‘e’ acute accent (Cligés), I will be using the grave accent (Cligès) as per the French tradition.

⁴ The epilogue names ‘Godefroiz de Leigni, li clers./A parfinee LA CHARRETE/Mes nus hom blasme ne l’an mete/Se sor Crestien a ovré,/Car ç’a il fet par le boen gré/Crestien, qui le comança’ [Godefroi de Leigni, the clerk,/has written the conclusion of “the Cart”;/but let no one blame him/for having completed Chretien’s work/for it was done with the good will/of Chretien who started it]: all references are to Chrétien de Troyes, *Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes: Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, ed. by Mario Roques, vol. 3 (Paris: Champion, 1983), ll. 7124-29; there is some variation in spellings of ‘charrete/charrette’, but I will be using ‘charrette’.

returns to the fountain of Landuc and happily resumes his role as lord and husband over Laudine, forgetting the earlier conflict over his absence. Yet Yvain fails in his duties as a husband, and Laudine welcomes him back only because Lunete tricks her into swearing an ambiguous oath. Each romance arrives at a ‘happy ending’, then, but there is always a ‘catch’, a final ‘twist’ in the tale as the pairs of conflicting positions are implied and left unresolved.

In tragedy and comedy, the writer resolves this tension when the protagonist realises the truth of their situation at the end of the narrative. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses this ‘discovery’ as *anagnorisis*, the moment at which the hero wakes to the perspective of the audience and his earlier worldview collapses. Aristotle’s writings on dramatic form are useful in the sense that they provide a framework with which to examine analogous reversals and revelations in medieval romance. But Chrétien is not writing drama and there is no moment of ‘discovery’ for his heroes at the end. One of the underlying assumptions of traditional scholarship is that Chrétien’s heroes gain greater self-awareness through adventure and crisis.⁵ However, unlike the classic instance of Oedipus, who stabs out his own eyes after discovering that he has killed his father, married his mother and brought the plague upon Thebes, neither Cligès nor Lancelot acknowledges the error of his ways in the final stages or admit responsibility for the outcome of the action, though Yvain shows some regret for his

⁵ Implicit in discussions of the ‘typical’ pattern of Chrétien’s romances (preliminary success-crisis-second success) is the idea that his heroes gain greater self-awareness through crisis and adventure: Jean Frappier, ‘Chrétien de Troyes’, in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History*, ed. by Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 157-92 (p. 181); William S. Woods, ‘The Plot Structure in Four Romances of Chrestien de Troyes’, *Studies in Philology*, 50 (1953), 1-15 (p. 4); see more recently, W. R. J. Barron, ‘Chrétien and the Gawain-poet: Master and Pupil or Twin Temperaments?’ *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly, Keith Busby, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), pp. 255-84 (p. 256); Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued: A Study of the ‘Conte du Graal’ and its Verse Continuations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 50, n. 31; Elspeth Kennedy, however, challenges the assumption that Chrétien’s heroes always enjoy final ‘success’ in ‘Failure in Arthurian Romance’, in *The Grail: A Casebook*, ed. by Dhira B. Mahoney (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 279-99 (pp. 282-3).

failings as a husband. None of the knightly heroes suffers any lasting consequences, however. At the end, then, the reader is left, on the one hand, with the ‘happy ending’ brought about by the hero’s triumph and, on the other, with a sense of unease aroused by the murky circumstances of this triumph, and the unlikely coalition of irony and idealism that remains.⁶

Few scholars have sought a structural device or narrative convention to describe what is happening at the end of these romances beyond the much-discussed trope of irony. As in Peter Haidu’s study of *Cligès* and *Le Conte du Graal*, which highlights the ironic character of major narrative junctures in those specific romances, the endpoints tend to be discussed in a wider context of irony and comedy across the texts.⁷ In contrast to this critical trend, Leslie Topsfield draws an implicit parallel between the three romances in the context of denouement, recognising that *Lancelot* and *Yvain* have ‘inconclusive’ endings, while *Cligès* ends in ‘unresolved conflict’.⁸ In addition, though D. H. Green considers the ‘problem’ of each romance to be solved, he agrees there is always ‘a catch’, and Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner highlights a larger ambiguity about closure in Chrétien’s final three romances, but

⁶ Keith Busby queries whether it is even appropriate to speak of ‘expectations’ in relation to Chrétien de Troyes, since he created the horizon of expectation in romance: Keith Busby, ‘The Characters and the Setting’, in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, vol. 1, ed. by Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly and Keith Busby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), pp. 67-8; however, Lacy highlights the importance of narrative patterns internal to the work in the creation of expectations, and indicates that authors probably expected their audience to bring a certain set of expectations drawn from knowledge of other poems: Norris J. Lacy, ‘The Typology of Arthurian Romance’, in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, vol. 1, pp. 33-56 (p. 49); Topsfield also points out that Chrétien would have assumed a degree of familiarity with the *triade classique*, the *Tristan* story and the poetry of the troubadours in his twelfth-century audience, and Le Goff and Le Roy Ladurie note that, generally speaking, ‘[u]ne des caractéristiques du conte merveilleux, c’est la happy end[ing]’: see Topsfield, ‘The Inheritance’, p. 12; Jacques Le Goff and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, ‘Mélusine maternelle et défricheuse’, *Annales*, 26 (1971), 587-622 (p. 598).

⁷ Peter Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance: Irony and Comedy in Cligès and Perceval* (Geneva: Droz, 1968); see also, for example, Ana Sofia Laranjinha, ‘L’ironie comme principe structurant chez Chrétien de Troyes’, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 41 (1998), 175-182; Kôji Watanabe, ‘L’ironie dans l’oeuvre de Chrétien de Troyes: de l’approche rhétorique à l’approche mythologique’, *Perspectives médiévales*, 22 (1996), 80-84; D. H. Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979); Gillian Knight, ‘Chrétien de Troyes: his “Rhetoric of Love”’, *Reading Medieval Studies*, 14 (1988), 77-110; most recently, Brian J. Reilly, ‘Irony and Cognitive Empathy in Chrétien de Troyes’s Gettier Problem’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 41.1 (2017), 160-184.

⁸ Topsfield, pp. 101, 204.

does not include *Cligès* in this discussion.⁹ While their remarks point towards a common pattern of inconclusiveness, this chapter will suggest the double endings of these romances are shaped by similar concerns and will seek to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the function and significance of their duality.

The final equilibrium of irony and idealism that characterises each end seems to be produced by a last-minute shift in circumstances, a narrative move which initially resonates with the conventional reversals of classical drama, and more contemporary ‘gimmicks’.¹⁰ Part of the work of this chapter will be to test out which of these theories might provide most insight into the dual quality of Chrétien’s endings. It will ultimately suggest, however, that the dual nature of these ends has its basis in the rhetorical art of antithesis (or *contentio*) as it emerged from the poetry of the troubadours at the court of Poitiers in the twelfth century, and possibly in other forms of paradox such as ‘*para-doxa*’, an idea or statement that runs counter to common opinion.¹¹ Together these devices of medieval description give rise to series of antitheses across the three romances, culminating in the two irreconcilable viewpoints on the narrative events implied at the end of each one. In fact, it is not until the end of each romance that the full implications of this compositional technique become clear: a romance built on antithesis cannot achieve the rounded perfection of *Erec et Enide*. Readers who expect an unequivocally ‘happy’ or thematically-unified ending, then, may find *Cligès*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain* unsatisfying; at the same time, however, these antithetical endings allow Chrétien to

⁹ Green, p. 113; Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 89.

¹⁰ On ‘gimmick’, see Raymond Chandler, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, *Saturday Review of Literature*, 15 April 1950, (New York: Saturday Review Associates, 1950), pp. 13-14.

¹¹ Antithesis is the opposition of ideas emphasised by a balance of sharply opposed words: see Edmond Faral, *Les Arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1924), pp. 76-7; among medieval writers in the tradition of *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Geoffrey of Vinsauf uses ‘*contentio*’ in the *Poetria Nova*, while Matthew of Vendôme uses ‘*antithetum*’ in the *Ars Versificatoria* (pp. 173, 224, 322); also William Michael Purcell, ‘Gervasius of Melkley’s *Ars Poetica*’, *Ars Poetriae* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 116-17; in relation to Chrétien, see Topsfield, pp. 18-19.

provide a pleasurable and lasting ‘aesthetic distance’ because of the unresolved tension between the reader’s knowledge and the character’s belief.¹²

Yet, whether readers are delighted or irritated by the sense of inconclusiveness created by the final antithesis of *Cligès*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain*, in each case the bifurcation of viewpoints at the end approaches certain realities of medieval (and perhaps even modern) society, with its injustices, trade-offs, and compromises. This reality is not the ‘mores and ideals’ of feudal knighthood highlighted by Erich Auerbach, since the portrayal of exemplary behaviour is the fundamental purpose of courtly romance and hardly controversial.¹³ Nor is it Auerbach’s ‘exterior forms of life’, though of course Chrétien does not neglect the strata of contemporary society in his romances.¹⁴ Rather, by placing his heroes in opposition to other significant characters at the end, and refusing to fully resolve this antagonism, Chrétien invests his romance figures with a degree of internal, psychological realism. Even though all three romances have clear endpoints and formal closure, then, because each is predicated upon an antithesis, they represent an interpretively open form of literature, which might lead the scholar to a different conclusion on every reading.

2.2 *Cligès*: The Dynastic Lovers and the Shadow of the Harem

¹² See Topsfield, p. 102; the concept of ‘aesthetic distance’ is the governing idea of Peter Haidu’s book of the same title, that Chrétien establishes and maintains a relationship of distance between the audience and the characters by means of ironic devices that prevent identification and ‘involvement’ of the audience with the narrative: Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance*, pp. 9-13.

¹³ Erich Auerbach, ‘The Knight Sets Forth’, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 123-142 (p. 131 ff).

¹⁴ Ibid.; the episode of the ‘Pesme Aventure’ in *Yvain*, for example, famously depicts ill-treated textile weavers: Gerard J. Brault, ‘Fonction et sens de l’épisode du château de Pesme Aventure dans l’*Yvain* de Chrétien de Troyes’, *Mélanges de langue et littérature françaises du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance offerts à Monsieur Charles Foulon, professeur de langue et littérature françaises du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance, par ses collègues, ses élèves et ses amis* (Rennes: Institut de français, Université de Haute-Bretagne, 1980), pp. 59-64; Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet, ‘La pire des aventures: le chevalier Yvain et les tisseuses de soie’, *Clio: Femmes, genres, histoire*, 38 (2013), 235-240.

For those expecting an assurance of dynastic prosperity in the manner of *Erec et Enide*, the ambiguous ending of *Cligès* will seem incongruous and disorienting. The end of the romance rests on an uneasy dichotomy of joy and trepidation:

N'onques cil celi ne mescrut
 Ne querela de nule chose.
 Onques ne fu tenue anclose,
 Si come ont puis esté tenues
 Celes qu'après li sont venues. (ll. 6760-64)

[He never doubted her in any way/nor ever quarrelled over anything./She was never kept confined/As have been since then/Those who came after her.]

Joy at the coronation of Cligès and Fenice, the rightful heir to the Byzantine empire and his paramour, the daughter of the German Emperor and the reigning-but-assumed-dead empress, who are welcomed home without public suspicion, and who enjoy lifelong happiness in their mutually beneficial but paradoxically courtly marriage.¹⁵ Yet there is equally trepidation at the retribution that lies in store for the future wives of Constantinople, 'tenue anclose', who pay the price for the lovers' adulterous relationship and deception of the late emperor, Cligès's uncle Alis. In the 'quicksilver flash' between celebration and cynicism and esteem and contempt (captured by the turn of 'Si come'), as perfect trust turns to oppression and

¹⁵ Passionate or true love (*fin' amor*) as it emerged in the twelfth century was constituted in hostility to marriage, and some prominent figures, such as Marie the Countess of Champagne (and Chrétien's patroness), even declared that love was incompatible with marriage; loyalty to the higher law of *donnoi* or courtly love was privileged above fidelity in marriage: Denis de Rougemont, 'The Tristan Myth', *Love in the Western World*, trans. by Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 34; Andreas Capellanus's dictum that love was impossible in marriage was probably a playful inversion of the Church's view that adultery is possible within it; adultery was strictly condemned in the married woman because of inheritance problems, see Tony Hunt, *Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain (Le chevalier au lion)*, Critical Guides to French Texts (London: Grant and Cutler, 1986), p. 53; Gaston Paris pioneered the use of the term 'amour courtois' [courtly love] in relation to Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la charrette*, which, in his definition, is illicit, furtive and extra-conjugal and is predicated upon the lover's submission to the lady: Gaston Paris, 'Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde, Lancelot du Lac: II: Le Conte de la Charrette', *Romania*, 12 (1883), 459-534 (p. 518); for a full definition of *fin' amor*, see Sarah Kay, 'Fin' amor', *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
 <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198661252.001.0001/acref-9780198661252-e-1791>> [last accessed 10 March 2020]; for more on courtliness in relation to *Cligès* specifically, see Norris J. Lacy, "'Cligès" and Courtliness', *Interpretations*, 15.2 (1984), 18-24

reward to punishment, the reader is left alone to grapple with the simultaneous justice and arbitrariness of the final state of affairs.¹⁶

There is certainly a measure of satisfaction in knowing that Alis has suffered the consequences for breaking his oath to his brother, Cligès's father, Alexander. In marrying Fenice, Alis makes a calculated move to disinherit his nephew, and thus the reader has cause to celebrate with the couple, having sympathised with Cligès and admired Fenice's ingenuity in extricating herself from the marital bed. More than this, Cligès is a great knight by both eastern and Arthurian standards, and his relationship with Fenice, though illicit, is exemplary in its courtliness. In fact, the lovers receive explicit praise from Chrétien in the closing verses, where he comments, 'chascun jor lor amors crut' (every day their love grew stronger; ll. 6750-61). Their private bliss has become a public good in which all can delight.

Yet the reader is acutely aware that the couple do not suffer any lasting personal consequences for committing treason, or for the string of reprehensible schemes that allow them to continue their adulterous relationship, also tainted by incest. This viewpoint is reinforced by the reader's foreknowledge of the long-term repercussions: punishment for the couple's indiscretions is displaced onto their successors, the anxiety-ridden emperors and unfortunate empresses, confined to a 'chanbre' remarkably like the Oriental harem for fear they will repeat Fenice's duplicity. The penalty seems unfair at best and, at worst, barbaric. Far from assuring imperial stability through the example of an idealised monarchical partnership comparable to Erec and Enide, or the noble love of Alexander and Soredamors, our last glimpse of the east in *Cligès* reveals that the new empress has brought the dynasty into disrepute.

¹⁶ This phrase 'quicksilver flash' is Topsfield's, used in his discussion of thematic antithesis and the poetry of Guilhem and Marcabru in twelfth-century France: see Topsfield, p. 4.

The revelation about Fenice's legacy has eclipsed almost all other points of interest in scholarship on the end of *Cligès*: scholars argue variously that this ending is little more than a 'poeticized anti-feminist cliché', that it recasts the story as 'an aetiological fable supplying us with sufficient reason for the existence of harems', or that it merely reiterates the tragic fate of Tristan and Iseut.¹⁷ Historically, these intertextual allusions to the *Roman de Tristan* have shaped interpretations of the text as a whole and this comment on Fenice's eventual notoriety, a reputation she is desperate to avoid (ll. 3105-7), only reinforces the characterisation of the text as a 'neo-Tristan' or 'anti-Tristan'.¹⁸ In fact, Norris Lacy points out, in the end the reputation Fenice earns is significantly worse than Yseut. She is remembered for two deceptions rather than one: 'poison' and 'traison' (the *fausse morte*, or feigned death, l. 5403 ff.), and the former does not even absolve her of responsibility as in the case of her analogue.¹⁹ Following Peter Haidu, scholars including Lacy, Topsfield, and Joan Tasker Grimbert have recognised that the proleptic digression in the closing verses is not an isolated

¹⁷ For the end of *Cligès* as 'a poeticized anti-feminist cliché' see Michelle A. Freeman, *The Poetics of Translatio Studii and Conjointure: Chrétien de Troyes's Cligès* (Lexington, Ky: French Forum, 1979), p. 39; for this comment on the poem as fable see Peter E. Nolan, 'Mythopoetic Evolution: "Erec et Enide", "Cligès", and Yvain"', *Symposium*, 25.2 (1971), 139-161 (p. 148); and for a more recent comparison to the Tristan story see Peggy McCracken, 'Forgetting to Conclude', in *Thinking Through Chrétien de Troyes* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), p. 140.

¹⁸ There are two main strands of the *Tristan* story, the courtly branch (Thomas of Britain c. 1173, Gottfried on Strassburg c. 1215) and the common branch (Beroul's *Le Roman de Tristan* c. 1170); the love triangle between Mark, Tristan and Yseut is common to all. There are frequent allusions to this triangle in *Cligès*, and new iterations of key elements: the potion is no longer the cause of love, but the instrument that allows Fenice to avoid relations with Alis; Fenice fakes her own death rather than dying for real like the Celtic lovers, which allows her to live with *Cligès* in secret and eventually to rule the empire; though *Tristan* is the most obvious source text, the prologue to *Cligès*, with its direct reference to Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, encourages us to look for Ovidian irony; other possible influences include the contemporary *Brut* and *Eneas*, and Virgil: see, for instance, A. G. Van Hamel, 'Cligès et Tristan', *Romania*, 33 (1904), 465-89; Alexandre Micha, 'Tristan et Cligès', *De la chanson de geste au roman* (Geneva: Droz, 1976), pp. 63-72; D. W. Robertson, Jr., 'Chrétien's *Cligès* and the Ovidian spirit', *Comparative Literature*, 7 (1955), 35-42; Foster E. Guyer, 'The influence of Ovid on Crestien de Troyes', *The Romanic Review*, 12 (1921) 97-134, 216-247; however, Maddox highlights the 'over-abundance' of work on *Cligès* in relation to its sources, as does Kinoshita: Donald Maddox, 'Critical Trends and Recent Work on the "Cligès" of Chrétien de Troyes', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 74.4 (1973), 730-45 (p. 743); Sharon Kinoshita, 'The Poetics of *Translatio*: French-Byzantine Relations in Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès*', *Exemplaria*, 8.2 (1996), 315-354 (p. 318).

¹⁹ Lacy, 'Cliges and Courtliness', p. 21.

opprobrium but only the final flourish in Chrétien's intricate ironic programme.²⁰ Lacy, for example, finds 'the conclusion is the most ironic and equivocal portion of a highly ironic romance', while Grimbert thinks 'the irony that pervades the "happy ending" in Cligès is virtually inevitable, especially since the illusion/reality dichotomy permeates the romance'.²¹

While most critics appear to be satisfied with the explanation of this ending as an 'ironical twist', there may be a more complex mechanism at work here of which irony is only a part.²² Indeed, to say this ending is 'ironic' does not explain why this particular instance feels sharper than those which precede it, so much so that, according to Haidu, it breaks the fictional 'contract' with the reader by showing fantasy 'destroyed' by reality.²³ Nor does it resolve whether the revelation truly 'subverts' that happy ending; or why it is 'unexpected' even after the reader has been prepared to a certain extent by myriad ironies across the romance.²⁴ Fundamentally, 'irony' does not fully illuminate the aesthetic operation of this ending, or clarify whether the reader responds with admiration, disdain, or fascination. Moreover, by focusing on the flashforward we overlook the other aspects with which it works in conjunction to make this ending strange and incongruous: the needless involvement of Arthur and his legions, the veneration of the lovers, whose Tristanic downfall seemed inevitable, and the real cost of their affair, the institutionalisation of depravity in the east, which debunks the contemporary socio-cultural narrative of *translatio studii et imperii*, the

²⁰ Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance*, p. 112; Lacy, 'Cliges and Courtliness', p. 20 ff.; Topsfield, pp. 64, 101; Joan Tasker Grimbert, 'Cligès and the Chansons: A Slave to Love', in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 120-36.

²¹ Lacy, p. 20; Lacy also emphasises the 'equivocal' nature of the romance's ending; he ends by saying that Cliges has an 'equivocating conclusion', a word that suggests concealment, although it is unclear what Chrétien might have concealed here, if anything (p. 24); Grimbert, p. 136.

²² Topsfield, p. 64.

²³ According to Haidu, Chrétien 'destroys the illusion basic to the fictional world' by showing how fantasy is 'destroyed' by reality; 'their isolation – the condition of their love – is seen to lead to world-wide fame as an example of the deception lovers use': Haidu, p. 110.

²⁴ Grimbert, p. 124; Nolan, p. 148.

conceptual transfer of learning and power from antiquity to medieval Europe famously alluded to in the prologue (ll. 1-44).²⁵

2.2.1 The Reversal of Situation

The immediate lead up to the denouement initially suggests its multiple incongruities, and the element of ‘surprise’, are the result of a last-minute reversal of fortune or situation.²⁶ When Cligès returns to Greece from his exploits in Arthurian Britain (ll. 4344-5139), he and Fenice are unable to resist their affections for one another and so she enlists Cligès’s help to deceive Alis once again. Where Thessala’s first potion succeeds in making Alis believe he and Fenice have consummated their marriage, though he has emphatically had ‘neant’ (l. 3332-70), the second potion incapacitates Fenice, convincing all of Constantinople that she is dead. This elaborate scheme ensures there will no longer be any obstacles to their happiness and, after

²⁵ This historiographical concern is signalled by the poet’s use of topical invention in the prologue, where he reformulates the principles of *translatio studii et imperii* [transfer of learning and power] to reflect the aristocratic values of ‘clergie’ and ‘chevalerie’; for more on topical invention, see Douglas Kelly, ‘The Art of Description’, in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, vol. 1, pp. 191-223; Kelly, ‘“Translatio studii”: Translation, Adaptation, and Allegory in Medieval French Literature’, *Philological Quarterly*, 57.3 (1978), 287-310 (p. 287); the concept of *translatio studii et imperii* was based on the classical definitions of *translatio* as metaphor given by Cicero (*De Oratore*) and Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria*); Hugh of Saint Victor and Otto of Freising later conceived this transmission would involve the transfer of two interrelated virtues from one civilisation to another, principal knowledge and world leadership: see Hugh of Saint Victor, ‘Didascalicon: Book Three’, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of Saint Victor*, trans. by Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 83-6; Otto, Bishop of Freising, *The Two Cities: A Chronicle of Universal History to the Year 1146 A.D.*, trans. by Charles Christopher Mierow (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), p. 167; for more on the definition of *translatio* in this specific context see Freeman, pp. 11-18; for further selected explanations of what exactly *translatio* entails, of which the most celebrated example is the *Aeneid*’s account of the transfer of empire from the Hellenic world to Rome, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 384-85; A. G. Jongkees, ‘Translatio studii: Les avatars d’un theme médiéval’, in *Miscellanea mediaevalia in memoriam Jan Frederik Niermeyer* (Groningen: J. B. Walters, 1967), pp. 41-51; David Louis Gassman, ‘Translatio studii: A Study of Intellectual History in the Thirteenth Century’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cornell University, 1973), p. 42; Kimberley K. Bell, ‘“Translatio” and the Constructs of a Roman Nation in Virgil’s “Aeneid”’, *Rocky Mountain Review*, 62.1 (2008), 11-24.

²⁶ ‘Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity’: text and translation are taken from ‘Aristotle’s Poetics’, in *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, trans. by S. H. Butcher, 4th edn (New York: Dover, 1951), p. 41, XI.

the physicians from Salerno are disposed of and Cligès retrieves Fenice from her tomb, they are finally free to enjoy a new clandestine life in the tower constructed for them by Jehan.²⁷ Ironically, it is not long before Fenice wishes to connect with the outside world again and this leads to Bertrand's observation of the couple in the secluded orchard (this moment is not dissimilar to when Tristan and Yseut are spotted in the forest in *Tristan*).²⁸ The lovers flee their paradise and Bertrand reports what he has seen to Alis, who swears he will take vengeance and issues orders for their capture. However, just when Cligès has recruited King Arthur's retinue to his cause, a messenger arrives to announce Alis has suddenly and conveniently died of grief, having been unable to apprehend his nephew. At the eleventh hour, then, the renewed threat evaporates and Cligès is restored as the rightful emperor of Greece with his new wife at his side.

The quick succession of about-turns in the final few hundred lines of *Cligès*, and the abruptness with which the hero's fortunes change to bring the narrative to an end, bears some resemblance to the *peripeteia* of ancient Greek theatre, but in its comic aspect.²⁹ Aristotle defines *peripeteia* as a sudden shift in the tragic protagonist's fortunes and circumstances from good to bad, which usually leads to their downfall. Comedy, however, reverses these principles: the hero's fortunes change from misery to happiness, typically as the result of wish-fulfilment. Aristotle also emphasises the importance of the unexpected, which occurs in the most noteworthy plots: the effect of a text is heightened, he remarks, 'when the events come on us by surprise'.³⁰ Chrétien cannot have known the *Poetics*, which was not available in the West until more than three hundred years after his romances were compiled.³¹ But as

²⁷ Haidu, p. 98.

²⁸ See also Lucie Polak, 'Cligès, Fénice et l'arbre d'amour', *Romania*, 93 (1972), 303-16.

²⁹ 'Aristotle's Poetics', trans. by Butcher, p. 27, VI., 9-14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39, IX., 11-12; of course, Aristotle is approaching this issue from the angle of tragedy, but he talks more broadly about plot, and whether the character is destined for good or bad fortune.

³¹ A. C. Hamilton, and others, eds, 'Aristotle and his Commentators', in *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 58; see also *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics*, ed. by Leighton D. Reynolds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); E. N. Tigerstedt,

Rupert T. Pickens has also found, Aristotle's descriptions of dramatic forms can help us to investigate and identify analogous literary devices in medieval romance.³² Moreover, as Topsfield explains, the sudden twist of fortune was characteristic of many romances, and appears to have 'found favour' as a stylistic device with courtly audiences.³³

At the end of *Cligès*, the lovers face punishment and death after their hideaway is discovered 'as soon as narrative necessity demands it'; but against all odds, this predicament is reduced to nothing and they emerge from the story triumphant, both as lovers and leaders.³⁴ This is in part because they are concealed from Alis's men (some of whom are sympathetic to their plight) by Thessala's magic, and in part because they receive the support of great-uncle Arthur's forces. But the most pivotal and opportune development is Alis's death, decisive but notably bathetic after the considerable emphasis placed on the grand scale of the preparations for war (ll. 6672-705). In line with comic peripeteia, then, the poet abruptly restores the prosperity of the protagonist at the end of *Cligès*. Beroul rationalises the analogous reversal of situation in *Tristan* by imposing a time limit on the potion (as did many of his successors), but Chrétien makes no such effort, and seems content to allow his readers to wonder whether his hero is worthy of this success. Indeed, the effect of comic peripeteia is generally twofold: it deflates the narrative world and undermines the significance of its events.³⁵ This might help to explain why the irony of the final lines elicits such strong responses: everything is made insignificant, only to have sudden, far-reaching historical significance.

'Observations on the Reception of the Aristotelian Poetics in the Latin West', *Studies in the Renaissance*, 15 (1968), 7-24.

³² See Rupert T. Pickens, 'The Poetics of Paradox in the *Roman de Mélusine*', in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, ed. by Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 48-75 (p. 59).

³³ Topsfield, p. 88.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See Roger W. Herzel, "'Anagnorisis" and "Peripeteia" in Comedy', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26.4 (1974), 495-505 (pp. 499-500).

But in comedy as well as tragedy, anagnorisis must precede peripeteia; it is the self-discovery that leads to the downfall or ascent of the protagonist. According to Roger W. Herzl, it is therefore ‘more universally useful to think of the peripeteia as the character’s obligation to restructure his vision of the world than as an abrupt change in the external circumstances of his fortune’.³⁶ Yet neither Cligès nor Fenice acknowledge the dubious morals of their relationship nor do they make any attempt to rectify their wrongdoing; not even Cligès’s visit to Arthurian Britain, which might have presented an opportunity for both parties to reflect on the repercussions of their actions in the world at large, prompts them to consider a perspective outside of their insular bubble. That they live out their days in blissful ignorance of how they have doomed their successors suggests classic peripeteia cannot fully account for the ambivalent ending of *Cligès*. It is the reader who is plunged into an unfamiliar realm of knowledge right at the end and who discovers a more double ‘vision of the world’, with all its contradictions brought into sharp focus.³⁷

2.2.2 The Medieval Gimmick

The convention of ‘gimmick’, or what has become known as ‘Chandler’s Law’, might provide further insight into the aesthetic operation of the ending, as well as the endings of *Lancelot and Yvain*.³⁸ The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘gimmick’ as ‘a gadget; spec. a contrivance for dishonestly regulating a gambling game, or an article used in a conjuring trick; now usually a tricky or ingenious device, gadget, idea, etc.’.³⁹ In literary criticism the term is used to describe a contrived ending with superficial and possibly comic appeal.

³⁶ Herzl, p. 498.

³⁷ ‘Thus the peripeteia may or may not plunge the character into misfortune, but it must always plunge him into a new and unfamiliar world of knowledge, the world which the audience already inhabits’: *ibid.*, p. 499.

³⁸ See note 10.

³⁹ ‘gimmick, n.’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/78347> [last accessed 10 March 2020].

Raymond Chandler, for instance, once recommended that writers who had somehow painted themselves into a corner of the plot should ‘have a man come through door with a gun in his hand’.⁴⁰ But the device has applications beyond an occasional expedient in pulp narratives. William Golding used a device at the end of his novels to shift the focus or emphasis of the whole, as when the naval officer appears at the end of *Lord of the Flies* and ‘rescues’ the boys, reducing their savagery to child’s play once again; he called this a ‘gimmick’.⁴¹

At the end of all three of Chrétien’s romances, an unexpected development in the narrative similarly refocuses its emphasis so that the reader retrospectively rethinks where they understood the text to be going, what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls ‘retrospective patterning’.⁴² This refocusing trick or ‘surprise ending’ corresponds with Northrop Frye’s ‘Hollywood’ gimmick in that it may arbitrarily produce a happy ending when the hero is on the verge of a catastrophic overthrow.⁴³ It also resonates with Sianne Ngai’s recent analysis of the gimmick form as it emerged in the literary culture of industrial capitalism: she highlights the tendency of ‘gimmicky’ narratives to backpedal on the rules and direction of the earlier plot, which elicits a mixture of admiration and disdain in the audience. Such a

⁴⁰ Chandler, pp. 13-14.

⁴¹ William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 246-8; *Pincher Martin* offers another example of this ‘trick’; in that novel, it becomes apparent at the end that the narrator has been dead from the beginning: see James Gindin, “‘Gimmick’ and Metaphor in the Novels of William Golding”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 6.2 (1960), 145-52 (p. 145-8).

⁴² ‘Since the impression of design operates during the reading of the poem as a running hypothesis, the conclusion may be crucial in either confirming it or not. When it is not confirmed, the conclusion may create an instantaneous readjustment of the hypothesis – what I have referred to as retrospective patterning’: Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 212.

⁴³ ‘The surprise ending is one which forces and rewards a readjustment of the reader’s expectations; it justifies itself retrospectively’: Smith, p. 213; Frye writes, ‘we may know that the convention of comedy will make some kind of happy ending inevitable, but still for each play the dramatist must produce a distinctive “gimmick” or “weenie”, to use two disrespectful Hollywood synonyms for *anagnorisis* [...] We notice too how frequently a comic dramatist tries to bring his action as close to a catastrophic overthrow of the hero as he can get it, and then reverses the action as quickly as possible [...] Any reader can think of many comedies in which the fear of death, sometimes a hideous death, hangs over the central character to the end, and is dispelled so quickly that one has almost the sense of awakening from nightmare’: Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 170-9.

response is productive because it cultivates ‘fascination with the way things come together’.⁴⁴ As we shall see, Chrétien’s aesthetic trickery similarly exposes the processes of textual action to the reader.

In the final vision of Cligès and his ‘amie et dame’ Fenice presented between lines 6742-61, the lovers seem to ossify into the ideal courtly and, crucially, socially integrated couple. But this representation is destabilised by the doom of the empresses, which refutes the idea that the couple’s deceitful path to aristocratic power could lead to an unequivocally happy ending. From a teleological perspective, this ending is strongly closural because the revelation that Cligès and Fenice are responsible for the ‘present day’ imprisonment of the queens provides the narrative with a purpose. Yet it is also gratuitous and antithetical to the lovers’ success: this is not what Cligès and Fenice imagined their story to be about. At the end of Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*, the narrative of the past similarly enters the horizon of the present (‘In which into this day in noble wyse/Men doon to Crist and to his seinte [Cecilia] servyse’), but without any of the uncomfortable implications of *Cligès*’s teleology.⁴⁵ The final proleptic turn modifies the value and impact of the heroic arc and the love story, runs counter to the glossy (though tragic) ending given to Alexander and Soredamors, and makes those readers who found comfort in the dynastic ending feel tricked or, at least, misled. In fact, readers of *Cligès* will feel doubly tricked if they expect the epilogue to manifest the migration of the cultural hegemony from ‘Grece’ to ‘France’ naturalised by the prologue (ll. 1-44). In the opening lines, Chrétien reformulates *translatio studii et imperii*, the idea of a westward and linear movement of culture conceived by Hugh of Saint Victor in the twelfth century, to accommodate the aristocratic values ‘chevalerie’ (chivalry) and ‘clergie’

⁴⁴ Ngai has emphasised the contradictory nature of the gimmick as it has emerged from the literary culture of industrial capitalism, whose aesthetic trickery, and tendency to ‘renew’ on and abbreviate everything that has come before, elicits both wonder and suspicion in equal measure: Sianne Ngai, ‘Theory of the Gimmick’, *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (2017), 466-505 (p. 467).

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Second Nun’s Tale’, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor, 2nd edn (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2012), p. 372, ll. 552-3.

(clerical learning; ll. 30-5).⁴⁶ This creates expectation for a sort of organic revivification of historical eastern cultural excellence in the Arthurian west.

In the manner of the gimmick form, the final lines of *Cligès* spectacularly contradict these expectations, and therefore the overall emphasis of the whole. In bringing to light narrative proof of historical eastern depravity, the long-line of empresses housed in an institution of eunuchs (ll. 6772-83), the end of *Cligès* calls into question the rationale that locates the east as a source of cultivated knowledge and civilised leadership, and thus works against the frame of reference (the process of *translatio*) established in the prologue. Sharon Kinoshita points out that the representation of the eastern empresses had some historical basis in actual households of Byzantine empresses, administered by eunuchs.⁴⁷ Yet whether or not this glimpse into the future is historically accurate, it shows that the eastern emperors will reject the idealised courtly relationship, typified by Cligès and Fenice, revealing eastern antipathy towards the precepts of chivalry and *fin'amor*, as well as a general tendency towards tyranny and oppression. Through gimmickry, then, Chrétien slyly insinuates there may never have been any need for historical eastern authority, 'chevalerie' and 'clergie' as per his prologue, to come over from Greece to France in the first place, though considering Chrétien translated the *Ars Amatoria* ('l'Art d'Amors', l. 3) and other works of Ovid, such irreverence was perhaps more tongue-in-cheek than serious.

The claustration of the empresses and its literary consequences, the depreciation of the 'courtly' dynastic marriage and the medieval commonplace of *translatio*, are gimmicky because they shift the focus and meaning of the whole: Arthurian romance is no longer about courtly love as a path to dynastic security, nor is *Cligès* about the origins of cultural transfer

⁴⁶ See note 25.

⁴⁷ Yet she also acknowledges that this epilogue 'complicates our reading of the romance' and suggests it really functions to discredit 'German claims in the sweepstakes to assume the hegemony of ancient Greece and imperial Rome' by 'ascribing the origin of this *Greek* custom to the (mis)behaviour of the *western* emperor's daughter': Kinoshita, 'The Poetics of *Translatio*', p. 57.

from east to west. It also causes the reader to re-evaluate their relationship to the text. The reader has, as Haidu puts it, ‘always been privileged to know the reality withheld from the characters’ and they are still allowed to share the poet’s view of things in the final lines.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the order of things at the end leaves the reader in the dark until the last moment: they are not told of the despotic harem in advance of the ‘happy ending’, and this ‘gimmick’ propels the story into the realm of historical reality, reducing the reader’s aesthetic distance from the characters, and leaving them stranded in a strange limbo between the ‘in the know’ club of the poet and the ignorance of the textual world. Ngai contends that feudal, pre-capitalist audiences, in line with their ancient equivalents, would have reacted to gimmicks or similarly ‘marvellous’ devices like the *deus ex machina* with wonder alone.⁴⁹ Yet surely such a generalisation does a disservice to the literary tastes of courtly audiences in the twelfth century, who were sensitive to nuance and the practice of concealing ‘reality’ from the uninitiated, and therefore might have felt stung by the disruption of their position vis-à-vis the text.⁵⁰ The slight shift in narrative perception, together with the deflation of expectations in relation to its meaning, could explain why the ending is considered to be the most ironic portion of the romance.

However, as D. H. Green points out, the ironist does not mean to deceive his audience with a lie ‘but rather to awaken them to the truth’.⁵¹ Indeed, from this perspective, the harem gimmick enlightens readers by providing a qualification on the highly idealised ending given to Alexander and Soredamors and, in the wider Arthurian context, on the absolute optimism at the end of *Erec et Enide*. Praising the use of the device in Golding’s novels, James Gindin

⁴⁸ Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance*, p. 110.

⁴⁹ Ngai, p. 469.

⁵⁰ For more on the twelfth-century audience’s familiarity with the interplay between illusion and reality, see Topsfield, pp. 3, 98; the kind of wonder that ancient and medieval audiences experienced when confronted with such a device was not one-sided, passive admiration; ‘tragic wonder’ was the inspiration of pity and fear: see Pickens, ‘Poetics of Paradox’, p. 59; also ‘Aristotle’s Poetics’, trans. by Butcher, p. 39, IX. 12.

⁵¹ Green, p. 29.

observes that ‘gimmicks back down, to some extent, from the completeness, the finality, of traditional statements about the nature of man’.⁵² This ‘backing down’ is part of what happens at the end of *Cligès*, which uses the gimmick of the harem to illuminate the contradictions and instability inherent in the courtly life of Constantinople. It is a less idealised, less certain picture of the royal court than before, yet this is closer to the analogous reality of the Angevin courts, which were perpetually afflicted by infighting between Henry II and Eleanor and their progeny, and whose central ideology rested on the *paradoxe amoureux*.⁵³ Though frustrating, the qualification provided by the revelation encourages the reader to meditate on whether the harmonious vision of society presented at the end of *Erec* is an accurate representation of the tumultuous courts the poet himself inhabited.⁵⁴ Thus the double vision on the material, the more ‘objective’ sense of the outcome as both felicitous and arbitrary, is accompanied by a dual influence on the reader, who leaves the text both disconcerted and enlightened.

This type of contradictory effect is, according to Ngai, a defining characteristic of the gimmick; indeed, in her account of the form, she particularly emphasises that gimmicks are built on antithesis, in both purpose and function.⁵⁵ It is the antithetical nature of the gimmick form that resonates especially with trends in twelfth-century poetry. According to Topsfield, the poetry emerging from ‘the culturally crucial court’ of Poitiers, associated with early troubadour poets like Guilhem IX (1071-1127) and Marcabru (1130-50), was often based on a series of thematic antitheses, and shaped by dialectical methods.⁵⁶ In fact, though the theory

⁵² Gindin, pp. 151-2.

⁵³ The *paradoxe amoureux* is the conflict between the lover’s desire to possess the lady and the need to resist or renounce that desire, ‘have *and* have not’: Leo Spitzer, ‘L’amour lointain de Jaufré Rudel et le sens de la poésie des troubadours’, *North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literature* (1944), 1-44 (p. 1-2); see also Topsfield, p. 7; Carleton Carroll, ‘Quelques observations sur les reflets de la cour d’Henri II dans l’œuvre de Chrétien de Troyes’, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 37 (1994) 34-39.

⁵⁴ Topsfield, pp. 7-9.

⁵⁵ Ngai, pp. 469, 505.

⁵⁶ Simon Gaunt and John Marshall, ‘Occitan Grammars and the Art of Troubadour Poetry’, in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 472–95 (p. 472); Topsfield, pp. 4, 16-19.

of the gimmick provides several useful details for understanding the aesthetic operation of the final portion of *Cligès*, perhaps most useful is that its paradoxical effect lays bare the system of contrasts upon which the entire romance is constructed. Looking back at *Cligès* as a whole, it is the rhetorical art of antithesis that can best account for the contrary duality of the ending.

2.2.3 Antithesis and Paradox in *Cligès*

In its most basic form, antithesis is a juxtaposition of opposite words in a phrase or sentence. Antithesis as a device of description is mentioned in the medieval arts of rhetoric written by Matthew of Vendôme (*antithetum*) and Geoffrey of Vinsauf (*contentio*).⁵⁷ This mode is not equivalent to the syntactic antithesis identified by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, which is often used in the English sonnets to enhance ‘epigrammatic’ closure.⁵⁸ As Rupert T. Pickens observes, Geoffrey takes the trope beyond simple oxymoron and gestures towards a more complex manifestation of antithesis in extended discourses, which seem to ‘resemble plot summaries’.⁵⁹ These treatises were too late to exercise any direct influence on Chrétien; though, Donald Maddox writes, they may reflect views on composition that had been current among clerks trained in twelfth-century schools.⁶⁰ Chrétien certainly would have inherited the dialectical methods of the medieval schools of Chartres and Paris, who taught that conceptual opposites should be ‘juxtaposed, compared, contrasted and analysed’ as a means to attaining higher knowledge.⁶¹ In this epistemological process, Topsfield explains, ‘honour is contrasted with baseness, reality with illusion, love of God with self-love’.⁶²

⁵⁷ *Antithetum* is a conceptual juxtaposition of opposites that distinguishes them without an attempt to conjoin them: see *Les Arts poétiques*, ed. by Faral, pp. 76-7, 173, 224, 322.

⁵⁸ ‘Epigrammatic closure’ is, according to Smith, when the characteristics of an epigram, ‘the last word on a subject’, including antitheses, are used to help ‘round-off’ or ‘knit-up’ a poem: Smith, pp. 169-71.

⁵⁹ See Pickens, p. 57.

⁶⁰ See Maddox, p. 742.

⁶¹ Topsfield, p. 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*

These scholastic principles filtered down into the new mode of vernacular poetry that emerged in the first half of the twelfth century.⁶³ The poetry of Guilhem, Marcabru, and other troubadours was chiefly concerned with conflicts in life between reason and desire, order and impulse, individual and community, wisdom and folly, and some lyrics took the form of *devinalh* ('guesswork', or riddles), which were full of 'dreamlike contradictions'.⁶⁴ But in their works, as in the pedagogical dialectics of the schools, these oppositions seem to have been harnessed in a quest for philosophical or metaphysical truth. This is perhaps why this view of life and literature as an 'amalgam of opposites' appealed to Chrétien, for such use of antithesis also finds expression in his romances. There is a system of analogy and contrast in *Erec et Enide*, but from *Cligès* onwards, this basic method of composition becomes a more intensive thematic strategy that bifurcates and juxtaposes episodes, characters, and their experiences, as well as their emotions and other types of conflict. This duality of thematic construction seems dependent on the juxtaposition of opposites throughout the romances at the level of the verse line, and in the abrupt shifts in tone, mood, and theme.

Of the three romances, *Cligès* seems especially invested in a duality of structure and theme. As Peter Haidu remarks, practically every episode in the first half of the poem has a close parallel in the second.⁶⁵ Significantly, there are no other father-son narratives in the medieval literary canon that operate as two non-interlaced, autonomous halves in this manner.⁶⁶ Yet aside from the points of contrast between Alexander and *Cligès*, there are a number of other antithetical pairs, contrasts, and apparent contradictions developed over the course of the romance: the two sets of couples across the generations, who epitomise the

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 2-4.

⁶⁴ The term *devinalh* translates as 'guesswork': see Sarah Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) pp. 143 ff., 247.

⁶⁵ Haidu, p. 63; see also J. C. Kooijman, 'Cligès, héros ou anti-héros?', *Romania*, 100 (1979), 505-19.

⁶⁶ Even in the case of the *Tristan* story, the most obvious intertext for *Cligès*, the poet does not flesh out the father's story as much as that of the son.

binaries of public/private, legitimate/illegitimate and restraint/indulgence; the Cligès-Fenice-Alis love triangle juxtaposed with the Tristan-Yseut-Mark triangle; the figure of King Arthur, who is both feudal leader and at the centre of court life; the servants Thessala and Jehan, representative of illusion and reality; even Cligès himself is a figure of two halves, a perfect hybrid of east and west. There is, then, a clear and consistent attempt to polarize throughout, ‘revealing itself sometimes in a word, sometimes in extended symmetry’.⁶⁷

Indeed, as if to supplement these larger components, Chrétien implicitly evokes the subject of antithesis on many occasions by expanding certain episodes and moments in which his characters are faced with a predicament or conflict of interest, thereby amplifying the contradictions therein. For instance, Alexander and Soredamors respond to their Ovidian love sickness in lengthy monologues; but both of these complaints take on a dialectic quality, as the young nobles quarrel with themselves about the reciprocity of their love, and wrestle with their own conflicting responses to it (l. 475 ff.). Soredamors, for example, welcomes and spurns heartache, oscillating between these two positions: ‘Or li est buen et or li nuist,/Or le viaut et or le refuse’ (‘One moment she likes it, and the next it hurts/one moment she wants it, and the next she refuses’; ll. 472-3). Significantly, however, Chrétien also draws a linguistic parallel between the individual experiences of knight and lady, both of whom admonish themselves repeatedly as a ‘fol/Fole’ in love (ll. 626-99).

Where Alexander and Soredamors have congruent experiences of love, Fenice brings Cligès’s heart into opposition with her own in a series of chiastic lines (ll. 4496-500). By taking the position of the ‘sers’ to Cligès’s ‘seignor’, she reverses the convention of the courtly lover who surrenders to and serves his lady. Fenice is a ‘virtuoso of contrariety’, amassing an extensive list of opposing terms in her meditations on the matter of love.⁶⁸ When

⁶⁷ Topsfield, p. 99; Haidu, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Kay, p. 246.

she realises she will be forced to marry the emperor irrespective of her love for Cligès, she laments this dilemma with a sharp opposition of words: ‘Mes enuiz est ma volantez/Et ma dolors est ma santez’ (‘my trouble is my desire/and my suffering is my health’; ll. 3075-6). Thessala reassures her this condition of being ‘doucemant malade’ is the contradictory state of being in love, which turns bitterness to pleasure, ‘et sovant retourne a contreire’ (‘and often turns back again’; l. 3084). Indeed the central thesis of *Cligès* seems to be that the experience of love is a paradox: the nature of love is to be fearful (ll. 3865-904) and, as Chrétien suggests in a flurry of bestial imagery, love creates a world upside down in which all ‘les choses a anvers’ (l. 3848 ff.), a theme that is explored more thoroughly in *Lancelot*. These contraries about love, often expressed in oxymoronic juxtaposition, crowd into the second half of the romance.

An exemplary occurrence of antithesis is the pivotal episode of Fenice’s *fausse morte* (ll. 5292-6162), which sets up the denouement of the romance. In the lead up to her ‘death’, Fenice feigns illness and distress, even though she is secretly pleased, while Cligès appears inconsolable, though he is inwardly elated (ll. 5685-98).⁶⁹ The urine sample and Fenice’s corpse-like demeanour persuade everyone she is dead, except for the physicians from Salerno, who grow suspicious, and subject her to a brutal but fruitless physical interrogation (ll. 5815-6015). Just before they are preparing to ‘roast’ her on a grate, ‘des dames plus d’un milier’ interrupt the torturous ordeal (ll. 6016-50). Ferocity goes with comedy as the ladies fling the perpetrators out of the windows to their deaths and their bodies crumple on the courtyard below. This episode exemplifies another form of literary paradox: the interplay between Greek *doxa* (the commonplace opinion) and *para-doxa* (a statement or condition running

⁶⁹ In fact, so pivotal is this episode that, in some French editions, *Cligès* is styled as ‘Cligès ou la fausse morte’: see Chrétien de Troyes, *Romans de la Table Ronde: Erec et Enide, Cligès ou la fausse morte, Lancelot le chevalier à la charette, Yvain le chevalier au lion*, trans. and ed. by Jean-Pierre Foucher (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Chrétien de Troyes, *Les chevaliers de la Table ronde: 1. La fausse morte; 2. Lancelot du Lac*, trans. and ed. by Maurice Toesca (Paris: Albin Michel, 1964).

counter to that opinion). Society believes the lie about the noble and tragic death of its empress (*doxa*), ostracising the sagacious doctors who sense foul play (*para-doxa*) to maintain this illusion; the reader knows, of course, that the *para-doxa* expresses the truth.⁷⁰ This dissonance anticipates the show-stopping irony that comes at the end of the chain of contradictions, when society finally witnesses the truth of Fenice's 'death'.

The rhetorical tradition of antithesis rationalises the dual perspective on the 'fairness' of the denouement in *Cligès*, which is determined by the tortuous lead up to the 'reversal of situation' and its ramifications, as well as the gimmicky, dual effect of this ending on the reader, who is simultaneously satisfied and appalled. Paradox allows for both 'sides' of the ending to be true, whether the reader feels it to be felicitous or arbitrary, and whether they admire or disdain it, because antithesis ascribes equal validity to opposing statements, concepts, and conditions.⁷¹ Seen through the lens of antithesis, the proleptic digression about the empresses does not overturn the happy ending but simply balances it out, as the idealism of dynastic bliss is offset by the savage irony of the closing lines, and the shadow cast by the harem. The accumulation of contrasts across the romance sensitises readers to antithetical pairings, but nothing in this narrative prepares them for the enormity and historical resonance of this unforeseen consequence, juxtaposed with the sublime elation of the imperial lovers: 'Por quoi aussi come an prison/Est gardee an Costantinoble [...] (ll. 6772-3).

Yet if readers experience this sense of surprise, then 'the unexpected' co-exists with the sangfroid they enjoy at least one remove from the characters and their lives.⁷² Indeed, contrasts and contradictions operate at all levels of this romance: in the oxymorons and chiasmic verse lines, in the juxtaposition of episodes and characters, in internal struggles faced by the characters themselves, in viewpoints on the action, in the tone and the mood, and

⁷⁰ See Pickens, pp. 55-7.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 50.

⁷² As Peter Nolan puts it, readers are 'in the presence of the unexpected': Nolan, p. 148.

finally in the clash between the crowning glory of Cligès and Fenice's courtship and the shame and derision heaped upon their descendants. These antithetical paradoxes, which find ultimate and climatic expression in this ending, invite the reader to move beyond scepticism to perceive the truth that fantasy coexists with reality, and, in this real world, 'savoir is not free from *folie*, and must coexist with it as part of the human condition'.⁷³ Chrétien carries this paradoxical view of life to more extreme conclusions in *Le Chevalier de charrette*, which also ends with a reversal of situation and a textual oddity regarding the authorial provenance of the romance, provoking the kind of cynicism usually reserved for gimmicks.

2.3 *Le Chevalier de la charrette*: The Saviour and the Renegade

The commentary provided by Gaston Paris in his 1883 study of *Le Chevalier de la charrette* (*Lancelot*) neatly encapsulates the traditional view of 'l'œuvre de Chrétien et de Godefroi':

On ne peut contester qu'elle [...] ne présente une certaine unité [...] Mais si le plan général du récit est simple et clair, il n'en est pas de même d'un grand nombre des traits dont ce récit se compose. D'abord plusieurs épisodes sont absolument inutiles: la première partie du roman, prise en bloc, n'a aucun lien avec la seconde.⁷⁴

This assessment gained considerable currency in *Lancelot* criticism at the beginning of the twentieth century, leading many medievalists to denounce the romance as 'illogical' and 'incoherent'.⁷⁵ Wendelin Foerster's contention that the poem was an artistic failure because Chrétien was working with material given to him by Marie de Champagne, which he found distasteful, became especially popular.⁷⁶ The general disparagement of the romance seems to

⁷³ Topsfield, p. 99.

⁷⁴ 'One cannot deny that it [...] presents a certain unity [...] But if the general outline of the story is simple and clear, it is not the case with many of the features which make up that story. Firstly, several episodes are absolutely useless: the first part of the romance, taken as a whole, has no relation to the second': Paris, 'Le Conte de la Charrette', pp. 482-4.

⁷⁵ Z. P. Zaddy, 'The Structure of the Charrette', *Chrétien Studies* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1973), p. 148.

⁷⁶ Wendelin Foerster, 'Einleitung', *Der Karrenritter (Lancelot) und Das Wilhelmsleben (Guillaume d'Angleterre) von Christian von Troyes* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1899), pp. lxxxiii-lxxxvii; Wendelin Foerster, *Kristian von Troyes: Wörter zu seinem sämtlichen Werken* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1914), p. 73; see also F. Xavier Baron, 'Love in Chrétien's *Charrette*: Reversed Values and Isolation', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 372-383 (p. 372).

have been a reaction against what some perceived as ‘the dangerous and perverse morality’ of Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair which, unlike Tristan and Yseut’s adultery, could not be explained away by a magical potion that would absolve them of wrongdoing.⁷⁷ Scholars were undoubtedly also unnerved by the surprising revelation in the epilogue that Chrétien enlisted his clerk Godefroi de Leigni to complete the final section of the romance,⁷⁸ which was taken as proof of the poet’s aversion to the material; authorial delegation in medieval literature is not typically called attention to in this way, and rarely is a second author named within the narrative.⁷⁹

Despite this, *Lancelot* enjoyed a critical renaissance in the wake of the publication of Douglas Kelly’s *Sens and Conjointure in the Chevalier de la Charrette*, which argued for its unity and coherence. Most Chrétien scholars since have agreed with Kelly’s assessment that the poem has a ‘well thought-out plot with a carefully constructed structural foundation’, and

⁷⁷ David J. Shirt, “‘Le Chevalier de la Charrete’: A World Upside Down?,” *The Modern Language Review*, 76.4 (1981), 811-822 (p. 811).

⁷⁸ So much so that, following David F. Hult, some scholars have claimed that Godefroi is a fiction of Chrétien, designed to relieve him of responsibility for the ‘distasteful’ material: see David F. Hult, ‘Author/Narrator/Speaker: The Voice of Authority in Chrétien’s *Charrete*’, in *Discourses of Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. by Kevin Brownlee and Walter Stephens (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), pp. 76-96; Krueger identifies Godefroi as an ‘ironic scribal persona conceived by Chrétien to “tie up” his adulterous love plot’: Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 274, n. 44; Nick Corbyn prefers to see Godefroi as a fiction, ‘a device to allow Chrétien to write Marie [de Champagne] out of the text: see Nick Corbyn, ‘Irony and Gender Performance in *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*’, *Arthurian Literature*, XV (1997), 37-54 (p. 52); Kevin Brownlee in contrast argues for Godefroi as an historical figure: Kevin Brownlee, ‘Transformations of the *Charrete*’, *Stanford French Review*, 1, 2 (1990), 161-78; a good summary of the opposing arguments is offered by Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 100-3.

⁷⁹ See Heinz Klüppelholz, ‘The Continuation Within the Model: Godefroi de Lagny’s “Solution” to Chrétien de Troyes’ *Chevalier de la Charrete*’, *Neophilologus*, 75 (1991), 637-40 (p. 637); in fact the apparently sanctioned transfer of authority from a poet to a named clerk or novice is doubly unusual since medieval authors often remained anonymous: for more on medieval anonymity see for example, Roger Dragonetti, *Le Mirage des sources, l’art du faux dans le roman medieval* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 9, 18; Emmanuèle Baumgartner, ‘L’Écriture romanesque et son modèle scripturaire: Écriture et réécriture du Graal’, in *L’Imitation, aliénation ou source de liberté* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1985), pp. 129-43; Anthony Bale, ‘From Translator to Laureate: Imagining the Medieval Author’, *Literature Compass*, 5 (2008), 918-34; it is true that some of *Le Conte du Graal* continuators are in fact named, such as Gerbert and Manessier, but these are not ‘continuations within the model’.

more still have recognised the significance of its treatment of traditional motifs and the value of its exposition of courtly love.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, *Lancelot* continues to provoke diverse scholarly responses, particularly in relation to whether Chrétien's representation of courtly love as adulterous, the 'matière' and 'san' apparently given to him by Marie de Champagne, is idealised or ironized ('story matter' and 'sense'; l. 26).⁸¹

Critical discussions about the end of the *Lancelot* tend to focus on how Godefroi de Leigni's epilogue 'inverts the terms' of Chrétien's original narrative address and disrupts his literary relationship with Marie, with opinion divided as to whether Godefroi is an historical figure or textual construct.⁸² The denouement of the narrative itself, including the mechanics of Lancelot's triumph, the central paradox that underpins the rationale for this triumph (that Lancelot is at once hero and fool, renegade and saviour, ideal lover and inadequate knight), and the relationship of these components to the fact of the text's unfinishedness (as signalled by the epilogue), has received comparatively little critical attention. There are notable exceptions: Topsfield looks in detail at the concluding portion and praises the overall 'inconclusiveness' of the romance; Douglas Kelly and Matilda Bruckner analyse Lancelot's

⁸⁰ F. Douglas Kelly, *Sens and Conjointure in the Chevalier de la Charrette* (Paris: Mouton, 1966), p. 238; for example, Edward I. Condren, 'The Paradox of Chrétien's Lancelot', *Modern Language Notes* 85.4 (1970), 434-53.

⁸¹ There is a long-standing debate as to whether the romance promotes the ethos of courtly love (as per the wishes of his patroness) or whether there is an ironic subtext that undermines this ideal; among those who argue for the idealisation of the love theme: Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: L'Homme et l'Oeuvre*, *Connaissance des Lettres*, No. 50 (Paris: Hatier-Boivin, 1957), pp. 124-46; Kelly, pp. 39-54; Erich Köhler, *L'Aventure chevaleresque: Idéal et réalite dans le roman courtois*, trans. by Eliane Kaufholz (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 193-5; Topsfield, pp. 105-74; Karl D. Uitti, *Story, Myth and Celebration in Old French Narrative Poetry 1050-1200* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 181-2; on the side of irony: Emmanuèle Baumgartner, *Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain, Lancelot, la charrette et le lion*, *Études littéraires*, 38 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), pp. 80-1; Haidu, pp. 10, 160; Peter S. Noble, *Love and Marriage in Chrétien de Troyes* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982), pp. 65-9; David J. Shirt, 'Chretien and the Cart', in *Studies in Medieval Literature and Languages in Memory of Frederick Whitehead*, ed. by W. Rothwell, W. R. J. Barron, David Blamires and Lewis Thorpe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), pp. 279-301; Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner investigates why Lancelot inspires such polarising views amongst scholars: see 'An Interpreter's Dilemma: why are there so many interpretations of Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*?' *Romance Philology*, 40 (1986), 159-80.

⁸² See Wendy Knepper, p. 62; see note 78; also, David F. Hult, 'La double autorité du *Chevalier de la charrette*', *Théories et pratiques de l'écriture au Moyen Âge, Littérales*, 4 (1988), 41-56.

decisive defeat of Meleagant at the end, crucially in relation to the unresolved strand of the lovers' affair, and Bruckner has repeatedly drawn attention to *Lancelot* as an 'open' text.⁸³

Wendy Knepper and Leah Tether also consider the resolution of the main strands, though they are primarily interested in the slippage between the end of Chrétien's 'narrative' and the 'continuation'.⁸⁴ In general, though, the 'end' of *Lancelot* has not been the primary focus of scholarly studies. This is perhaps chiefly because the final portion is not considered to be the legitimate work of Chrétien (l. 6150 ff.), but it may also be because the end of the narrative reinforces the old sense of illogicality and incoherence critics have sought to rationalise.⁸⁵

Even before the epilogue disrupts the unity of the romance, the end of the narrative counteracts any sense of stability and resolution readers might expect to receive at the close of the text. Lancelot's fortuitous rescue by Meleagant's sister, narrated through the register of chance and fortune, seems improbably convenient, and his subsequent pledge of devotion to her reneges on or, as Wendy Knepper puts it, 'recoils' from the logic established in the preceding narrative, not to mention Lancelot's character development.⁸⁶ Moreover, as Edward Condren argues, the 'bathos and anti-climax of the poem's conclusion' disappoint after the odyssey of trials the hero endures to rescue Guenevere.⁸⁷ There is indeed something disconcerting about his decapitation of Meleagant, which plays out against the facetious

⁸³ Kelly, pp. 94-7, 147-50; Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, '*Le Chevalier de la Charrette (Lancelot)*', in *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes: A Symposium*, ed. by Douglas Kelly (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1985), pp. 132-81 (pp. 162-75); see also Bruckner 'An Interpreter's Dilemma', 158-80; Bruckner, 'A Case for *mise en abyme*: Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrete*', in *Shaping Romance*, pp. 60-108.

⁸⁴ Wendy Knepper, 'Theme and Thesis in *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*', *Arthuriana*, 6.2 (1996), 54-68 (pp. 64-65); Leah Tether, 'Distinguishing Continuations, Sequels and Ends', in *The Continuations of Chrétien's 'Perceval': Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 57-108 (p. 90 ff).

⁸⁵ The 'handover' from Chrétien to Godefroi is thought to have taken place at l. 6150 on the basis of Godefroi's indication that he took over the writing of the romance around the point of Lancelot's imprisonment in his epilogue (l. 7130 ff.): on the ambiguity as to exactly which imprisonment is referred to here, see Kelly, pp. 22-24.

⁸⁶ See Wendy Knepper's theory of the 'recoil movement', a dialectical form in which an action's significance is emphasised by contrast with the immediately preceding events: Knepper, p. 57.

⁸⁷ Condren, p. 435.

backdrop of a babbling brook and is detracted from by their murderous horses. Then there is, of course, the oxymoron of the hero himself, and the final paradoxical dual perspective on his triumph over Meleagant that emerges more or less in relation to romance's 'two audiences': the view of Lancelot's controversial deeds in love and chivalry as shameful, and the upside down 'Arthur-world' of the lovers, who see them as honourable.⁸⁸ On the one hand, Lancelot's defeat of Meleagant helps the king and consolidates his position as the saviour of the people of Logres and an ideal hero. On the other hand, readers will find a piquant irony in the knowledge that Lancelot has betrayed his king and thrown the realm into jeopardy by consummating his relationship with the queen. Indeed, at no point prior to his return to court is there any suggestion he is motivated by public service, or by anything other than his private love for Guinevere. As at the end of *Cligès*, no definitive answers are provided as to the virtue and deserts of the hero, and readers must make peace with the conundrum of a victorious yet morally ambiguous protagonist.

Of course, it is tempting to explain these incongruities and irritations as symptomatic of the substitution of Godefroi for Chrétien at line 6150. Yet arguably this authorial switch is a logical development in the series of antitheses, contradictions, and inversions that stack up over the course of the romance. Indeed, the thematic contradictions expressed in both the epilogue and the denouement are determined by a wider strategy of paradox that Chrétien lays the groundwork for from the outset, whether it was Godefroi who wrote them down in the end or not. As many scholars recognise, there is a new contradiction at every turn of the romance at the levels of tone, theme, and plot development, with the result that readers are left with a multifocal perception of the hero and the events that unfold around him, and with a final paradoxical sense of resolution and inconclusiveness.⁸⁹ This part of the chapter will

⁸⁸ See Baron, p. 375-8, 382; Knepper, p. 57.

⁸⁹ Among them, Baron, p. 375 ff.; Bruckner, 'An Interpreter's Dilemma', pp. 159-80; Condren, p. 437 ff.; Shirt, 'World Upside Down?', pp. 811-22; Topsfield, pp. 107-74.

explore how the sustained contrasts, so often characterized as straightforward comedy or irony, rationalize the incongruities in the denouement, including the final paradox of Lancelot's triumph over Meleagant, and will suggest that *Lancelot* is an 'open' text with or without Godefroi's admission.

2.3.1 Lancelot's Last-minute Liberation, and the Gimmick of Godefroi

Lancelot's climactic victory over his nemesis Meleagant hinges upon the hero's miraculous release from a secluded, impenetrable tower, commissioned especially by Meleagant for the purpose of containing Lancelot and preventing his return to court. Like the series of fortunate accidents that elevate Cligès at the end of his romance, this about-turn, which reverses the hero's fortunes and brings the narrative to an end, has higher stakes than earlier 'close calls' in the romance. The reader's knowledge that the security of the Arthurian kingdom hangs in the balance makes the irony of this reversal sharper and, as in *Cligès*, brings the ending into line with the device of comic peripeteia. Lancelot performs several amazing feats over the course of the romance, and seems to avoid catastrophe only narrowly in every episode. This seems particularly true of the Sword Bridge episode (ll. 3003-141), which Lancelot chooses to cross without armour, though passers-by have repeatedly warned him that the crossing into Gorre is certain death. The hero thus considers himself 'grant guehaing' when he walks away with superficial wounds to his hands and feet ('most fortunate'; l. 3134). In addition, he barely escapes with his life from the Perilous Bed and the Flaming Lance (l. 486 ff.), almost falls to his death from a window at the castle of his first hostess whilst gazing at Guenevere (ll. 535-74), and finds himself briefly submerged in water after the Ford Knight knocks him from his horse (ll. 741-71).

However, there is something especially staggering about Lancelot's opportune rescue from Meleagant's hermetically sealed tower in the middle of nowhere. To ensure Lancelot's

stunt at the Tournament of Noauz is not repeated, Meleagant builds a tower on an island in a remote coastal inlet of Gorre, itself an upside-down version of Logres and thus obscured from potential Arthurian rescuers (ll. 6112-46). Not content with this level of security, he instructs his masons to wall up the doors and all but one window; the poet, as if to highlight the utter hopelessness of the hero's predicament, adds that they are forced to swear never to speak of it again. Where in *Cligès* the ladies are doomed to a life of imprisonment for love, here the knight must suffer immurement as a delayed consequence of his love for Guenevere. After Meleagant boasts to his father that his fearsome reputation has caused Lancelot to abscond from their combat, Bademagu chastises him and wonders about the true whereabouts of the hero (ll. 6276-309). Meleagant's sister alone takes her father's speculations seriously, and sets out to find Lancelot herself. Chrétien reveals she is the fifth damsel of Lancelot's quest, and that she owes him a debt for the head of the Orgueilleux, who Lancelot defeats twice, showing mercy after the first defeat, and beheading him after the second at the damsel's request (ll. 2811-65). In respect of motivation, her rescue mission as reward for this service makes narrative sense, but this does not detract from the element of chance in her successful search for the hero, which the poet is keen to emphasise.

The singular good fortune of her discovery of the hero in the tower is heightened by the turmoil at the Arthurian court brought about by Lancelot's absence, which in turn creates the impression that the kingdom is teetering on the brink of some kind of disaster at the hands of Meleagant (ll. 5238-401, 6057-221). Yet though the court's distress underlines the gravity of the situation and the precariousness of Gawain's challenge, it is the language used to relate Lancelot's rescue and the abruptness of his return to court that brings this turn of events into the realm of chance, fortune, and peripeteia. Indeed, Lancelot's rescue from the tower has a different quality to his other 'close shaves': it is configured, not as a victory inspired by his sublime love for Guenevere, but as a stroke of fortune. Chrétien begins to adopt this register

in the Sword Bridge episode, with Lancelot considering himself fortunate in his injuries. But here it becomes a more extensive semantic field: Meleagant's sister is directed by 'aventure' (chance; l. 6398), and 'Fortune' (l. 6438); when she finally arrives, she hears a voice filled with doom, deploring Fortune and the turns of her wheel (ll. 6468-529). This could be read as a gender-bending moment: a brave damsel comes to rescue the trembling knight trapped in a tower. Yet Meleagant's sister equally assumes the role of Lady Philosophy, come to counsel Lancelot in his reflective solitude as he gleans the cruel mockeries of Fortune from the top of his tower. The direct juxtaposition of Lancelot's Boethian lament and his jubilant rescue reinforces the sense of a peripeteia-like reversal, as does the marvellous jolt with which he arrives back at court to save the day, appearing before Gawain's eyes as though he has fallen from a cloud like the *deus ex machina* (ll. 6785-93).⁹⁰

Yet there are several issues that trouble this sequence as a means to an end, and which suggest the device of peripeteia may not be a satisfactory explanation for it. Most significantly, in showing his gratitude to Meleagant's sister, Lancelot pledges his 'cuer [...] cors [...] service et [...] avoir' to her emphatically (ll. 6705-9). The submission of his entire being to a second noble lady is an unprecedented move by Lancelot. He remains single-mindedly faithful to Guenevere through the most compromising trials, and advances made by other ladies, including the Immodest Damsel who lures him into bed with the ruse of the false rape (ll. 986-1151). However, this declaration suggests he is now suddenly prepared to make a new pledge of undying devotion, apparently relegating Guenevere to a position of lesser significance by default. Not only is this strikingly inconsistent with his primary motivation across the romance, but it is not followed by any explanation; indeed, the issue of Guenevere

⁹⁰ The 'god from a machine' who was lowered onto stage by mechanical contrivance in Ancient Greek drama (notably the plays of Euripides): see Chris Baldick, 'deus ex machina', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-301>> [last accessed 11 March 2020].

is not addressed again in the romance. Perhaps, as Leah Tether indicates, the narrative thread of their adulterous relationship was simply too difficult to resolve in a satisfactory way.⁹¹ But whatever the case, readers are left wondering if Lancelot's pious devotion to the queen was hyperbolic, or if his submission to Meleagant's sister is simply a device to extricate him from a corner in the plot, not meant to have any bearing on his love for Guenevere. Though it is the catalyst for the denouement, then, the manner of Lancelot's rescue in fact frustrates the resolution of the central love plot, generating more questions than it solves.

Moreover, despite his solitary meditation up in the tower, Lancelot does not recognise his missteps, and therefore he does not experience the moment of anagnorisis necessary for true peripeteia. After railing against the twists of fortune that have brought him so low, he lays the blame for the outcome of his quest squarely at the feet of Gawain, who he feels sure must not have conducted an exhaustive search for him: 'Ha, Gauvains [...] Certes, trop i par demorez,/Si ne faites pas corteisie' ('Ah Gawain [...] Indeed, you do delay too much/You have no courtesy'; see ll. 6504-18). But though Gawain does not live up to his reputation for praiseworthy deeds, equally Lancelot does not admit his hand in jeopardising the stability of the Arthurian kingdom through his affair with the queen. There might be an admission of responsibility implicit in his new pledge to Meleagant's sister, but this comes after her arrival at the tower, and thus after the point at which Lancelot's fortunes change for the better. As in *Cligès*, the reversal of situation is the result of an external, rather than an internal, change. Though not peripeteia, then, this development nevertheless allows Lancelot to finally get rid of Meleagant. Not only does his new mistress allow him to return to court (ll. 6714-21), but she does not divert Lancelot's attention away from the task in hand as Guenevere before her. In fact, where Guenevere might have inadvertently caused Lancelot to fall into the debilitating state of 'pansers' (as he does at ll. 535-74, 710-72, 1424 ff.), or deliberately tried

⁹¹ Tether, p. 96.

to manipulate his performance (as at ll. 5572-6022), Meleagant's sister leaves Lancelot to attend to his own affairs. No longer distracted or hypnotised by his love for the queen, who aborted two previous combats at Bademagu's behest, Lancelot beheads Meleagant and brings the romance to an end.

However, just as Lancelot begins to perform effectively as a knight, Chrétien (apparently) ceases to perform as a poet. In three manuscripts, an epilogue reveals Chrétien abandoned the romance and brought in Godefroi de Leigni to 'finish the job'. This epilogue negates the sense of closure generated by Meleagant's beheading, and opens the text once again:⁹²

Godefroiz de Leigni, li clers,
 A parfinee LA CHARRETE;
 Mes nus hom blasme ne l'an mete
 Se sor Crestien a ovré,
 Car ç'a il fet par le boen gré
 Crestien, qui le comança:
 Tant en a fet des lors an ça
 Ou Lanceloz fu anmurez,
 Tant con li contes est durez.
 Tant en a fet, n'i vialt plus metre
 Ne moins, por le conte malmetre. (ll. 7124-34)

[Godefroi de Leigni, the clerk,/has written the conclusion of "the Cart";/but let no one blame him/for having completed Chretien's work/for it was done with the good will/of Chretien who started it./He worked on it from the point/where Lancelot was walled in the tower,/Until the tale was finished./So much he wrote, but he wishes to add/nothing more, for this would disfigure the story.]

Scholars have long wondered why Chrétien handed over the reins to Godefroi at the moment of Lancelot's imprisonment, and why the poet allowed him to reveal his part in finishing the poem.⁹³ This is the gimmick of *Lancelot*: in the course of a few lines, Godefroi/Chrétien turns

⁹² The epilogue is found in mss. C (B.N. f. fr. 794), T (B.N. f. fr. 12560), and V (Vatican 1725); it is presumed that the changeover takes place at around line 6150 – indeed, Mario Roques's introduction to his edition of the text states that it is beyond doubt that this is the place because it is a clearly demarcated point where the episode in question stops and the next begins: see *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, ed. by Mario Roques, pp. iii-ix; cf. Foerster, *Der Karrenritter*, p. I; Kelly, p. 27; Alexandre Micha, *La Tradition Manuscrite des Romans de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris: Droz, 1939), p. 128.

⁹³ While it is true recent studies using stylometry have found different lexical patterns after line 6150, 'possibly indicating the signature of another author in the text', it is doubtful whether any reader would have noticed a shift in authorship without Chrétien/Godefroi's own admission: Brian J. Reilly

a complete romance into an unfinished romance, casts doubt on the authorship of last thousand lines, and for those interested in the ‘authoritative’ endpoint, shifts the focus and emphasis from the final climactic fight between Lancelot and Meleagant to the point where Lancelot is immured by him, and, as Matilda Bruckner points out, this textual location is itself ambiguous.⁹⁴ In their efforts to explain the authorial substitution, some critics have speculated, following David F. Hult, that Godefroi is ‘a fiction of Chrétien’, invented to allow him to waive responsibility for the illicit love story.⁹⁵

Without any historical evidence, the authenticity of this literary persona, any real transactions that took place, and the truth of the inscribed relations between poet and clerk are uncertain. What is certain, however, is the symmetry between epilogue and prologue (ll. 1-29).⁹⁶ Both writers profess deference to a superior, both use a kind of modesty *topos*, and there is an inversion of verb and subject of the prologue in the epilogue (ll. 25, 7129). In fact, the agreement outlined in the epilogue stands in direct opposition to the literary contract described in the opening lines, with Chrétien’s ‘boen gré’ to a fellow writer usurping the literary ambitions and explicit ‘non-flattery’ of the ‘dame de Chanpaigne’ (l. 1).⁹⁷ The inversion of Marie’s commission is reinforced by the sharp opposition of words (‘plus metre/malmetre’) in the same metric position at the ends of the final couplet. The abrupt shift

and Moira R. Dillon, ‘Virtuous Circles of Authorship Attribution through Quantitative Analysis: Chrétien de Troyes’ Lancelot’, *Digital Philology*, 2.1 (2013), 60-85 (p. 60); see also Klüppelholz, 637-640; David J. Shirt, ‘Godefroi de Lagny et la composition de la *Charrette*’, *Romania*, 96 (1975) 27-52.

⁹⁴ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, p. 88; despite Knepper’s emphasis on the end of Chrétien’s ‘narrative’, it is clear he did not intend for the story to end there; this aspect of the text draws comparison with Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, which reveals the final lines written by Guillaume de Lorris and the lines that begin Jean’s continuation; in lines 10496-644, Amor reveals the authorial switch happened at 4023-30, encouraging us to look back to the point of transition: see Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 39.

⁹⁵ See note 78.

⁹⁶ See also Tether, pp. 96-8.

⁹⁷ For more on the prologue, see Jean Frappier, ‘Le prologue du *Chevalier de la charrette* et son interprétation’, *Romania*, 93 (1972), 337-77; Jean Rychner, ‘Le prologue du *Chevalier de la charrette*’, *Vox romanica*, 26 (1967), 1-23.

in Lancelot's actions towards the end of the romance could be the result of this change in authorship. However, a more comprehensive view of the romance indicates that his characterisation, behaviour, and his quest have been full of contradictions from the beginning, and that the presentation of this authorial substitution may simply be part of the same broader strategy of antithesis that shapes the romance as a whole.

2.3.2 The Paradoxes of *Le Chevalier de la charrette*, and the Opponent Romances

Most studies of *Le Chevalier de la charrette* recognise that the poem abounds in paradoxes and contradictions, from Lancelot's pseudonym (the Knight of the Cart) to his status as both 'extraordinary hero' and 'despicable fool'.⁹⁸ Topsfield puts it most eloquently when he posits the romance on 'two levels' of thematic dichotomy: Lancelot's 'moral' excellence versus the absolute evil of Meleagant; Lancelot's 'profane *fin'amors*' for Guenevere versus universal moral values.⁹⁹ Though *Lancelot* does not have the duality of structure observed in *Cligès*, there is a doubling of episodes, with minor 'happenings' foreshadowing major ones; for example, the hero's decapitation of the Orgueilleux on behalf of Meleagant's sister is a precursor to the beheading of Meleagant himself in the end.¹⁰⁰ In addition, every theme, character, setting, discourse, and symbol is perspectivalised for the 'two audiences' of the narrative: the lovers and the 'nonlovers'.¹⁰¹ To an even greater extent than the couple in *Cligès*, Lancelot and Guenevere turn the values of the Arthurian kingdom upside down, and this becomes an organising principle whose narrative consequences ripple out all the way to the ending.

⁹⁸ Bruckner, 'An Interpreter's Dilemma', p. 159.

⁹⁹ Topsfield, pp. 106-12.

¹⁰⁰ In addition, the queen's self-sacrifice in leaving court with Kay (ll. 31-198) anticipates Lancelot's self-effacement before the cart (ll. 323-586); the hero's arduous ride in the cart looks forward to his choice of the Sword to Gawain's less treacherous Water Bridge (ll. 587-713); Lancelot's absent-minded combat against Meleagant, his head turned by the Queen (ll. 4391-941), anticipates his poor performance at the Tournament of Noauz at Guenevere's behest (ll. 5379-6076).

¹⁰¹ See Baron, p. 378; Knepper, p. 57.

The bifurcation of narrative elements is apparent from the cart episode. Chrétien introduces Lancelot through the medium of a dialectic, as his hesitation before the cart becomes the locus of a struggle between *Reison* and *Amors*, the one warning him of the stain to his reputation, the other urging him to put love above all other considerations (l. 364 ff.). When he chooses to ride in the cart in exchange for news of his beloved queen, he turns its traditional significance on its head. Such gallows carts transported those ‘qui traïson ou murtre font’ to their deaths (l. 330), but here it becomes a metonym for the lengths to which Lancelot will go in his devotion to Guenevere.¹⁰² The scenes following the cart episode emphasise the two sides of Lancelot’s paradox. In another internal conflict, the hero debates whether to enter the Immodest Damsel’s room (ll. 1096 ff.); offers both mercy and retribution to the Orgueilleux (ll. 2519-955), and in a moment that captures the paradoxical nature of this story, Lancelot upheaves a prophetic slab, a feat that at once proves his worth as the saviour of the people of Logres and confirms the tombstone to be his own grave (ll. 1841-2022).

These various manifestations of antithesis prepare readers for two central paradoxical episodes in the romance, as well as the antithetical relationship of the quest narrative to the ending. Lancelot’s passage across the Sword Bridge has often been seen as a locus of contradictions, with the knights’ paradoxical warnings (such as ll. 3056-7) and the parodic allusions to the Harrowing of Hell.¹⁰³ But there is a second exemplary instance of antithesis in Meleagant’s accusation of Guenevere (ll. 4415-920). After Lancelot and Guenevere’s night of passion, Meleagant discovers the bloodstained sheets and mistakenly concludes that the wounded Kay has slept in Guenevere’s bed. No one else in the household believes them guilty of this act, which exemplifies common opinion (*doxa*). When Meleagant accuses the

¹⁰² For more on the inversion *topos*, see Shirt, ‘World Upside Down?’, p. 819.

¹⁰³ For more on these allusions, see D. D. R. Owen, *The Vision of Hell: Infernal Journeys in Medieval French Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), pp. 201-5; see also Laura Hibbard, ‘The Sword Bridge of Chrétien de Troyes and its Celtic Original’, *The Romanic Review*, 4 (1913), 166-90.

queen of infidelity, he introduces a *para-doxa* into the situation; of course, the reader knows the *para-doxa* constitutes a version of the truth. When Lancelot's defence of her honour is deferred because of Bademagu's conflicting roles as king and father, the narrative suppresses the *para-doxa* to maintain the false illusion that the queen is innocent of adultery. The interplay of paradox in this episode dramatizes the central paradoxical intrigue of Lancelot's ideal and contemptible love for Guenevere.

Many of the contradictions in the romance prior to the ending, not least Meleagant's true/false allegation, are determined by the effect of Guenevere's love on Lancelot's chivalric ability.¹⁰⁴ Lancelot falls into a hypnotic state of contemplation each time he sees any indication of Guenevere, which variously improves and impedes his knightly abilities. Sometimes these 'pansers' incapacitate him, as when he almost falls from the window, does not hear the Ford Knight, and buckles at the sight of the queen's golden hair (ll. 1293-511). But at other times, his passion for her inspires moments of brilliance like the Sword Bridge, and imbues him with a pre-eminent valour both desirable and conspicuous. When Lancelot fights Meleagant in Gorre, he manages to defend himself from behind and keep his eyes focused on Guenevere at the window. In this moment, he seems to acquire two faces reminiscent of Janus, the Roman god of duality, the face of an ideal courtly lover and a comically unorthodox knight (ll. 3666-89).

Guenevere's reactions to Lancelot are equally paradoxical: the hero interprets her derision of him as a display of affection, for example (ll. 3942-4124). Yet Lancelot satisfies the queen's every whim, however contradictory, regardless of his reputation, liberty, and even his life: the hero attempts to hang himself after hearing false rumours of Guenevere's demise (ll. 4125-414), and later escapes from prison only to fight at intervals 'au noauz', as

¹⁰⁴ For a fuller account of this theme, see for instance David C. Fowler, 'L'amour dans le *Lancelot de Chrétien*', *Romania*, 91 (1970, 378-391).

the worst knight, and the best, in line with her commands (ll. 5379-6076).¹⁰⁵ Lancelot's love for the queen determines his every move, good and bad, making him repository of antitheses and at times a physical manifestation of the double vision this love requires. These antitheses spill over into the world around him and, as Bruckner argues, open the text to an endless 'chain of interpretations'.¹⁰⁶ Yet the final section of the romance departs from this narrative logic, and Lancelot no longer acts in accordance with Love's demands.

The end of *Lancelot* extends the rhetorical device of antithesis that shapes the double vision of the hero and his adventures but, rather than simply continuing the established pattern, its components form larger oppositions with the quest narrative and the prologue. The elevated role Meleagant's sister assumes in the plot at the end and her magnanimous treatment of Lancelot stand in opposition to his self-compromising servitude to Guenevere. Because his new mistress allows him to exercise his wishes unfettered by her own personal desires, Lancelot is free to act independently and effectively to defeat Meleagant. In fact, the hero's boldness and resolve in the final sequence play out in direct contrast to his handling of every previous situation. Lancelot's self-determination at the end might be part of what Knepper calls the 'recoil' movement, a dialectical form in which an action's significance is emphasised by contrast with preceding events.¹⁰⁷ But viewed through the lens of antithesis, the incongruities in the tone, setting, and action of the ending fall into line with the contrasts that have characterised the whole text: Gawain's affected preparation for battle and Lancelot's discreet entrance (l. 6755 ff.); Meleagant's dialectic guesswork about Lancelot's

¹⁰⁵ Lancelot behaves in line with the conventions of the courtly lover outlined by Andreas Cappellanus, though recent scholars have cast doubt on whether his writings represent an accurate depiction of real medieval precepts of courtly love: see Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love (De Amore)*, trans. and ed. by John Jay Parry (New York: F. Ungar, 1959); see Fanni Bogdanow, 'The Love Theme in Chrétien de Troyes's "Chevalier de la Charrette"', *The Modern Language Review*, 67.1 (1972), 50-61; and David Lyle Jeffrey, 'Courtly Love and Christian Marriage: Chrétien de Troyes, Chaucer, and Henry VIII', *Christianity and Literature*, 59.3 (2010), 515-530.

¹⁰⁶ Bruckner, 'An Interpreter's Dilemma', pp. 159-60.

¹⁰⁷ Knepper, p. 57 ff.

possible escape from prison (l. 6915 ff.); the comic ferocity of their inanely frenzied horses, who also have it in for one another (ll. 7039-42), and the decapitation of Meleagant on a carpet of 'erbe fresche et bele' against the backdrop of a sparkling, 'clere fontenele', flowing from a pipe of gold (ll. 6983-98). Most significantly, antithesis rationalises the final dichotomy of the hero himself: antithesis allows for both of Lancelot's 'identities' to co-exist, and gives equal weight to the opposing perspectives on his triumph.

The destabilisation of a single viewpoint in favour of duality is also reflected in the epilogue. In fact, the arrival of Meleagant's sister at this stage of the narrative has a similar effect to the introduction of Godefroi into the external politics of the narrative composition. Scholars have made much of the parallel relationships between Marie and Chrétien, Lancelot and Guenevere: the knight's unwavering service to his lady, and eagerness to do her bidding, is seen to parody Chrétien's paratextual lip service to Marie's ideas about courtly love.¹⁰⁸ Even the language Chrétien uses to describe Lancelot's submission to his queen at ll. 1264, 4187 and 5656 echoes his own relationship to his patroness: 'Come cil qui est suens antiers' ('as one who is completely hers'; l. 4). Yet there is this unexplored parallel between Godefroi and Meleagant's sister, both of whom disrupt partnerships inside and outside the romance that readers have hitherto understood to be shaping the direction of the narrative, allowing the writer/knight greater freedom. Equally overlooked is that it is possible to make different connections between the couples inside and outside the romance if Lancelot's antagonistic relationship with Meleagant is emphasised over his love affair with Guenevere. Meleagant equally seeks to control Lancelot's narrative and when Guenevere drops out of view at the end, Meleagant moves into the position of Marie. The multiplication of couples inside and outside the romance undermines the idea of single narrative authority or influence, and

¹⁰⁸ Select scholars include Roberta L. Krueger, 'Desire, Meaning and the Female Reader: The Problem of Chrétien's *Charrete*', in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 229-45; Knepper, p. 54 ff.; Corbyn, p. 52.

compels readers to accept the co-existence of incompatible interpretations. Moreover, when Godefroi fails to explain the mechanics of the authorial handover in language that paradoxically echoes the words used by Chrétien to detail his literary arrangement with Marie, the clerk signposts readers back to the prologue for clues to his existence, making the whole romance an endless loop that can be mined cyclically for answers.¹⁰⁹

The paradox of prologue and epilogue is the final flourish in the series of antitheses that make up the *Lancelot* text. Those with a superficial understanding of the romance genre as productive of happy and unified endings alone might be tempted to believe that the poet would have reconciled these conflicts had he been able to finish the romance himself.¹¹⁰ But a global vision of the narrative shows Chrétien cultivates manifold contradictions throughout the romance, which fan out from the central paradox of Lancelot himself. As F. Xavier Baron indicates, it is possible Chrétien wanted it ‘both ways’: he wanted to show that a knight could be at once a remarkable hero and a detestable chump, and that love and adventure, like most things in life, could be admirable and foolish at the same time.¹¹¹ Twentieth-century critics who charged *Lancelot* with illogicality and incoherence were correct, then; but while these qualities may have been a cause for criticism in the eyes of those who favoured classic realist novels, it should now be recognised as a facet of the rhetorical strategy of antithesis Chrétien uses to both illuminate the contradictions of life itself and open the text to reinterpretation. By backing away from universal statements about the nature of man and experience, Chrétien

¹⁰⁹ In this respect, the romance reflects the Bible, which Frank Kermode notes, ends with a Revelation that ‘is traditionally held to resume the whole structure’, as well as the formal circularity of a work like James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, whose closing word is the same as its opening word and thus suggests an ‘infinite continuation of the reading process’: Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 6; see also McGerr, p. 23, p. 30.

¹¹⁰ McGerr suggests that the text as Chrétien left it (with Lancelot imprisoned away from court) might have actually made for greater internal consistency (through linking of beginning and end), since Lancelot enters the narrative in the forest already on his quest to rescue the queen: McGerr, p. 40; see also Knepper, p. 61.

¹¹¹ Baron, p. 383.

aims for a different kind of realism; as Topsfield concludes, the inconclusiveness of *Lancelot* shows ‘there is no impregnable wholeness of spirit, no lasting peace of mind, no absolutely pure and complete love’.¹¹²

Chrétien apparently found this to be a transformative mode, for even when he finishes his romances, this contradictory aesthetic remains. Topsfield downplays the use of antithesis in *Le Chevalier au lion*, and argues that ‘Analogy and contrast [...] are now used with restraint’.¹¹³ Yet even an uncritical reading of *Yvain* in the context of *Lancelot* shows the former is invested in the same principles of contrast, for, if nothing else, it is diametrically opposed to *Le Chevalier de la charrette*. The critical tradition treats the two romances as a pair because they were apparently composed simultaneously at the height of Chrétien’s career between 1176 and 1180.¹¹⁴ This assumption in turn stems from three major intersections between the two texts: the interlocking ‘Gawain’ narratives, the intertextual references to Lancelot in *Yvain*, and the affinities between the heroes. The adventures undertaken by Gawain are woven through both narratives, which indicates that they are operating in the same time frame.¹¹⁵ There are further parallels between the heroes, including their anonymity and pseudonyms, though where Lancelot begins his adventure as an unknown knight, Yvain only goes incognito in the second part. There are other counterpoints: while *Yvain* is concerned with marriage as a means to gain ownership of land, *Lancelot* is shaped by the hero’s position as a courtly lover; *Yvain* is preoccupied with the reaffirmation of homosocial bonds, while the hero of *Lancelot* is deeply unsocialised; just as *Yvain* does

¹¹² Topsfield, p. 172-4.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 176.

¹¹⁴ See Tony Hunt, ‘Le Chevalier au Lion: *Yvain Lionheart*’, *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), p. 156; so called ‘companion’ romances because they seem to have been written around the same time in parallel.

¹¹⁵ The reader is told Gawain cannot act as champion for Lunete because he is on a mission to rescue the queen from Meleagant, for example: all references are to Chrétien de Troyes, *Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes: Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. by Mario Roques, vol. 4 (Paris: Champion, 1978), p. 119, l. 3906 ff.

not have a proper prologue, *Lancelot* does not have an epilogue written by Chrétien. But though the two run on opposing trajectories through the narrative, *Yvain* manifests the same spirit of antithesis seen in *Lancelot* and *Cligès* and presents a similarly double ending.

2.4 *Le Chevalier au lion*: The Peaceful Marriage and the Sleight of Hand

Le Chevalier au Lion (*Yvain*) is the most celebrated of Chrétien's romances, renowned for its accomplished treatment of the central Arthurian themes of love and chivalry, simplicity of form, and for the harmoniousness of its general design. While there has been 'considerable disagreement', as Norris Lacy puts it, over the structural organisation of Chrétien's last complete work, few scholars venture to disturb or qualify the judgment that it constitutes the best of his romances, including Paul Zumthor: 'Yvain, le mieux construit des romans de Chrétien'; and Jean Frappier: 'Yvain est, avec Erec, le roman mieux construit de Chrétien'.¹¹⁶ Consequently, *Yvain* has long been praised as 'the perfect paradigm of medieval romance' over its 'companion' text *Lancelot* and continues to be 'l'objet de plusieurs analyses qui signalent et justifient la qualité de la "conjointure"'.¹¹⁷ That this view was shared by the medieval readership is suggested by the extant manuscripts, which indicate that *Yvain* enjoyed the widest circulation over time, and by the significant number of translations and adaptations that emerged in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, including Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein* and *Ywain and Gawain* in English.¹¹⁸ In fact, D. S. Brewer suggests that 'The

¹¹⁶ Lacy, p. 93; 'Yvain, the best constructed of Chrétien's romances': Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), p. 481; 'Yvain is, with Erec, the most well-constructed romance of Chrétien': Jean Frappier, 'Le Chevalier au lion', in *Chrétien de Troyes: Connaissance des Lettres* (Paris: Hatier, 1968), p. 148; see also Maurice Accarie, 'La structure du *Chevalier au lion* de Chrétien de Troyes', *Le Moyen Âge*, 84.1 (1978), 13-34.

¹¹⁷ Tony Hunt, 'Le Chevalier au Lion', p. 156; "'The Knight with the Lion" is the object of numerous analyses that demonstrate and support the quality of the "conjointure"': Francis Dubost, '*Le Chevalier au Lion*: une "conjointure" signifiante', *Le Moyen Âge*, 90 (1984), 195-222 (p. 195).

¹¹⁸ *Le Chevalier au lion* is the only romance to have been copied in the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (no manuscripts copies of Chrétien's romances survive from the fifteenth century); even *Le Conte du Graal*, which survives in the most manuscripts (14 to *Yvain*'s 11), was not copied in the sixteenth century: see Kelly, pp. 29-30.

Book of the Leoun' Chaucer names in his *Retraction* may have been a translation of *Yvain*.¹¹⁹ The superlative status of *Yvain* is tarnished only by the 'pace and import' of its final sequence which, as Fredric Cheyette and Howell Chickering put it, has 'severely tested modern critics sense of a satisfying conclusion [...] because they perceive an artistic tension between the need for conclusion and the characters' presumed states of mind'.¹²⁰

On first impression, the ending produces strong closure equivalent to *Erec et Enide*.

After a series of trials, Yvain returns to Laudine, and she receives him back into the land of Landuc after promising to help 'the Knight with the Lion' regain his lady's favour:

Or a mes sire Yvain sa pes;
 et poez croire c'onques mes
 ne fu de nule rien si liez,
 comant qu'il ait esté iriez.
 Molt an est a boen chief venuz
 qu'il est amez et chier tenuz
 de sa dame, et ele de lui. (vv. 6789-95)

[Now my lord Yvain has his peace;/and please believe/that he has never been so happy for anything/nor that his troubles are over./For everything has turned out well/nor that he has the sweet love/of his lady, and she of him.]

This reads like the quintessential 'happy ending' and, unlike *Cligès*, there is no proleptic postscript or anything obviously compromising. Yet scholars take issue with the equivocating veneer of language in the final lines, which seem to gloss Laudine's feelings on the matter and make light of her earlier vow to banish Yvain 'from her love' and her land if he did not

¹¹⁹ Traditional speculation is that the lost work may have been a translation of Guillaume Machaut's *Dit du Lyon*, or perhaps Eustache Deschamps's *La Fiction* (or *Le Diet*) *du Lyon*: D. S. Brewer, 'Chaucer and Chrétien and Arthurian Romance', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1974), pp. 255-59; see also Ernst Hoepffner, 'Crestien de Troyes und Guillaume de Machaut', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 39 (1919), 627-29.

¹²⁰ Fredric L. Cheyette and Howell Chickering, 'Love, Anger, and Peace: Social Practice and Poetic Play in the Ending of Yvain', *Speculum*, 80.1 (2005), 75-117 (pp. 75-6); see for example Helaine Newstead, 'Narrative Techniques in Chrétien's *Yvain*', *Romance Philology*, 30.3 (1977), 431-41, (pp. 440-1); Marc Glasser, 'Marriage and the Use of Force in *Yvain*', *Romania*, 108 (1987), 484-502 (498-99); Joan Tasker Grimbert, "*Yvain*" *dans le miroir: Une poétique de la réflexion dans le "Chevalier au lion" de Chrétien de Troyes* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1988), pp. 171-81; Donald Maddox, *The Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes: Once and Future Fictions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 62; Saul N. Brody, 'Reflections of Yvain's Inner Life', *Romance Philology*, 54 (2001), 277-98.

return from his adventures within a year (which he does not; l. 2578-80). Topsfield feels that ‘the ending of *Yvain* is unconvincing’, and views the conclusion as a ‘patching together of story’.¹²¹ Similarly, Marcella Munson finds it ‘odd’ that the poet would ‘end the story of Laudine and Yvain with such a lack of detail’, with such a ‘pat ending’.¹²² Joseph Duggan further observes that the story can only end ‘because Laudine does not wish to renege on her oath’ and finally determines that the ‘portrayal of motivation [comes] up a bit short’.¹²³

In their efforts to account for the apparent disparity between *Yvain* as the gold standard of twelfth-century courtly romance writing and its sudden, ‘tinny’ ending, more recent scholars gloss the ending as deliberately provocative, while others argue that ‘people of lordly estate’ would have found the ending aesthetically pleasing. Leah Tether, for instance, argues that the poet’s warning to the reader to treat any further additions to the tale as ‘mançonge’ is so strong that it goes beyond the stemming of expectations, and lays ‘down a challenge’ to continuators (ll. 6804-8).¹²⁴ Cheyette and Chickering, on the other hand, argue that twelfth-century readers would have ‘delighted’ in the versification of the language used in medieval charters and the familiar scenario of a dispute settlement.¹²⁵ Though this chapter will agree with Tether in so far as the ending provokes debate, considering that the romance does not obviously call for continuation, and *Yvain* is a romance text, not a legal document, these sorts of explanations do not fully unpick the aesthetic reasoning behind the sugar-coated reconciliation of Yvain and Laudine.

This part of the chapter will argue that the dissatisfaction critics experience at this endpoint arises at least partly because of a dual perspective on the action consistent with the

¹²¹ Topsfield, p. 205.

¹²² Marcella Munson, ‘Cil qui l’escrist: Narrative Authority and Intervention in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Yvain*’, *Paroles Gelées*, 12.1 (1994), 27-45 (p. 39).

¹²³ Joseph J. Duggan, *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 118-19.

¹²⁴ Tether, pp. 81-2

¹²⁵ Cheyette and Chickering, pp. 76-77.

dynamic seen in the ends of *Lancelot* and *Cligès*. When the romance comes to a close, the reader derives comfort from the knowledge that Yvain has been reunited with his lady and wife, apparently preventing his own demise, which he felt certain would come to pass if he could not win her forgiveness (ll. 6504-5). It also puts an end to the recurrent cycle of winning love and abandoning it in favour of adventure: until this point, Yvain has been trapped in structural and metaphorical 'prison' created by his conflicting obligations (ll. 1924-42). Yet the reconciliation is only achieved because Laudine's cunning handmaid Lunete persuades her lady to swear an ambiguous oath that she will ensure 'Le Chevalier au lion' redeems the good grace of his lady, knowing full well Laudine has not previously recognised him as her husband Yvain. Thus, Yvain has not legitimately won back the love of his wife, and Laudine, speaking only of her fear of 'parjure' (l. 6791), is apparently a victim of coercion.

At first, the two sides of this ending seem to have been determined by the conflict between the themes of love and chivalry in *Yvain*. The specific configuration of values in this later romance presents a variation on the thematic dichotomy of *Lancelot*, with the concept of *fin'amor* complicated by marriage. As Laudine's loving husband, Yvain commits to protecting both her and her land of Landuc, including the marvellous spring. But as an Arthurian knight, he is bound to pursue adventures and take part in tourneys alongside Gawain and other knights of the realm. Over the course of the romance, the reader witnesses Yvain struggle to satisfy the demands of both obligations, eventually losing his mind and even his identity when he is disowned by Laudine after failing to return from his adventures on time. By this logic, the ending is a triumph for chivalry because Yvain retains his position as a lover and husband despite committing himself almost wholeheartedly to his exploits as a knight. This would suggest that readers feel a sense of dissatisfaction because the themes of love and chivalry are not properly reconciled: Laudine and Yvain, the parties that stand

behind these two values, are brought into harmony on the basis of a problematic legal bind and nothing more.

However, Topsfield argues that the real paradox of *Yvain* is not the conflict between the knight as warrior and the knight as lover, but rather the conflict between the values represented by Arthur's followers ('the life of self-indulgence') and those practiced by the inhabitants of Laudine's world ('acceptance of duty').¹²⁶ This indicates that the mechanics of the denouement are not as straightforward as the subjugation of 'love' by 'chivalry', and that there are other factors that shape the ending and contribute to the general frustration of readers. Undoubtedly among these is Lunete's sudden intervention, the only obvious pretext given for the reconciliatory denouement. As a narrative move, it feels arbitrary and contrived in the context of earlier subtleties, such as Yvain's relationship with the lion and his combat with Gawain. The next part of the chapter will re-evaluate Lunete's semantic sleight of hand (and by extension, the poet's) from an Aristotelian perspective, but will suggest that her intervention also resonates with the gimmick form. This might explain why scholars perceive the ending as abrupt and forced, and why claims for the ensuing marital 'peace' between Yvain and Laudine seem in direct conflict with Laudine's reaction to their reunion.

2.4.1 The Mistress of Gimmicks

The denouement strikes readers as incongruous in the first instance because a contrivance ends the feud between Yvain and Laudine in lieu of an organic process of reconciliation. When Yvain unceremoniously falls out of favour with Laudine at the mid-point of the romance, their relationship seems irreparable (ll. 2592-760). He misses the deadline to return to Landuc as promised, breaking his solemn contract with Laudine both as wife and *domna*, and thus seems deserving of her renunciation of him. Yet, only moments before Laudine's

¹²⁶ Topsfield, p. 182.

messenger arrives, Yvain becomes upset, reflecting suddenly that he has broken his word to his wife; as Thomas Hinton notes in relation to Perceval's tendency to forget one 'goal' in favour of another, clearly different issues are competing for retention within the memories of both the hero and the narrative.¹²⁷ The distress caused by the comprehension of his mistake triggers his period of madness and seclusion (l. 2798 ff.), after which he deliberately pursues adventures concerning the protection and liberation of various women as 'Le Chevalier au lion' (l. 3082 ff.). Eventually, however, Yvain resolves to return to the fountain to make 'pes' with Laudine, 'par force et par estovoir' (l. 6514-21). Lunete, a consistent advocate of Yvain, knows about his plans to return to the spring, and her tactful manipulation of language allows Yvain to cast off his pseudonym on arrival and once again take his place as Laudine's husband. Laudine herself says very little in the way of substantial protest: she admonishes Lunete for her deception, for 'bien [s]'as or au hoquerel prise' (l. 6751), and for making her love a man who, to her mind, neither loves nor respects her. However, she recognises that failure to grant Yvain's wishes will bring her into disrepute. In any case, there is no indication a mutual love will be rekindled between husband and wife; indeed, the poet avoids the word 'amor' completely; instead he focuses on Yvain's desire to establish 'pes', the word for 'peace', which is mentioned four times in the final part (ll. 6769, 6789, 6801).

After Yvain loses his mind, it becomes clear there will not be an easy resolution to the conflict of interest the hero faces in his commitment to two codes of conduct. It is fair to say that, in the services he carries out as Le Chevalier au lion, Yvain has more fully engaged with the values of duty and honour exemplified by Laudine's world, taught by the lion how to properly serve and protect.¹²⁸ That he carries out these efforts on behalf of women might

¹²⁷ Thomas Hinton, 'Authorship, Kinship and the Ethics of Continuation', in *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien de Troyes's Perceval, the Continuations, and French Arthurian Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 111-62 (p. 117).

¹²⁸ For the analogy between the lion's love for Yvain and the love Yvain should have given to Laudine, see Topsfield, p. 191.

suggest they are symbolic reparations for the service withheld from Laudine, and that the ladies are surrogates for her. Nevertheless, at line 6514, the poet is no closer to reconciling Yvain with the real object of his love. Because he stays incognito in the second half of the romance, none of Yvain's heroic endeavours, not even his rescue of Lunete (ll. 4407-565), improve his chances of redemption. The 'pes' made between Yvain and Laudine at l. 6780 therefore seems sudden and improbable. It is possible that the earlier and similarly incredible transformation of Laudine's feelings towards Yvain appropriately foregrounds this ending. Her mortal hatred for Esclados's killer turns to love as soon as Lunete persuades her that he can serve as her new protector (ll. 1986-2123); perhaps the settlement is once more simply the most convenient option for Laudine, who still needs a knight to protect her fountain. Even so, however, the reader is not suitably prepared for the swiftness of this denouement, nor for the decidedly uncourtly, unromantic way the poet achieves it.

The reversal of situation at the end invites comparison with the device of peripeteia discussed in relation to *Cligès* and *Lancelot*. In fact, Topsfield argues that Yvain's madness is 'a formal cleansing process which frees his mind from the fetters of Arthur's world', which sounds remarkably like the 'discovery' of anagnorisis.¹²⁹ Significantly, however, Yvain's admission of 'corpable et forfe' (guilt and wrong) comes after he receives assurance that he will not suffer personal consequences for his 'Folie' (ll. 6774-5). The satisfaction derived from peripeteia is usually dependent on the hero's independent recognition of guilt; it is the 'discovery' that triggers the reversal. Thus, the knowledge that Yvain's admission is conditional upon Laudine's surrender diminishes the satisfaction the reader gains from the 'resolution' of the romance. Moreover, even if Yvain's time as a wild man in the woods prompts some personal reform, in the end, his vision of conscience, and his determination to make himself as useful as possible to ladies in distress, is not sufficient to win over Laudine

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

and break the deadlock.¹³⁰ Indeed, as in *Cligès* and *Lancelot*, the shift in circumstances that brings *Yvain* to an end is not an internal ‘epiphany’ but an external development: in this case, the situation needs a fixer.

That fixer is Lunete: it is her gimmicky intervention, and not any action taken by Yvain himself, that releases the hero from his chivalric juggling act. To avoid compromising the life of his hero and the principles of his lady, the poet promotes Lunete to a position of unprecedented authority to cut through the Gordian Knot.¹³¹ Of course, Lunete’s diplomatic scheming is central to the beginnings of the courtship between Yvain and Laudine; yet she never presumes to rise above her station and truly deceive her superiors. By the end, however, Lunete is prepared to use any means necessary to settle the dispute, perhaps with a view to protecting Landuc, and exploits linguistic ambiguity worthy of a poet to trick Laudine into welcoming Yvain back into their marriage (ll. 6634-39). After Laudine swears this legally binding oath (‘si jureroiz’), the poet emphasises Lunete’s gleeful success (l. 6649 ff.). But, as far as readers know, the contract leaves her lady trapped and distressed (the poet does not provide dialogue or any free indirect discourse for Laudine after l. 6784), and makes for a contrived, uncourtly denouement. Just as Yvain ‘antrobliè’ (forgets for a while) his troubles at the end, the poet apparently expects readers to forget Laudine’s earlier protests, as well as the socially prescribed deference to the courtly *domna*, and accept their legalistic reconciliation.

Like the thunderbolt striking the lands of Landuc during the marvellous storm, then, Chrétien strikes a ‘pes’ between Yvain and Laudine, and ends his romance. In this way, the denouement of *Yvain* bears some resemblance to the *deus ex machina*, with Lunete mobilised

¹³⁰ For a recent account of Yvain’s ‘healing’ and ‘epiphany’, see Éléonore Andrieu, ‘La guérison d’Yvain dans le *Chevalier au lion*: l’*épiphany* du *fin chevalier*. Étude littéraire des vers 2829 à 3023’, *Op. cit., revue des littératures et des arts*, 17 (2017), 1-24.

¹³¹ See also Ellen Germain, ‘Lunete, Women, and Power in Chrétien’s *Yvain*’, *Romance Quarterly*, 38.1 (1991), 15-2.

to solve the problems of the plot at a stroke. In support of this, Lunete exhibits some qualities of the divine, especially in her ability to stand back sufficiently distant from the narrative world to see aspects concealed from other characters; she also invokes God's name 'De' or 'Des' several times during her successful persuasion of Laudine (ll. 6598-653).¹³² The way that she wraps up the plot at this crucial moment also resonates with the idea of the gimmick codified by Chandler: she is the man (or, rather, the mistress) who comes through the door with 'a gun' in her hand.¹³³ However, while these conventions offer a way into understanding the ending of *Yvain*, neither the dramatic nor the gimmick form fully explains why the mindsets of hero and lady remain irreconcilable in the final lines.¹³⁴

Indeed, even though Lunete's trickery contrives an ending, it catches Laudine in a double bind; in other words, Lunete's solution resolves one problem and creates another. Chrétien assures his readers that 'Molt an est a buen chief venuz' (Everything has turned out well; l. 6793), but does not attempt to account for the discrepancy between Laudine's impassioned cry, 'Celui qui ne m'ainme ne prise,/Me feras amer mau gré mien' (The one who neither loves nor respects me,/You will make me love him in spite of myself; ll. 6752-3), and the declaration by the poet that Yvain 'amez et chier tenuz/De sa dame, et ele de lui' (is loved and cherished/by his lady, and she by him; ll. 6794-5). Laudine does not think or say anything to that effect, and there are no joyful embraces as there are between Yvain and Gawain at end of their dialectical combat. Either the reader accepts Laudine does not know what is good for her and will eventually come around to happiness, or they must accept this

¹³² Some critics have argued for a connection between Lunete and the moon goddess Diana: see for instance Michel Stanesco, 'Le chevalier au lion d'une déesse oubliée: Yvain et "Dea Lunae"', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 24 (1981), 221-232.

¹³³ Chandler, pp. 13-14.

¹³⁴ Hunt notes that it is uncertain how much of the poet's commentary is subject to the ironic qualification found in Foerster's text 'Si poez croire' [You may well believe], particularly since the phrase is absent from some manuscripts: Hunt, 'Le Chevalier au Lion', p. 166; see also Chrestien de Troyes, *Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion): The Critical Text of Wendelin Foerster*, ed. by T. B. W. Reid (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1942).

final sense of inconclusiveness. Although the conventions of resolution discussed above elucidate the contrivances of this ending, they cannot account for this final sense of incongruity; in Chrétien's antithetical endings, no resolution is absolute, and the poet always balances joy with uncertainty.

2.4.2 The Contradictions of *Yvain*

Central to *Yvain* is the conflict between two chivalric obligations, the knight as lover and the knight as warrior, or in Topsfield's more nuanced interpretation, between two chivalric 'ways of life': 'Folly is set against wisdom [...] self-indulgence against duty, [...] on the levels of knighthood, social duty and love'.¹³⁵ In Topsfield's reading, the first 'illusory' way of life is represented by Arthur's court, heroic but foolish and egotistical, and the second by Laudine's otherworld 'reality', ordered by duty and responsibility verging on self-righteousness.¹³⁶ Yet however readers configure this 'conflict', the effect is the same: over the course of the romance, Yvain oscillates between incompatible preoccupations and appetites, none of which, as in the case of *Lancelot*, are wholly 'good' or wholly 'bad', fundamentally ideal or fundamentally flawed. Yvain's commitment to Laudine conflicts with his impulse to come to the aid of others in distress; his longing to have the love of a lady (or Celtic fairy mistress) with his Arthurian desire for prestige.

The culmination of all this is the paradoxical crisis the hero faces around the mid-point just before Laudine's renunciation of him: he had to leave Laudine to gain social status, but he cannot have the social status he originally achieved without returning to her. Topsfield argues that Yvain finally transcends the dichotomy of his secular obligations, through his association with the virtuous lion, and 'moves towards a *caritas* and peace of mind', which

¹³⁵ Based on his belief that *Yvain* is not concerned with the love for the beloved but with the virtues which sustain love: Topsfield, pp. 176-7.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

surpasses even the moral values of Laudine.¹³⁷ However, while Topsfield's interpretation stands up to scrutiny up until Yvain returns to Landuc, the ending reiterates the contradictions he has faced throughout. The juxtaposition of the perspectives held by Yvain and Laudine is a final expression of the antithetical spirit that shapes the entire romance. *Yvain* does not illustrate as comprehensive a pattern of analogy and contrast as *Cligès*, for instance. But beyond the central conflict outlined above, there are other contradictions and paradoxical conceptualisations of central narrative themes and ideas which foreground the final antithesis of hero and lady.

Sarah Kay points out the series of contradictory phenomena in the text, especially in the land of Landuc: the monstrous peasant (l. 286 ff.); the fountain that boils, and the drops of water that provoke storms.¹³⁸ Yet the preposterous minutiae of the world upside down reflect the larger thematic contradiction between the implied premise of the romance, to tell of those who served love in bygone days (ll. 18-28), and the actual conduct of its prominent knights, whose amorous exploits are far from exemplary. Calogrenant makes advances towards his host's daughter but departs after just one night (l. 243); Yvain develops a passion for the lady he widows but abandons her almost immediately after they marry, and Gawain fails to rescue the women he promises to protect in favour of more impressive missions like Guenevere's rescue.¹³⁹ It is possible, as Tony Hunt argues, that the opening discourse on love in fact refers to *amicitia*, friendship, which sustains the 'most successful' relationships in the romance, such as those between Yvain and Gawain and Yvain and the lion.¹⁴⁰ In fact, the homosocial bonds in this text are so strong that they turn the chivalry *topos* on its head: although it is

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 177 ff.

¹³⁸ Kay, p. 177.

¹³⁹ His absence is commented upon first by Lunete, who has sought him in vain as her champion (3696 ff.), then by his brother-in-law, hard beset by the giant Harpin, who did not appeal to him for assistance because his whereabouts were unknown (3906 ff.).

¹⁴⁰ Tony Hunt, *Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain (Le chevalier au lion)*, Critical Guides to French Texts (London: Grant and Cutler, 1986), p. 36.

Yvain's personal ambition for vengeance that drives his aggressive individual advancement in the first instance, it is his friendship with Gawain that leads him into a topsy-turvy world of chivalry where his feats are disconnected from and, in fact, increasingly jeopardise his relationship with the lady.

However, not even Yvain's most 'successful' relationships with Lunete, the lion and Gawain, are free from contradiction. The early stage of his camaraderie with Lunete, for instance, arises from a series of paradoxes. After his horse is split in half and he is trapped behind the portcullis (l. 956 ff.), the people of Landuc are initially convinced Yvain is in the hall (*doxa*), only to be proved wrong by their fruitless search (*para-doxa*). Esclados's still bleeding wound then renews their belief that his killer is present (*doxa*), but again they are forced to accept he has vanished (*para-doxa*).¹⁴¹ His first encounter with the lion similarly evokes the subject of antithesis. Like Alexander faced with the uncertainties of love, and Lancelot before the cart, Yvain debates with himself about the risks of defending the lion against a dragon (ll. 3343-71). Though he eventually syllogises that he must favour the lion (as per the bestiaries, lions are good and dragons are full of 'enuious'), this resolution leaves him in a catch-22: even if he does rescue the lion, the beast might still attack him.¹⁴² Virginie Greene argues this marvellous dilemma gives Yvain a second opportunity to make a difficult choice and 'live with it'.¹⁴³ But even if this episode shows that Yvain, fresh from his detox in the wild, is now able to confront dilemmas in a rational manner, it also suggests contradiction must be accepted as a necessary part of resolutions to complicated problems. The trade-off

¹⁴¹ The townspeople's notion that Esclados's body is a sign for them to interpret alludes to an idea that was prevalent in the medieval chronicles of Henry of Huntingdon and his contemporaries – that the deceased body could express a particular moral message depending upon whether the king or noble in question had led an exemplary or sinful life: see Michael Evans, 'The Corruption of the Body', *The Death of Kings: Royal Deaths in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), pp. 61-86.

¹⁴² See also Paule Le Rider, 'Lions et dragons dans la littérature, de Pierre Damien à Chrétien de Troyes', *Le Moyen Âge*, 104 (1998), 9-52.

¹⁴³ Virginie Elisabeth Greene, *Logical Fictions in Medieval Literature and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University 2014), p. 27.

that Yvain makes between coming to the aid of a troubled creature and potentially incurring the wrath of that same creature anticipates the final paradox he (and Laudine) must accept in the end.

The contradictions of *Yvain* reach their climax in the abstracted combat between Yvain and Gawain, during which neither are aware they are attacking their friend on behalf of the feuding sisters (ll. 5983-6312). The episode contains a philosophical digression or, as Greene puts it, a ‘mock dialectical debate’ about the ambivalence of the self, able to love and hate at the same time:¹⁴⁴

Et or don ne s’antraiment il?
 “Oil” vos respong et “nenil.”
 Et l’un et l’autre proverai,
 Si que reison i troverai. (ll. 5995-98)

[And now did he not give his love to him?/‘Yes’ I tell you and ‘no’./And I’ll prove this one and the other/each reply is correct.]

This dialectic, which echoes Abelard’s *Sic et Non*, sets up a framework for the coexistence of opposing ideals ‘sanz fin’ at the end (l. 6801). The romance in fact supplies the metaphorical analogy that ‘en un chas a plusors manbres [...] Einsi puet bien estre la chose’ (ll. 6027-29); that, in short, the mind has different compartments for different concerns.¹⁴⁵ This explains, as Hunt writes, ‘how Amor and Haïne coexist in the combatants [...] how there can be a single meeting place for “deus choses, qui sont contreires” (l. 6026)’.¹⁴⁶ The apparent paradoxes of the relationship between Yvain and Gawain in this moment indicate that the role of the knight is a nuanced one, and suggests his motivations and heroic arc can always be viewed from at least two different perspectives.

¹⁴⁴ Greene, p. 77.

¹⁴⁵ Jean Frappier associated this episode with Abelard’s *Sic et Non* on the basis of line 5996 (“Oil” vos respong et “nenil”) which echoes the title compilation of contradictory citations answering theological questions: Jean Frappier, *Étude sur Yvain, ou Le chevalier au lion de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris: Société d’édition d’enseignement supérieur, 1969), pp. 194–8.

¹⁴⁶ Hunt, *Yvain*, p. 80.

The duality of experience outlined during Yvain and Gawain's duel could also be applied to the surprisingly uncourtly events of the final scene: perhaps readers are meant to accept Yvain's position as both knight and a husband as a nuanced and conflicting one, or perhaps Laudine does love Yvain, but will not deign to show that she has reconsidered so quickly; or perhaps Laudine's failure to show mercy to Yvain proves her to be ignorant of the codes of courtly conduct.¹⁴⁷ Or perhaps through the rationalisation of the idealised lady, Chrétien is putting forward a view of love and its place within a responsible society in opposition to the courtly ideal of servitude within an adulterous relationship and the fatal passion of the contemporary *Tristan* story. In any case, if the philosophical ambiguity of the combat is a frame of reference for the ending, it becomes less important to supply a definitive solution to the conflict between Yvain and Laudine. Their positions do not have to be reconciled because, as with the antagonistic friends, it is possible for adverse and positive emotions to reside in different regions of the same mind.

As in *Cligès* and *Lancelot*, there is also an element of the unexpected in this ending: when Yvain returns to the spring, the reader can only imagine, without evidence to the contrary, that Laudine will reject him again, and that he will instead live happily ever after with his lion, or perhaps with Lunete. The juxtaposition of this expectation with their sudden reconciliation is not what the reader or, indeed, Laudine bargained for (not publicly at least). The paradoxes explored in these final two episodes, as Hunt claims, are a series of dialectical oppositions, intended to promote an atmosphere of debate at the end of the work.¹⁴⁸ However, Hunt does not emphasise the unexpected manner in which Chrétien sets up his 'debate', nor does he notice that this same textual 'atmosphere' is also reflected in the earlier works of *Cligès* and *Lancelot*.

¹⁴⁷ For a more detailed examination of Laudine, see A. R. Press, 'Chrétien de Troyes's Laudine: a *Belle dame sans mercy*?', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 19.2 (1983), 158-71.

¹⁴⁸ Hunt, *Yvain*, see p. 53 ff., p. 82 ff.

The contradictions of *Yvain*, and especially the conflict between his compulsions as a self-indulgent knight and selfless hero, a perfect courtly lover and tyrannical husband, is an ‘adversative rhythm’, an aesthetic device designed to provoke contentious responses rather than deliver comfort. This characterisation of *Yvain* as ‘fundamentally adversative’ is based on Joan Tasker Grimbert’s observation that in Mario Roques’s edition of the text, 250 lines begin with the word ‘mes’ (but).¹⁴⁹ Significantly, the language used at the end of the romance never shifts to reflect a new rhythmic harmony. In its last appearance, the adversative word ‘mes’ is rhymed with the word key to effecting the reconciliation between Yvain and Laudine: ‘pes’ (ll. 6789-90). This antithetical pairing might confirm that while the peace Lunete makes between hero and lady allows them to co-exist, the two parties remain adversative. Despite critical claims to the contrary, in this romance Chrétien avoids precisely what scholars have accused him of doing. By embracing contradiction, he eschews an artificial ‘pat’ ending, offering instead a dichotomized ending, cleaved by the equally valid perspectives of Yvain and Laudine. It is a fitting end to a romance that medievalists find, paradoxically, both perfect and lacking.

In the end, *Yvain* irritates from an aesthetic point of view because it does not present a unified truth, a synthesis or solution to an overarching ‘problem’. As A. C. Spearing observes, the English translator of *Yvain* brings greater certainty to the closing sequence of his source with the assurance of a happy ending for ‘Lunet and the liown’ and, calling on the finality of death, he adds that Yvain’s happiness with Laudine lasts ‘Until that ded haves dreven tham down’.¹⁵⁰ Yet the paradox offered in place of this reassurance in the Old French romance reflects a truth about the complexity of human experience that straightforwardly

¹⁴⁹ Joan Tasker Grimbert, ‘Adversative Structure in Chrétien’s *Yvain*: the role of the conjunction mes’, *Medioevo Romanzo*, 9 (1984), 27-50 (p. 27).

¹⁵⁰ A. C. Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 113; *Yvain and Gawain*, ed. by Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, *Early English Text Society*, 254 (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), ll. 4025-6.

‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’ cannot easily convey: there can never be a perfect right decision in anything. Individuals, knights or otherwise, can only work to have the fortitude to make decisions at all, accepting whatever imperfect circumstances their choices might bring. It would seem, then, that Chrétien’s ‘symbolic fantasy’ has a greater degree of psychological realism than it tends to be given credit for, another reason to read his romances alongside that great ‘master’ of social realism, Chaucer.¹⁵¹

2.5 Conclusions

The antithetical endings of these three romances chart Chrétien’s changing ideas about the thematic order and potential signification of his Arthurian narratives. Analogy and contrast, the system of composition used in *Erec et Enide*, which gives rise to its optimistic and beautiful ending, finds new thematic expression in the later romances through the consistent dichotomisation and juxtaposition of all textual elements, from shifts in tone and details of character, to public and private discourse. It seems that readers are not truly alerted to the full extent of this strategy (or irritated by it) until the ends of these romances, at which point it becomes clear the long chain of antitheses will not reconcile into the harmonious, optimistic solution realised in *Erec et Enide*. Yet what Chrétien seems to aim for in *Cligès*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain*, is not a perfect ‘wholeness’ in the structural and thematic sense of *Erec et Enide*, but a ‘whole picture’ of life, illuminated (and dramatized) in all its contradictions. Paradoxically, this ‘whole’ view of life, which merges good and bad, folly and wisdom, shame and honour, irony and idealism all together at once, produces unresolved texts; true wholeness and perfection was achieved by God alone. In a real sense, the poet does not fully resolve these

¹⁵¹ Brewer suggests that Chrétien and Chaucer are incompatible on account of the fact that Chrétien’s symbolic fantasy bears no relation to Chaucer’s masterful realism: see Brewer, pp. 255-59; others, like Shirt, have written about the realism of Chrétien’s romances: see David J. Shirt, ‘Cligès: realism in romance’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 13 (1977), 368-80.

romance plots, or their character arcs, because the expected point of resolution supports a double vision of narrative events. All three endings double down on the opposing positions implied throughout, and preserve the balance between them: Fenice's infidelity with Cligès does not make them any less the rightful heirs to the throne; Lancelot's defeat, and silencing, of Melegant proves him to be both a saviour and a renegade; Yvain's sneaky readmission to Landuc does not detract from the fact that he is a magnanimous knight and will be a 'peaceful' husband. It is not that the poet refuses to reveal whether his heroes are conclusively good or bad at the end; the men are simply neither wholly admirable nor wholly shameful, which makes the romances both closer to the truth of life and inherently open to conflicting interpretations. This conception of human activity perhaps expresses the ongoing cultural negotiations around the moral values and attributes of the knight in the High Middle Ages: they were not the chivalric mercenaries of the eleventh century going to Hell, but not quite the knights of the fourteenth century assured of their love from God and a place in Heaven.

The theories of peripeteia and the gimmick brought to bear on the endings of the three romances might now seem redundant. The sudden reversals of fortune, initially theorised as comic peripeteia, can be rationalised as juxtaposition, and the element of the unexpected in the endings is perhaps better explained as paradox rather than gimmick. Both sit comfortably under the larger umbrella of rhetorical antithesis. Nevertheless, approaching the intricate workings of these endings from less conventional angles reveals that some of the mechanisms thought to be exclusive to ancient theatre, modern and postmodern literature also have a place in narrative compositions of the twelfth century. The fact that sudden reversals and unexpected revelations are common to all three suggests that such dramatic (or ironic) devices enjoyed a tradition in Old French romance independent of Greek drama, by which it could not have been informed. One last thing that these texts have in common is that their

endings all contain some form of prolepsis: they either show the reader the future (*Cligès*), allude to potential instability (*Yvain*), or gesture beyond the text (*Lancelot*), and thus forego closure in favour of trailing ellipsis. This sort of anticipation will become more important and extreme in *Le Conte du Graal*, frustrating the finishedness of the romance in real terms. The system of contrast that grew out of *Erec et Enide*, and progressed to a duality of ending from *Cligès* to *Yvain*, takes a decisive step further in *Le Conte du Graal*, where duality becomes multiplicity, an approach to ending that ultimately counteracts any form of resolution.

3. The Land of No Return: The Unfinished *Conte du Graal* and its Continuations

3.1 Why return to *Le Conte du Graal*?

Scholars have speculated for many decades as to why Chrétien's *Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal* was left unfinished, whether it was a case of *terminatio* (the death of the author), and how it might have ended if the poet had brought the tale to completion.¹ Keith Busby and Roger Dragonetti lay out the typical questions of critics attempting to hypothesise Chrétien's possible intentions for the denouement of the 'roman inachevé':

would Perceval and Gauvain have both come to the Grail Castle and met in single combat? Would Perceval have defeated Gauvain? What would have happened to Perceval? And what future is in store for the Arthurian Kingdom as a whole?²

Celui-ci n'avait-il pas promis de reparler de Perceval? N'avait-il pas laissé entrevoir également une quête de la lance de la part de Gauvain, et un combat devant prouver son innocence ou sa culpabilité?³

Most, like Busby and Dragonetti, have queries about the trajectories of the two heroes, as well as the fate of the wider Arthurian society. Yet perhaps the most ubiquitous question is whether Perceval would have returned to the Grail Castle and learned the secrets of the Grail procession.⁴ The lack of elucidation for this central enigma continues to prompt the most questions about Chrétien's final romance despite or, perhaps, because of the many varied

¹ Among them, Pierre Gallais, *Perceval et l'initiation: essais sur le dernier roman de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris: Sirac, 1972); Per Nykrog, 'Two Creators of Narrative Form in Twelfth-Century France: Gautier d'Arras – Chrétien de Troyes', *Speculum* 48.2 (1973), 258-76; Rupert T. Pickens, *The Welsh Knight: Paradoxicality in Chrétien's Conte du Graal* (Lexington Ky: French Forum, 1977); Roger Dragonetti, *La Vie de la Lettre au Moyen Age: Le Conte du Graal* (Paris: Seuil, 1980); Alexandre Leupin, 'La Faille et L'écriture dans les continuations du Perceval', *Le Moyen Age: Revue d'Histoire et de Philologie*, 88 (1982), 237-269; Keith Busby, *Chrétien de Troyes: Perceval (Le Conte du Graal)*, Critical Guides to French Texts (London: Grant & Cutler, 1993); Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued: A Study of the Conte du Graal and Its Verse Continuations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Thomas Hinton, *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval, the continuations and French Arthurian Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012); Leah Tether, *The Continuations of Chrétien's Perceval: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

² See Busby, *Perceval*, p. 85.

³ 'Hadn't he promised to talk about Perceval again? Had he not also given a glimpse into Gawain's quest for the lance, and a combat to prove his innocence or guilt?': Dragonetti, *Le Conte du Graal*, pp. 9-18.

⁴ I am capitalising 'Grail' and the other objects of the Grail procession (the Bleeding Lance and the Broken Sword) in line with scholarly convention.

responses to it offered in the work of continuators, adapters, and academics across the centuries.⁵

While no medievalist would question that *Le Conte du Graal* is unfinished – the absence of any discourse after line 9234 makes this an indisputable fact – there are other ways the romance is unfinished beyond this most obvious indication of incompleteness. In place of narrative events that might give rise to a sense of closure, Chrétien’s aesthetic offers silence or adumbration in the spaces where the poet might usually be expected to forge resolution.⁶ It is not until the narrative has been steered away from these textual moments that it becomes apparent that Chrétien has sidestepped details about certain characters, objects and aspects of the action. Some of these textual sidesteps, such as the lack of exegesis for the Grail objects, are more easily identifiable than others. It is fortunate, then, that we have the earliest form of reader response in the shape of the four main continuators, all of whom stage various and varying returns, not only to the Grail Castle, but to other specific moments, characters and locations in Chrétien’s romance, presumably in response to perceived gaps in the narrative.⁷

⁵ Some of the earliest rewritings and adaptations of Chrétien’s Grail story included the Didot *Perceval* and the Lancelot-Grail or the Vulgate Cycle; for recent work on the Grail procession see for example, Miranda Griffin, ‘The Grail’, in *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, ed. by William Burgwinkle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 76-83; Jean-Claude Lozachmeur, *L’énigme du Graal* (Turquant: Mens sana, 2011); Edward Donald Kennedy, ‘The Grail and French Arthurian Romance’, in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. by Helen Fulton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 202-18; Jean-François Lecompte, *La symbolique du Graal: Géométrie du “Conte du Graal” de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris: Édite, 2008); Michèle Vauthier, ‘L’inspiration chez Chrétien de Troyes à la naissance du Graal’, *L’inspiration: Le souffle créateur dans les arts, littéraires et mystiques du Moyen Âge européen et proche-oriental*, ed. by Claire Kappler and Roger Grozelier (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006), pp. 335-50; Richard W. Barber, *The Holy Grail: The History of a Legend* (London: Penguin, 2005); see also seminal work by Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes et le mythe du Graal: étude sur ‘Perceval ou le Conte du Graal’* (Paris: Société d’édition d’enseignement supérieur, 1972), and Charles Méla, *La reine et le Graal: La conjointure dans les romans du Graal, de Chrétien de Troyes au “Livre de Lancelot”* (Paris: Seuil, 1984).

⁶ For more examples of narrative events and poetic devices that might give rise to a sense of closure see Chapter 1, ‘Illusory Ends in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Erec et Enide*’, as well as, Tether, pp. 61-82; and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), pp. 33 ff., 151-86.

⁷ For more on reader response theory see Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Jauss, ‘Literary History

Numerous analyses of Chrétien's text have been offered over the years in various forms by Frappier, Nykrog, Gallais, Leupin and Busby, to name only a few representatives. However, none has fully explored the extent to which *Le Conte du Graal* is unfinished and the exact nature of this unfinishedness in the light of the poet's earlier romances and the work of the continuators, who conceived a number of different endings and eventualities for the Grail story.⁸ To avoid speculating about the end Chrétien might have penned, this chapter will investigate a far more realisable line of questioning: how and why audiences now and then perceive *Le Conte du Graal* to be unfinished, and why, for the continuators, finishing the romance was not simply a case of returning Perceval to the Grail Castle.

Using a combination of close reading and Genettian theory, the following analysis will return to the part of the text attributed to Chrétien, alongside the relevant sections from the continuations, to clarify from a narratological standpoint the extensive indications of 'unfinishedness' relating to characters, settings, and temporality across the fragment. I will argue that *Le Conte du Graal* is unfinished, not simply because the final extant lines are interrupted, but because there are many loose threads throughout the poem, some of which register as points of unfinishedness in advance of the closing portion. While others may have noticed this, none has satisfactorily explained how or why this might be the case. Because

as a Challenge to Literary Theory', trans. by Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History*, 2.1 (1970), 7-37; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); for reader response in the context of romance, see Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, *Der Arthurische Versroman von Chrétien bis Froissart: Zur Geschichte einer Gattung* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1980), translated into English as *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart*, trans. by Margaret Middleton and Roger Middleton (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and in relation to the continuations of *Le Conte du Graal*, see Hinton, p. 164; Tether, p. 109; Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 3.

⁸ Tether considers how the text is unfinished in the light of the episodes William Roach identifies as open to continuation and explores the responses of the continuators in detail, but only looks in brief at the endings to Chrétien's earlier romances: p. 102 ff.; though it has been fashionable in the past to compare *Le Conte du Graal* to Chrétien's previous romances – such as, Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: L'Homme et L'Oeuvre*, *Connaissance des Lettres*, No. 50 (Paris: Hatier-Boivin, 1957); Leslie T. Topsfield, *Chrétien de Troyes: A Study of the Arthurian Romances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Peter Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance: Irony and Comedy in Cligès and Perceval* (Geneva: Droz, 1968) – few have done so alongside the continuations, including the recent studies of the continuations by Tether, Hinton and Bruckner.

there are loose threads throughout in varying states of ‘finishedness’, the romance is no more satisfactorily finished by the continuators with an expedient approach to ending, who see the resolution of the text in Perceval’s achievement of the Grail objects alone, than those who take a more scenic route through the unresolved narrative material, and seem only vaguely interested in bringing the romance to an end.

3.2 The ‘Perceval’ Continuations and the Critics

The most recent studies of the *Perceval* and its *Continuations* or the *Conte du Graal* ‘cycle’ – as Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner and Thomas Hinton describe it – focus on the significance, mechanics, and impact of the four main continuations themselves: the First Continuation, the Second Continuation, Gerbert de Montreuil’s Continuation and the Third or Manessier Continuation.⁹ These monographs respond to the urgent need to investigate the largely unexplored manner of storytelling reflected in this specific body of works, which, unlike the components of other cycles, do not function as standalone texts. All necessarily touch upon the unfinished nature of the Chrétien portion and identify the different narrative threads the continuators respond to. Both Hinton and Leah Tether look at rubrication in the eighteen extant manuscripts of the *Conte du Graal* ‘cycle’ and how authorial changeovers are marked, if at all.¹⁰

⁹ The continuations accumulate in varying combinations in the manuscripts, the most common being the First Continuation (in either the Short, Long or Mixed Redaction) followed by the Second Continuation and Manessier (these are MS *D, E, G, M, P, Q, S, U*); only MS *T* (Paris, BNF, fr. 12576) and MS *V* (Paris, BNF, n. a. fr. 6614) contain all four: see Hinton, pp. 246-9; see also Terry Nixon, ‘List of Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes’, in *Les Manuscrits de Chrétien de Troyes: The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. by Keith Busby et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 9-13; two prologues to Chrétien’s text were also composed, the *Elucidation* and *Bliocadran*, both of which seek to provide Perceval, and especially his immediate ancestors, with a prehistory.

¹⁰ Hinton, pp. 70-110, 245; Tether, pp. 21-56, 203-7; in addition to the eighteen manuscripts, Tether also lists three fragments without manuscript sigla, including the Annonay fragments: see Tether, p. 204.

It is important to clarify at this point that a literary continuation arises specifically from a text that is unfinished or incomplete. According to Gérard Genette, a continuation is differentiated from a sequel or adaptation in that where a sequel seeks to develop the otherwise complete narrative threads of a finished work by acceding to more superfluous expectations for the story, a continuation responds to a text devoid of any recognisable conclusion.¹¹ Following David Hult and Leah Tether, a continuation is best described as an addition that presents itself as the missing piece of fabric in the tapestry of the total narrative work, and thus ‘tacitly proclaims a work’s incompleteness’.¹² This definition seems to have shaped Tether’s perspective that a continuation that gets straight to the point or ‘missing piece’ is preferable to one that extends the narrative with only a laidback approach to ending the text.

The other obvious signal of incompleteness in *Le Conte du Graal* is the absence of any narratological, structural, or paratextual elements that might signal the end of the romance. This lack of thematic and structural closure seems to have been as problematic for thirteenth-century audiences as it is for modern readers. Both Manessier and Gerbert, whose final two continuations date from around 1225, express a specific desire to complete the romance. Addressing his patroness Jeanne Countess of Flanders, Manessier writes in his epilogue ‘Dame, por vos s’en est pené/Manessier tant qu’il l’a fine’.¹³ Gerbert also announces his intention to bring Chrétien’s fragment to an end, though in less explicit terms, praying that God will give him the strength to reach the end of Perceval’s story.¹⁴ In the context of *Le*

¹¹ For more on the definitions of continuation versus *suite* see Tether, pp. 57-60; see also Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 161-5.

¹² Tether, p. 59 ff.; David Hult, ‘Closed Quotations: The Speaking Voice in the *Roman de la Rose*’, *Yale French Studies*, 67 (1984), 248-69 (p. 248).

¹³ ‘Lady, for you Manessier has toiled on it and now has brought it to an end’: *The Continuations of the Old French ‘Perceval’ of Chrétien de Troyes*, vol. 5: The Third Continuation, ed. by William Roach (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), ll. 42657-8.

¹⁴ Gerbert de Montreuil, *La Continuation de Perceval*, *Classiques Français du Moyen Age*, ed. by Mary Williams and Marguerite Oswald, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1922-75), ll. 7002-3.

Conte du Graal corpus, however, a continuation does not always provide a ‘satisfactory ending’, as Tether puts it, or sense of completion, and the first continuations are undone by an admirable yet unrealistic desire to pursue all possible narrative avenues, beyond obviously ‘loose ends’, not taken by Chrétien himself.¹⁵

Indeed, the responses of the early continuators tell us that there were other elements aside from the lack of an end that readers considered incomplete or in need of further development. The anonymous First Continuation (c. 1200) and the Second, likely composed by Wauchier de Denain no later than 1210, explore different possibilities for the Arthurian landscape, tangents which, particularly in the case of the First Continuation, did little to resolve the narratological questions left unanswered by Chrétien’s tale. In the context of bringing the text to an end, this approach may seem counterintuitive on first reading, but it is questionable whether an economic ending to the text consisting of a straightforward return to the Grail Castle would have addressed all the outstanding narrative threads, even if scholars like D. D. R. Owen and Anne Wilson feel that the poem simply required the twofold denouement of a second round of Grail questions and a marriage to Blanchefleur.¹⁶ Indeed, the initial continuations suggest that in a romance as complex as *Le Conte du Graal*, it is not enough to simply ‘get straight to the point’, if only because there is more than one ‘point’ to the story.

It should not be assumed, then, that writing ‘The End’ of Chrétien’s poem in the form of a pithy conclusion is all his continuators wanted to do, or what they considered appropriate to the task of finishing the work. These later poets might have been using Chrétien’s final

¹⁵ Based on the observation that continuations do not always complete a text as such, Tether identifies two main types or ‘sub-genres’ of continuation: extension and conclusion. According to her classifications, extensions provide readers with ‘short-term gratification’ while conclusions offer ‘measured gratification’: Tether, pp. 98-108.

¹⁶ D. D. R. Owen, ‘From Grail to Holy Grail’, *Romania*, 89 (1968), 31-53 (p. 35); Anne Wilson, ‘Chrétien’s Perceval’, *The Magical Quest: The Use of Magic in Arthurian Romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 137.

enigmatic poem to push their own thematic agenda, but it is equally possible that their concept of ‘unfinishedness’ surpassed the obvious omission after the final couplet ‘Et quant la roïne le voit,/Si li demande qu’ele avoit’ (And when the queen saw her,/She asked her what was the matter; ll. 9233-4), and they were responding to unfulfilled promises and dangling narrative threads where and when they perceived them across the text.¹⁷ Irrespective of whether they recognised something innovative in Chrétien’s approach to narrative here, through their writing, the continuators drew attention to the parts of the extant *Conte du Graal* that they perceived to be unfinished, some of which can be better understood through the lens of narratological theory. This is because Chrétien’s text also seems to operate according to the logic of the ‘return’ that forms the basis of Genette’s theory of narrative, and thus can be mapped as a series of returns to specific characters and narrative locations in a comparable way to Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

3.3 A New Approach: Narratology

Gérard Genette identifies several different narrative mechanisms in his theorisation of narrative time in relation to a reading of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Genette maps out the different components that influence narrative order, specifically the various types of discordance between the two orderings of *fabula* and *sujet*.¹⁸ These are the chronological order of events as experienced by the characters and the order of events as they are told in the narrative.¹⁹ Genette argues that the shifts between these two temporal orders of

¹⁷ All references are to Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal*, ed. by William Roach (Geneva: Droz, 1959), p. 271; though the interaction between the Lady Lore and Guenevere is interrupted, the poetic line itself is finished – the couplet closed.

¹⁸ See Gérard Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983); this first appeared in Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972); for the specific commentary on ‘anachronies’, see ‘Ordre’, pp. 67 ff.; see also Gérard Genette, ‘Order’, in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 33-85.

¹⁹ *Fabula* and *sujet* can also be understood as the raw material of the narrative and the handling of this material; the narration, the *sujet*, or *sjužet* as it was dubbed by early twentieth-century formalists, is theoretically the only one to which the audience has direct access.

story and narrative, as in a flashback or flashforward, result in discordances or ‘anachronies’. He identifies three different types of discordance relevant to this analysis of *Le Conte du Graal*: analepsis (flashback), prolepsis (flashforward) and paralepsis (sidestepping). An understanding of these terms is essential to the theorisation of Chrétien’s romance over the course of this chapter. I have taken on board some of the refinements suggested by Mieke Bal, whose elucidation of the Genettian terms has helped to clarify the following definitions.²⁰

3.3.1 Analepsis

Analepsis occurs when a past event is narrated at a point later than its chronological place in the story, as in a retrospection or flashback. It is possible to differentiate between external and internal analepsis, the former referring to a point outside the temporal field of the narrative and the latter to a moment contained within it. Within the category of internal analepsis there are two subcategories: heterodiegetic analepsis deals with a storyline different from the content of the main plot; homodiegetic analepsis deals with the same line of action. There are in turn two types of homodiegetic analepsis. The first is completing analepsis, or a ‘return’, which retrospectively fills in an earlier gap in the narrative; the second is repeating analepsis, or a ‘recall’, which often repeats elements of language, scene, and dialogue.²¹

3.3.2 Prolepsis

Prolepsis is any narrative manoeuvre that mentions or anticipates in advance an event that will take place later, as when Perceval or Gawain promise to avenge or return to a specific

²⁰ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, 2009), pp. 75-109.

²¹ Smith provides a useful qualification on this sort of terminology that may be extrapolated here – ‘We cannot ever really “return” to the beginning point in a poem or piece of music; we can only repeat it’: see Smith, p. 27.

person or place. They are perhaps most straightforwardly thought of as an ‘open bracket’. As with analepsis, it is possible to differentiate between external and internal prolepsis, and hetero- and homodiegetic internal prolepsis. Genette divides the latter into two categories: completing prolepsis, which fills a later blank ahead of time, and repeating prolepsis which doubles one of the narrative sections to come, and so plays the role of ‘advance-notice’.

3.3.3 Paralipsis

Analepsis gestures back towards, or seeks to fill, temporary omissions in the narrative:

These earlier gaps can be pure ellipses, that is, breaks in the temporal continuity. But there is another type of gap, of a less strictly temporal kind, created not by the elision of a diachronic section but by the omission of one of the constituent elements of a situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover. Here the narrative does not skip over a moment of time, as in an ellipsis, but it sidesteps a given element.²²

Genette calls this form of lateral ellipsis paralipsis. Paralipsis occurs when the narrative omits one of the constituent elements of a scene or episode. Here the narrative does not skip over a moment of time, but sidesteps a specific detail of character, place, or object.

3.3.4 Applying Genettian Narratology to *Le Conte du Graal*

Although there is clearly a significant historical distance between the writings of Proust and those of Chrétien, the theory put forward by Genette resonates strongly with the narrative patterns found across *Le Conte du Graal* corpus.²³ Prolepsis and paralipsis are especially prevalent in Chrétien’s text, and when the continuations revive characters, locations and objects from the earlier romance, they do so in the narrative present of their story rather than returning to moments in the narrative past of Chrétien’s tale. In other words, they fill in missing elements rather than diachronic gaps in the story and thus, across the whole corpus,

²² Genette, trans. by Lewin, pp. 51-2.

²³ As Hinton observes, *Le Conte du Graal* ‘may have hitherto unappreciated relevance to discussions of narrative theory often reserved for far more recent experimental fiction’: Hinton, p. 27.

spatial connections replace chronological ones, as in paralipsis. There are also some temporal discordances in Chrétien's earlier romances. In *Lancelot*, Gawain sees Kay's riderless horse burst from the forest, and then stumbles across a recently despoiled battlefield (ll. 199-322). Both of these paralyptic moments, what William Kibler calls 'phantom adventures', are indicative of events for which Gawain himself has not been present: the first being the combat between Meleagant and Kay, and the second alluding to a fray involving the unknown knight Lancelot.²⁴ Lancelot later discovers a headstone in the Perilous Graveyard bearing a proleptic inscription about an unknown knight destined to liberate the captives from Gorre (ll. 1841-2022), a prophecy Lancelot himself later fulfils. The difference is that where *Lancelot* reveals the outcome of the prolepsis, or discloses events alluded to by paralipsis, similar narratological gaps in *Le Conte du Graal* are left open, presumably due to the unfinished state of the text.

There are certain instances of paralipsis and prolepsis that Chrétien himself resolves within the bounds of his fragment. Indeed, it is possible that the continuators tried to fill in gaps in the narrative because of the precedent set by Chrétien himself. At the end of Perceval's encounter with the Tent Maiden, in an example of prolepsis, the hero promises to repay her for her begrudging hospitality and ring (ll. 692-842). Later in the tale, Perceval stumbles across the maiden with her tyrannical lover and rescues her from her plight, closing the bracket opened by his initial encounter with her. Chrétien thereby creates a model for a narrative organised around gaps and anticipations, which are revealed or resolved by returns to that specific part of the *fabula* after variable periods of narrative time. Of course, the poet does not address every paralipsis and prolepsis. In most cases, details of the events and

²⁴ Kibler coined the term 'phantom adventures' to describe the unnarrated exploits of characters in Arthurian romance: see William Kibler, 'Sagremor in the Arthurian Verse Romances', in *'Por le soie amisté': Essays in Honor of Norris J. Lacy*, ed. by Keith Busby and Catherine M. Jones (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 283-92 (p. 287); quoted in Hinton, p. 209.

objects alluded to are never mentioned again.²⁵ This is where the continuations come in. In the four main extensions and conclusions of Chrétien's tale, almost every paralipsis and prolepsis initiated by Chrétien is met with a return or what Genette calls completing analepsis, a retrospective filling-in of the gaps in the material.²⁶ William Roach argues that Chrétien leaves only four episodes incomplete at the end of his fragment.²⁷ He identifies a 'primary' and a 'secondary' incomplete strand for Perceval, the silences at the Grail Castle and the promise to return to Blanchefleur respectively, and an incomplete main plot and subplot for Gawain, the oath to find the 'Bleeding Lance' for the King of Escavalon and the unfulfilled promise to rescue the maiden at Montesclaire.

Although Tether objects to the 'sweeping' nature of Roach's conclusions, she too assumes that unresolved threads originate from only the midpoint onwards and is more interested in the 'mechanics of continuation' than the different ways in which unfinishedness can present across a narrative as such.²⁸ She also usefully cites such apparently unresolved threads as the Hideous Damsel's prophecy (ll. 4671-83), the prayer the hermit whispers to Perceval only to be uttered in the gravest peril (ll. 6481-91), the function of the knight with the silver leg outside the castle with the bed of marvels (ll. 7648-75), as well as Perceval's continued progress towards maturity.²⁹ In general, however, she follows Roach's suggestions

²⁵ In contrast to Genette's case study, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in which Proust 'returns' to each prolepsis and paralipsis within the bounds of the narrative: see Genette, trans. by Lewin, pp. 33-85.

²⁶ With the notable exceptions of the prayer whispered to Perceval by the hermit (ll. 6481-91), and the knight with the silver leg (ll. 7648-75).

²⁷ William Roach, 'Les Continuations du *Conte del Graal*', in *Les Romans du Graal aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles*, Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Strasbourg, 29 Mars-3 Avril 1954 (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1956), p. 117.

²⁸ Tether, p. 2 ff.

²⁹ 'It would be odd indeed if a Continuation immediately and abruptly transported us to the Grail Castle where some of the 'major' threads were quickly and tidily tied up, as such a large narrative leap would severely jar the reader's sense of stasis'; Tether is also interested in character development, the retainment and/or development of the hero(es): Tether, pp. 104-5.

in identifying the ‘major plotlines’ that remain unfinished, adding only the conclusion of Chrétien’s final scene and the maturation of the protagonists.

Yet Roach’s generalising representation of the ‘major plotlines’ distorts the reality of the narrative threads that remain outstanding because it largely privileges strands relating to Perceval and the Grail Castle at the expense of others. As Tether later points out, surely the most urgent and glaring elision is Gawain’s combat with Guiromelant, the knight who accuses Gawain of killing his lord, which seems imminent at the point at which the text breaks off.³⁰ It is unclear why Roach overlooks this vital missing component in his analysis; it may be because, like Ernst Hoepffner and D. D. R. Owen, he viewed the Perceval and Gawain components as two independent fragments that had been joined together by a later redactor or continuator, with the Perceval sequence representing the ‘serious romance’.³¹ However, whether or not Chrétien originally intended the romance to be two independent works, this does not change the parameters of the work as it has come down to us in the manuscripts, or the fact of its unfinishedness. For this reason, a systematic analysis of *Le Conte du Graal* that does not assume the priority of certain strands over others is needed to construct a full picture of the romance’s unfinishedness.

³⁰ Tether, pp. 105-7.

³¹ D. D. R. Owen argues that the Gawain episodes do not provide either a foil or complement to the Perceval sequence – their stories are too different in tone and theme, and he sees the Perceval thread as a ‘serious romance’ and the Gawain sequence as a ‘heroic burlesque’: D. D. R. Owen, *The Evolution of the Grail Legend* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), pp. 153-64; Ernst Hoepffner’s supposition that *Le Conte du Graal* must have been originally two separate, independent works that were merged after Chrétien’s death reflects the difficulty that twentieth-century scholars had in accepting the two-hero structure – he considered the Perceval and Gawain sections independent fragments joined by an editor after Chrétien’s death: see Hoepffner, ‘Review of Fourquet’s *Wolfram d’Eschenbach et le Conte del Graal*’, *Romania*, 65 (1939), 397-413 (p. 412); Phillipe-August Becker claims that Chrétien did not write any of the Gawain section: see Becker, ‘Von den Erzählern neben und nach Chrestien de Troyes’, *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 55 (1935), 385-455 (p. 400-16); according to Bruckner, ‘no one argues nowadays for separating Chrétien’s romance in two’, but ongoing discussions about the significance of Gawain’s adventures in relation to Perceval’s demonstrate that this difficulty has not quite gone away: Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 20.

The textual ‘sidesteps’ in *Le Conte du Graal*, together with their reparations in the continuations, will be organised into three categories: characters, settings, and temporality. The aim of this categorisation is to set out the unfinished parts of *Le Conte du Graal* in a way that does not foreground certain narrative components and characters over others. This approach will allow me to investigate how and why the concept of ‘unfinishedness’ can take account of more than the end of a romance, and why finishing *Le Conte du Graal* was not simply a case of taking Perceval on the most direct route to Grail success.³² Indeed, the continuators look to several other strands in their various efforts to extend and end the poem, and this gives the corpus a ‘distinct character of endlessness’.³³ The next section of this chapter will demonstrate how the instances of paralipsis and prolepsis relating specifically to character arcs in Chrétien’s text signal the unfinishedness of his romance, before considering the returns to those characters in the continuations.

3.4 Characters

The extant fragment of *Le Conte du Graal* follows two protagonists: Perceval and Gawain. When the text breaks off neither hero has experienced any of the narrative events tantamount to an ending: the return home, marriage, coronation, or death. There are also multiple unresolved threads in the adventures of both knights: the protagonist is abandoned, details are withheld about the fate of a secondary character, or a character whose return is expected is not returned to. However, when scholars come to discuss the unfinished state of the text, the

³² Tether’s analysis seems to suggest ‘that there may only be one action which would be capable of achieving closure: the denouement of the Grail theme [...] as a result, the mystery of the Grail may be considered a kind of “terminating thread”, as the fact that the Second Continuator breaks off before its explanation could suggest that this thread, above all others, which would be the one to furnish the plot with an appropriate and satisfying end [...] that is, the one thread that, even in the absence of resolution for other threads, could potentially, and autonomously, provide closure for the entire narrative’ (pp. 160-1).

³³ Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 17.

Perceval strand is afforded a special priority, often without reflection or justification.³⁴ The favouritism shown towards Perceval in analyses of the romance seems to be the result of a scholarly assumption underlying much of the work on this subject: the romance is unfinished because of absent details about the fate of Perceval, the presumed ‘first hero’.³⁵ It is true that Chrétien’s previous treatment of romance suggests a pattern of prioritising one primary hero; Gawain is explicitly a foil for the protagonist in *Yvain* and *Lancelot*, which might seem to anticipate his role in *Le Conte du Graal*.³⁶ The romance does also begin with Perceval as a boy and so it might logically be expected to adhere to a ‘biographical drive’ and end with him; in addition, Perceval enjoys a relative proximity to the Grail ‘objects’ that are generally perceived to be at the centre of the text.³⁷

The widespread emphasis on Perceval seems to have been further influenced by his prevalence across most of the continuations, as well as the many adaptations and rewritings, from the Didot *Perceval* to *Parzival* and *Sir Percyvell of Gales*. Although the First Continuation chooses to focus on Gawain alone, the three later continuations side-line Gawain, reinstating Perceval as the leading actor of the romance. Hinton argues this bias towards Perceval occurs because the process of continuation demands ‘a narrative centre against which digression can be measured and through which novelty can be integrated into a coherent whole’.³⁸ But the collective prioritisation of the Perceval strand seems also to have retrospectively transformed the value and meaning of Gawain’s adventures, which as a

³⁴ ‘The most widely accepted view is the one that considers Gauvain’s adventures as frivolous and senseless exploits accomplished by a mundane knight, and contends that their purpose is to give a flattering background to those of Perceval, knight supreme entrusted with a deeply significant destiny’: Nykrog, p. 268

³⁵ Medieval scribes as well as modern editors and readers commonly style the romance *Perceval*; even Bruckner uses the term ‘first hero’: see Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 11.

³⁶ For more on Gawain’s role across Chrétien’s oeuvre, see William A. Nitze, ‘The Character of Gauvain in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes’, in *Gawain: A Casebook*, ed. by Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 103-15.

³⁷ Hinton, p. 105.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

consequence resemble digressions or interpolations of material.³⁹ The character dynamics established both by Chrétien's earlier romances and the continuations mean that same hierarchical standard is applied to his Grail romance. This determines which strands are judged to be the major strands of the narrative and, in turn, which strands are thought to be most important for inclusion in the end.

However, this general critical preoccupation with Perceval and with the plotlines pertaining to that character alone are problematic, particularly in the context of a romance that is so 'strangely decentred'.⁴⁰ Indeed, despite the apparent demand for a narrative centre across the continuations, the extant text develops the adventures of Perceval and Gawain as two equivalent components. Bruckner argues that the 'proto-quest' narrative of Gawain's rescue efforts in *Yvain* and *Lancelot* in fact anticipates his rise to prominence in *Le Conte du Graal*, and so the dual structure could be interpreted as a logical progression of the poet's romance model.⁴¹ The unresolved strands pertaining to Gawain are thus no less indicative of the unfinishedness of the romance simply because the story begins with Perceval, and it is important to resist the assumption that chronological priority entails a qualitative priority. *Le Chevalier au Lion*, for instance, begins with Calogrenant's tale but afterwards shifts focus to Yvain.

Because *Le Conte du Graal* is unfinished, we cannot tell how the poet would have ultimately defined Perceval and Gawain in relation to one another, how much of the overall

³⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 101; Rupert Pickens, for instance, seems annoyed that Chrétien has not kept Gawain in check, allowing his strand to develop 'far beyond the kind of interlaced counterpoint noted in *Lancelot* and *Yvain*' until it 'threatens to become a quasi-independent component in its own right': see Rupert Pickens, *The Welsh Knight*, (Lexington: French Forum, 1977), p. 16; even in his most recent monograph *Perceval and Gawain in Dark Mirrors*, Pickens argues in chapters 3 and 4 that Gawain is merely 'the reverse image' or a 'reflection' of Perceval, who sins and rejects God but in the end attains redemption: see Rupert T. Pickens, *Perceval and Gawain in Dark Mirrors: Reflection and Reflexivity in Chrétien de Troyes's "Conte del Graal"* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), pp. 85-132 (esp. p. 103); see also Lori Walters, 'Review of *Perceval and Gawain in Dark Mirrors: Reflection and Reflexivity in Chrétien de Troyes's "Conte del Graal"*', *Speculum*, 92.1 (2017), 294-5.

⁴⁰ Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

narrative he would have apportioned to each of them, and whether they would have arrived at the same destination or not.⁴² The extant fragment tells us Chrétien pays more or less equal attention to Perceval and Gawain, with 4,644 lines focusing on Perceval (ll. 1-4348, 6217-513), and 4,181 devoted to Gawain (ll. 4755-6216, 6514-9234).⁴³ All this suggests that the Gawain and Perceval strands deserve to be given equal narratological and thematic consideration in an analysis of the romance's unfinishedness. It is therefore important to look in detail at the literary biographies of both Perceval and Gawain to ascertain how and why Chrétien might have left behind certain characters, withheld details about the lives of others, and whether the narrative manoeuvre away from Perceval really was of greater consequence than the interruption of Gawain's adventures to the finishedness of the total narrative work.

3.4.1 Perceval

Perceval's final appearance in *Le Conte du Graal* establishes an expectation that the romance will reprise his strand before it comes to an end:

De Percheval plus longuement
 Ne parole li contes chi,
 Ainz avrez molt ançois oï
 De monseignor Gavain parler
 Que rien m'oiez de lui conter. (ll. 6514-18)

[Of Perceval no longer/The tale speaks at this point,/Instead a great deal will be heard/Of my lord Gawain/before you hear me (speak) anything of him (Perceval).]

Despite Perceval's significant period of stasis at his uncle's Hermitage, the prolepsis at l. 6518 indicates it should not be interpreted as his final resting place. While the immediate

⁴² Bruckner argues that if we are to understand the kind of answers Chrétien may have anticipated for the questions embedded in his narrative puzzles, we must nevertheless read across the heroes' 'interlaced itineraries', as if what happens to one happens to the other: see *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴³ 405 lines are shared by the two heroes, covering the dialogue between them when they initially cross paths and the arrival of the Hideous Damsel (ll. 4349-754); Hinton notes on two occasions that the poet devotes 'slightly more lines overall' to elaborating Gawain's adventures than those of Perceval, but he does not provide figures and I have been unable to back his assertion up with my own survey of line counts: Hinton, pp. 101, 130.

narrative possibilities have been exhausted and, D. D. R. Owen points out, all the material of the 'Fair Unknown' model has been adapted, Perceval has not yet proved himself worthy of the kingship enjoyed by Erec at the end of his history, for example.⁴⁴ Perceval, unlike Erec, has not married his lady or completed his quest, having failed to ask the right questions at the Grail Castle. As Rupert T. Pickens observes, these unresolved failures 'seem to call for [...] episodic development beyond the Hermitage scene'.⁴⁵

However, the narrative never returns to Perceval to close the bracket. Furthermore, this last Perceval episode does not mention of any specifics of his future trajectory. There is, then, undoubtedly a dangling thread in relation to Perceval's arc. Indeed, the prolepsis at this potential site of stasis detracts from any sense of closure that might have been gained from Perceval's reunion with his uncle at the Hermitage. In fact, it does precisely the opposite, alluding to other new narrative possibilities for Perceval's adventures. It is likely that the Second Continuator viewed this last of Perceval's scenes as the essential loose end in the context of his character development and the larger story. In its effort to construct itself as the logical progression of Chrétien's romance, this early 'Perceval' continuation loops back to the point at which Perceval stumbles across his uncle's Hermitage almost two thousand lines in.⁴⁶ However, there are further textual 'sidesteps' relating to other characters that are often overlooked but no less crucial to the overall sense that the romance is unfinished.

3.4.2 Perceval's mother

⁴⁴ Owen, 'From Grail to Holy Grail', p. 35.

⁴⁵ Pickens, *The Welsh Knight*, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁶ In fact, the version of the Second Continuation in MS *E* (Edinburgh, NLS, Adv. 19. 1. 5) inserts a passage from the Hermit episode in Chrétien's text verbatim at line 19617: see Hinton, p. 85; references are to *The Continuations of the Old French 'Perceval' of Chrétien de Troyes*, vol. 4: The Second Continuation, ed. by William Roach (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1971).

Though scholars typically underestimate the impact of Perceval's unceremonious departure from his mother in discussions of the unfinished state of the text, the exclusion of specific details from that scene in the Waste Forest make it unresolved when the text breaks off:⁴⁷

Si se regarde et voit cheüe
 Sa mere al pié del pont arriere,
 Et jut pasmee en tel maniere
 Com s'ele [his mother] fust cheüe morte.
 Et cil cingle de le roorte
 Son chaceor parmi la croupe
 Et il [the horse] s'en va, que pas n'açoupe,
 Ains l'en [Perceval] porte grant aleüre
 Parmi le grant forest obscure. (ll. 622-30)

[He (Perceval) looked back and saw/His mother had fallen at the head of the bridge,/And was lying passed out in such a way/As though she (his mother) had fallen dead./And with his saddle-girth he whipped/his horse across the tack/And he (the horse) set off, and did not stumble/But carried him (Perceval) at great speed/Through the great dark forest.]

The narrative does not reveal whether she is dead or only appears to be, quickly sidestepping this crucial detail with an elaboration of Perceval's path through the forest ahead. This creates the first paralipsis in the romance. The reader shares Perceval's limited view on the events and so when he turns away from his mother, they lose sight of her fate, too. The microlevel of elliptical syntax characteristic of Old French verse throughout this section also supports the argument for paralipsis at the macrolevel of narrative structure because it eliminates various names including the word for 'mother'.⁴⁸ This narrative development is obviously essential for Perceval to embark on his adventures in the first place; the lack of clarification about the

⁴⁷ As Bruckner observes, there is a tendency to gloss over too quickly Perceval's explicit quest to find and return to his mother: Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 135; there has been a tendency to focus instead on the absence of Perceval's father: see for example Charles Méla, 'Perceval', *Yale French Studies*, 55.6 (1977), 253-79; Lenora D. Wolfgang, 'Perceval's Father: Problems in Medieval Narrative Art', *Romance Philology*, 34.1 (1980), 28-47; more recently, Irit Ruth Kleiman, 'X marks the spot: the place of the father in Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*', *The Modern Language Review*, 103 (2008), 969-982; there has been some more recent interest in the role of mothers, see Claire Serp, 'La relation à la Mère: mémoire familiale et éducation morale dans les romans arthuriens', in *Le legs des pères et le lait des mères ou comment se raconte le genre dans la parenté du Moyen Âge au XXI^e siècle*, ed. by Isabelle Ortega et Marc-Jean Filaire-Ramos (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 9-15.

⁴⁸ See Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 206.

fate of his mother could therefore be interpreted as unavoidable collateral damage, necessary for him to take the path towards knighthood but insignificant to his larger quest.

Yet this episode has major ramifications for Perceval's trajectory: the decision to abandon his mother triggers a narrative pattern which leads him to turn away not only from Blanchefleur and the mysterious objects at the Grail Castle, but also from God.⁴⁹ In the context of the lesson of Christian charity at the heart of the prologue ('caritez'; ll. 1-68), Perceval's desertion of his mother creates a negative action that he must redeem with a corresponding positive. Stefanie A. Goyette indeed argues that when 'Perceval loses his contact with grace [...] on abandoning his mother and her realm, the hero's journey becomes one of redemption linked strongly to a return to the maternal'.⁵⁰ If there is a strategic link between beginning and end, we might expect to find a scene towards the end of the romance in which Perceval returns to the Waste Forest to compensate for his earlier wrongdoing with a display of charity, whether his mother is still alive or not.⁵¹ No such scene is written into Chrétien's text, however. Even if Perceval had returned to the Grail Castle to ask the right questions, and even if he had married Blanchefleur, such a loose end would have undermined any happy ending Chrétien imagined for him.

The lack of discussion around the early mother-child separation episode in the context of the ending comparative to other strands might also be explained by Perceval's encounter with the Weeping Maiden after his adventure at the Grail Castle. Revealing herself to be his cousin, she promptly informs Perceval of his mother's death and admonishes him for his failure to ask the right questions of the Fisher King (ll. 3453-587). In this moment, the

⁴⁹ For more on the paradox of this situation (that he must leave his mother to achieve, but it is this desertion that prevents him from achieving the Grail according to his maternal relatives), see Méla, *La reine et la Graal*, p. 89; Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 125.

⁵⁰ Stefanie A. Goyette, 'Milk or Blood? Generation and Speech in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal*', *Arthuriana*, 26.4 (2016), 130-151 (p. 145).

⁵¹ For more on the linking of beginning and end as a form of closure, see Chapter 1, 'Illusory Ends in Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*', pp. 46-7.

narrative seems to retract its earlier promise to return to Perceval's mother, a promise implicit in his abandonment of her. As Pickens observes, though he first conceived of his journey as a quest for knighthood, and then in terms of his eventual return to the Waste Forest, Perceval's desire to reunite with his mother dead or alive is henceforth subjugated to his desire to re-enter the Grail Castle.⁵² Pickens implies that Perceval's visit to his maternal uncle at the Hermitage, with its emphasis on Christian charity, can be interpreted as the redemptive or, in our terms, the analeptic or 'return' episode for Perceval's abandonment of his mother.⁵³

However, simply because Perceval chooses to abort his mission once he learns of his mother's demise does not necessarily mean that the narrative anxiety around his earlier abandonment of her has been dispelled, and the romance never reveals the circumstances of her death. Although Perceval is encouraged to remove his mother from the history of his maturation by Gornemant, the flashback to his mother's death in each of the encounters with family members, and the repeated calls for him to atone for the 'sin concerning the mother', suggest that something more is required of him.⁵⁴ Peter Haidu considers Perceval's desire to return to his mother 'the first sign of charity he has shown'.⁵⁵ Thus, when Perceval abdicates responsibility for his hand in her death, as well as his duties to any of the remaining family members at his mother's house, he turns away from the path of charity, relinquishing the opportunity to one day offset his earlier apathy. Such a response would have linked prologue to conclusion and achieved closure through the concordance of beginning and end.

⁵² 'Et des que ele est mise en terre,/Que iroie jou avant guerre?' (And since she is buried in the ground/what reason have I to continue onwards; ll. 3621-2); see also Pickens, *The Welsh Knight*, p. 25.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 48-56.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 131-2.

⁵⁵ Peter Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes: Irony and Comedy in Cligès and Perceval* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1968), p. 230; see also Busby, *Perceval*, p. 152.

The response of the continuators suggests that something was missing from the development of the strand relating to Perceval's mother.⁵⁶ At line 23667 of the Second Continuation, the memory of his collapsed mother is summoned from the 'textual past' of Chrétien's romance and Perceval confesses that he wants to know the truth about her fate.⁵⁷ After a recognition and reunion scene with his sister, Perceval is shown his mother's tomb by his hermit uncle who asks Perceval to tell him about his life. Here the Second Continuator summarises his adventures thus far, putting the continuation in direct communication with Chrétien's text. The hermit chastises Perceval for killing knights in the name of God and implores him to be a good Christian, replicating the lesson of charity in Chrétien's prologue. It is these direct links to Chrétien's poem, coupled with the recognition scenes, that allow the Second Continuation to announce itself as the site of closure for this specific narrative strand.⁵⁸

Gerbert acknowledges this earlier return to the mother's house and enriches the Christian meaning given to it there. Perceval begs for forgiveness at his mother's tomb, and the episode becomes a vehicle for the sermonising exegesis typical of Gerbert's overtly Christianised continuation. The hermit explains to him that a knight's sword is double-edged because one edge is meant for the defence of the Holy Church, the other for earthly justice. The Broken Sword, which first appears in the First Continuation as a test for receiving the secrets of the Grail, is cast as an embodiment of Perceval's neglect of Christian morals, for he is unable to repair the notch on the Church edge.⁵⁹ This affirmation of Perceval's inadequacy

⁵⁶ With the exception of the First Continuator, who does not progress any elements of Perceval's story and therefore can reveal little about whether early readers of *Le Conte du Graal* interpreted this episode as finished or not.

⁵⁷ See Hinton, p. 124.

⁵⁸ Terence Cave reminds us that recognition scenes have the capacity to provide both 'reassuring' closure and troubling misgivings: Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 24, 43; and Hinton, p. 146.

⁵⁹ For more on the Broken Sword, see for example Massimiliano Gaggero, 'L'épée brisée dans le *Conte du Graal* et ses continuations', *Dai pochi ad molti: Studi in onore di Roberto Antonelli*, ed. by Paolo Canettieri and Arianna Punzi, vol. 1 (Rome: Viella, 2014), pp. 855-84.

at the end of this section prevents Gerbert from completing this unresolved strand as such, but it counterbalances the early apathetic Perceval with a later Perceval who is repenting and vigilant. Even if Gerbert's resurrection of this episode did not close it off to further continuation, his handling of it suggests Perceval's lack of charity towards his mother disturbed the closural force of Chrétien's text. Significantly, the Middle English adaptation *Sir Percyvell of Gales* re-orientes much of Perceval's story around his mother, and reunites them in the forest at the end, offering perhaps the most complete version of this episode and giving the narrative, in Ad Putter's words, 'a satisfying circular shape' because of the concordance of beginning and end.⁶⁰

3.4.3 Blanchefleur

It is because of Perceval's desire to learn the truth about his mother in the early part of the extant *Conte du Graal* that his love affair with Blanchefleur results, not in a marriage, but in a prolepsis; in Chrétien's romance, incomplete threads breed incomplete threads:

Et si fust soie toute quite
 La terre, se il li pleüst
 Que son corage aillors n'eüst;
 Mais d'autre ore plus li sovient,
 Que de sa mere au cuer li tient
 Que il vit pasmee cheoir,
 S'a talent qu'il l'aïlle veoir
 Plus grant que de nule autre chose
 [...]
 Et se ele [Perceval's mother] est morte, autresi. (ll. 2914-32)

[And she could be all his/And the land, if he wished /Had his mind not been elsewhere;/But at other times he recalls/That his mother is in his heart/Whom he saw fall in a faint,/He wishes to go to see her/More than anything else [...] And if she was dead, he would return.]

The reasoning behind Perceval's departure, that he must return to his mother, connects these two moments in the text and suggests an implicit narrative desire to complete the earlier

⁶⁰ See Ad Putter, in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. by Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 171-96.

unfinished strand. Jean Frappier argues that ‘rien d’indique la durée exacte du séjour de Perceval à Belrepaire’ and this creates ‘un flou chronologique’, a chronological disturbance in the narrative of his adventures.⁶¹ While it is true that the interruption of this episode creates a prolepsis, the fact that Frappier reads the entire episode as disturbance to the larger quest – which is in his account implicitly a quest for the Grail – alludes to the incompatibility of the major narrative components. This could explain why Chrétien does not return to Blanchefleur or indeed, to Perceval’s mother, despite the rationale for episodic development given here.

The absence of a return to Blanchefleur is significant because, as Pierre Gallais argues, the experience of human love is an obligatory stage on the way to Perceval’s maturation, one of the implicit requirements for the stable marriage and kingship that might help to establish closure. Gallais even goes so far as to relegate the importance of the Grail as second to Blanchefleur: ‘La quête raide et sterile du Graal doit le céder à celle, tendre et pregnante, de Blanchefleur’.⁶² Considering the value placed on relics by the twelfth-century public, this conceptualisation of the different quests in the romance perhaps goes too far the other way.⁶³ But the enduring significance of Blanchefleur in the scholarship implies that an ending concerned only with the dematerialised and mysterious Grail procession over a happy marriage to Blanchefleur would not have been adequate if the romance was to showcase

⁶¹ ‘We do not know the exact length of Perceval’s stay at Biaurepaire’: Jean Frappier, ‘Sur La Composition du Conte du Graal’, in *Autour du Graal* (Geneva: Droz, 1977), pp. 155-83 (p. 161); for more on the significance of the Blanchefleur episode, see also François Suard, ‘Place et signification de l’épisode Blanchefleur dans le *Conte du Graal* de Chrétien de Troyes’, *Mélanges de langue et de littérature médiévales offerts à Pierre Le Gentil, professeur à la Sorbonne, par ses collègues, ses élèves et ses amis* (Paris: Société d’édition d’enseignement supérieur et Centre de documentation universitaire, 1973), pp. 803-10.

⁶² ‘The rigid and sterile Grail quest must yield to that of Blanchefleur, tender and significant’: Gallais, *Perceval et l’Initiation*, p. 268.

⁶³ For more on the significance of crusading relics in Old French, see D. A. Trotter, *Medieval French Literature and the Crusades (1100-1300)* (Geneva: Droz, 1988), pp. 31 ff., 71 ff; and more generally Clifford R. Backman, ‘Crusades’, in *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by William W. Kibler and Grover A. Zinn (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 277-80; also Nigel Bryant, ‘Introduction’, *Merlin and the Grail: Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval: The Trilogy of Arthurian Romances attributed to Robert de Boron* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), pp. 8-9.

Perceval's development and frailty as a knight and not as some disembodied, allegorized redeemer figure. Although the Grail is almost always awarded a special priority in criticism, then, the fact this Blanchefleur strand is left incomplete when the romance breaks off is key to our understanding of the text as unfinished.

Chrétien places great emphasis on Perceval's memory of his beloved and in doing so invokes and then frustrates potential closure for the Blanchefleur strand. At the mid-point of the romance, often a location of semantic importance in Chrétien's romances, the poet stages a quasi-return to Blanchefleur.⁶⁴ Perceval is mesmerized by a wounded goose lying on the snow-covered ground, and particularly by three drops of its blood because 'La fresche color li resamble/Qui ert en la face s'amie' (The fresh colour resembles/the face of his love; ll. 4200-1).⁶⁵ This might constitute what Maddox and Pickens call a 'specular encounter', which occurs when protagonists, 'receive, sometimes clearly, sometimes darkly foreknowledge of their destinies'.⁶⁶ Yet in this case, Perceval's contemplation of 'Blancheflor' or the semblance of her face seems to be gesturing back to the past rather than into the future, perhaps to signal Perceval has lost something vital to his quest in his abandonment of her. However, despite Perceval's newly developed ability to envision her likeness, this remains a superficial return to Blanchefleur, and thus the episode should still be considered unfinished.

The response of the continuators suggests that early readers of the romance did not interpret the Blanchefleur episode as finished. The Second Continuator takes Perceval back to

⁶⁴ The mid-point of the romance is often of great importance to the overall meaning and direction of the narrative; it is the point at which Erec and Enide marry and Erec's 'recreantise' becomes apparent, the point at which we learn the identity of the anonymous hero in *Lancelot* and the moment at which the hero loses his lady and his mind in *Yvain*: see also Philippe Ménard, 'La révélation du nom pour le héros du *Conte du Graal*', in *Amour et chevalerie dans les romans de Chrétien de Troyes. Actes du colloque de Troyes, 1992*, ed. by Danielle Quérueil (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995), pp. 47-59.

⁶⁵ For a more detailed account of this episode, see Daniel Poirion, 'Du sang sur la neige: nature et fonction de l'image dans le *Conte du Graal*', in *Voices of Conscience: Essays on Medieval and Modern French Literature in Memory of James D. Powell and Rosemary Hodgins*, ed. by Raymond J. Cormier (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), pp. 61-70.

⁶⁶ Pickens, *Perceval and Gawain in Dark Mirrors*, p. 21.

Biaurepaire, though it is unrecognisable from the siege-crippled castle in Chrétien's text, now beautiful and prosperous mercantile territory. Yet at the end of the episode the same sequence from Chrétien plays out: Blanchefleur asks Perceval to stay, he refuses, he promises to return. By having Perceval promise to return to her after the completion of the Grail adventure, the Second Continuation merely creates another prolepsis unrealised within its own bounds.⁶⁷ In the later continuations, too, a single interpretive focus on the Grail comes at the expense of Blanchefleur. Gerbert initially frames Perceval's refusal to marry Blanchefleur as one of his primary unresolved sins, and it is only after Perceval's Christian marriage that he becomes worthy of learning the secrets of the Grail.⁶⁸ This lays the foundation for completion because it is when these social ideals are brought into harmony that closure is achieved. However, despite the connection Gerbert makes between them, the Grail strand finally deprives the Blanchefleur strand of resolution, as he leaves her to pursue his more urgent and ultimately conflicting obligation at the Grail Castle.

The final continuator Manessier has recently been credited with providing the most 'satisfactory end' to the romance.⁶⁹ Yet his integration of the social and spiritual dimensions of the text is no more comprehensive than Gerbert's. Manessier avoids Perceval's betrothal to Blanchefleur and reduces her to a status 'more reminiscent of a friend' in favour of concentrating on the Grail quest.⁷⁰ Even with this modification, their brief and platonic

⁶⁷ In fact, towards the beginning of the Second Continuation, Perceval falls in love with another – the Lady of the Chessboard Castle: see 'The Second Continuation', in *The Complete Story of the Grail: Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval and its Continuations*, trans. by Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), p. 240 ff.

⁶⁸ Gerbert cleverly reintroduces Gornemant to contribute to his moral development by emphasising the importance of marriage. Gerbert also revives the Red Knight and his lineage – another superfluous return: see 'Gerbert's Continuation', in *The Complete Story of the Grail*, pp. 339-476; as Bruckner indicates, Gerbert is 'an excellent reader of his predecessors, the fourth continuator understands how serious the status of the lovers' relationship remains to the outcome of Perceval's quest': Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 66.

⁶⁹ Tether, pp. 174-6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174; see also Lori J. Walters, 'The Image of Blanchefleur in MS Montpellier, BI, Sect Méd. H 249', in *Les Manuscrits de Chrétien de Troyes: The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed.

encounter results in the same proleptic routine seen in all the previous treatments of this strand. The thirteenth-century Grail hero is virginally pure, which may have hindered a move towards the kind of ‘crowning marriage’ seen at the end of *Erec* and *Yvain*, for instance.⁷¹ In Perceval’s case, this might have involved his reintegration into Biaurepaire as lord over land and lady. Even though Manessier’s denouement is usually acknowledged as the most adequate, then, his reluctance to carry the Blanchefleur episode through to its logical conclusion amplifies the pattern of prolepsis found in Chrétien, cementing its incompleteness rather than resolving it.

For Tether, it is the Second Continuator who ‘re-connects’ with Chrétien’s romance and begins the process of finishing the text by reactivating the elements of the story neglected by the First: ‘with the return of Perceval comes the anticipation that the story will now move towards a close’.⁷² In her account, the reprise of the Perceval strand is linked explicitly with the ability of the continuation to provide an adequate conclusion to the narrative. However, it is possible that this association was made retrospectively because of the subsequent continuations, both of which follow suit in taking Perceval’s biography as their principal subject. Yet the narratological agenda set by the Second Continuator in fact hampers the ability of the later continuators to provide the corpus with an end that addresses all the incomplete material because the favourite subject of Perceval’s Grail quest suppresses other strands of equal value to Chrétien’s text. This issue is exemplified by the brief *Independent Conclusion* to the Second Continuation, which explains the nature of the Grail objects,

by Keith Busby, Terry Nixon, Alison Stones and Lori Walters, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 437–55 (pp. 440–44).

⁷¹ Bruckner points out that the Christianisation of the Grail (in Robert de Boron’s *Joseph d’Armathie* and the *Queste del Saint Graal* of the Vulgate) means that ‘Perceval’s success in the Grail quest is tied to his ability to remain, if not as virginally pure as Galahad, at least chaste’: Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, ‘Knightly Violence and Grail Quest Endings: Conflicting Views and from the Vulgate Cycle to the *Perceval* Continuations’, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 26 (1999), 17–32 (p. 25).

⁷² Tether, p. 145; Hinton notes that the key moment of return to Perceval at line 19607 of the Second Continuation is marked (by an illustration) in MS *E*, *P* and *Q*, despite the extremely varied versions of the text given in each copy, see Hinton, p. 83.

Perceval's family ties, and his ascent to the throne, but does not address other unresolved narrative threads in detail, let alone Gawain's adventures.⁷³ Indeed, in the context of the larger corpus, the main casualty of the Second Continuation's narrow focus on Perceval is the Gawain strand, which receives little attention in the later continuations despite the fact that it is unexpectedly interrupted in Chrétien, and is thus key to understanding the intricacies of the extant text's unfinished state.

3.4.4 Gawain

Although Chrétien's jettison of Perceval and the characters connected to him is crucial to our understanding of *Le Conte du Graal* as unfinished, there is another hero of equal importance to the extant poem: Gawain. Gawain would have been the most logical choice of subject for continuators seeking to finish the romance because it is Gawain, not Perceval, who is at the forefront of the narrative action and dialogue when Chrétien's text breaks off at 9234:

Qu'il est me sire et je ses hom,
 Qu'il ne lait por nul achoison
 Que je ne le truisse al quint jor
 De la feste soz ceste tour
 [...]
 Que j'a[i] une bataille prise
 Vers un chevalier qui ne prise
 Ne moi ne lui qui gaires vaille:
 C'est li Guiromelans sanz faille,
 Qui le het de mortel haïne. (ll. 9112-25)

[As he (the king) is my lord and I (Gawain) am his vassal,/there must not be any reason/that I do not find him on the fifth day/of the feast below the tower...Because I am engaged to do battle/against a knight who has no/measure of the worth of me or him [King Arthur]/this knight is Guiromelant indeed/who hates me with a mortal hatred.]

There is no sense here that the narrative is ending. On the contrary, this series of prolepses is emphatic in its projection of what still remains to be narrated: Gawain's squire will deliver

⁷³ The *Independent Conclusion* is unique to MS K unique to MS K Bern, Bürgerbibliothek 113, where it is inserted after the Second Continuation, and thus provides a 58-line end to the text: see Tether, pp. 32-3, 193-8; Corin F. V. Corley, *The Second Continuation of the Old French Perceval: A Critical and Lexicographical Study* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1987), p. 20.

the summons to Arthur's court, and Arthur and his retinue will witness the combat between the two knights.⁷⁴ Because the knight Guiromelant apparently holds both Gawain and Arthur in low esteem, his relative success or failure will have consequences, not just for Gawain, but for King Arthur and, by proxy, the Arthurian kingdom.⁷⁵ The message has not been delivered when the romance breaks off one hundred or so lines later.

The primacy of the Gawain strand at this most critical point of narrative frustration might lead readers to anticipate a position of importance for him in the continuations. It is therefore surprising that all but the First Continuator consign Gawain to relative insignificance, choosing instead to evolve Perceval's adventures.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the First Continuation takes Gawain as the principal character in all three redactions, indicating that at least some early readers of Chrétien's text recognised this component required development if a resolution was to be reached. Tether implies that the later continuations did not treat the Gawain material in this way because the narrative possibilities originating from his section in *Le Conte du Graal* had been exhausted by the First Continuator.⁷⁷ She praises the Second Continuation for resuming the Perceval strand, and condemns the First for its 'exploitative' and implicitly lazy approach to continuing 'the conveniently incomplete Gawain thread' of Chrétien's tale.⁷⁸

The First Continuation is, however, more faithful to Chrétien's aesthetic than has previously been recognised. The earliest continuator picks up from exactly where Chrétien's

⁷⁴ Indicative of the strength of the bias against Gawain, Pickens implies that it would have been Perceval, and not Gawain, who might have ultimately returned to the Arthurian court, despite the fact that Arthur's knight usually return to the places from which they came: see Pickens, *The Welsh Knight*, pp. 32-3.

⁷⁵ Interestingly, the pronoun 'le' in the final line of the extract above could be translated as referring to 'him' [King Arthur] or 'me' [Gawain].

⁷⁶ The First Continuation exists in three versions – the Short Redaction, the Long Redaction and the Mixed Redaction – and the 'First Continuator' is the collective term used here for all three redactors; for details of the narrative variations, see Hinton, pp. 229-44.

⁷⁷ Tether, pp. 144-5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140

text drops off and extricates Gawain from his disputes. However, it is not true that the early treatment of the Gawain strand precludes any further continuation. Though the First Continuator resolves the action at a narrative level, he does not tackle the deeper problems, such as the truth of Gawain's character assassination by Guiromelant and the implications of his adventure at the Castle of Maidens, but rather respects Chrétien's silence on them. The First Continuation does not therefore fully palliate the anxieties occasioned by Gawain's adventures in *Le Conte du Graal*, and this undermines the logic of the speculative reasoning given for the cessation of Gawain's narrative above. Indeed, if the continuators were truly deterred by the possible exhaustion of certain strands, then it seems odd that they continued to revise the Grail procession and, in Gerbert's case, staged superfluous returns to Gornemant and the Red Knight, episodes which Chrétien completed.

It is possible, then, that the First Continuation is dismissed by the critics for the same reason as the Gawain section of Chrétien's romance: it does not fit the Perceval schema. Yet the general dilution of the Gawain character in the Second Continuation prevents the later iterations of the story from resolving the complexities of Chrétien's tale, of which Gawain's adventures are an important part. Despite the abundance of prolepses around line 9112, there is much in the latter stages of the Gawain component to suggest that Chrétien was beginning to lay the groundwork for ending, particularly in the details of Gawain's encounters at Escavalon with Guigambresil. Indeed, it is Gawain's two opponents, Guigambresil and Guiromelant, with whom he has especially urgent unfinished business when the text breaks off.

3.4.5 Guigambresil and Guiromelant

The arrivals of Guigambresil and Guiromelant, the knights who accuse Gawain of killing their lord and father respectively, trigger a series of prolepses that stall the progression of

Gawain's adventures and make a denouement that is comprehensive in terms of narrative resolution increasingly less likely.⁷⁹ In the wake of the Hideous Damsel's prophecy (ll. 4759-47), Gawain agrees to a trial by combat against Guigambresil at the castle of Escavalon after an interval of forty days. Yet this abrupt shift in focus not only steers Gawain away from his expected mission to rescue the damsel at Montesclaire, leaving that proleptic thread dangling, but results in another prolepsis when Gawain is again forced to postpone his combat with Guigambresil so he can seek out the Bleeding Lance, one of the relics in the Grail procession, for the King of Escavalon. Guiromelant later challenges Gawain to a duel immediately before the termination of the romance, and gives Gawain seven days to summon King Arthur and his court for their contest, but the text breaks off just as Gawain's squire is delivering the message.

In the context of bringing the romance to an end, Chrétien's decision to open these new narrative directions at such a late stage, more than five thousand verses in, might seem counterintuitive. However, in the case of the Guigambresil episode at least, there is a sense that Chrétien is laying the groundwork for some sort of narrative climax centred around the Grail Castle. This is because of the connection made between Escavalon and the Lance, which puts Gawain on an equal footing with Perceval in the quest for the Grail objects. The fact that Chrétien does not have Gawain join Perceval's Grail quest following the Hideous Damsel's prophecy, but imagines a motivation for him independent of this, suggests the emergence of two separate Grail quests. Despite the tangled mass of storylines from which he still had to extricate his characters, this turn of events suggests Chrétien was considering some ways in which he could bring the different parts of his story together for an ending.

⁷⁹ Guigambresil's appearance in the action is so abrupt that it seems akin to the device of the 'gimmick', discussed in Chapter 2, see 'The Antithetical Endings of *Cligès*, *Yvain* and *Lancelot*', pp. 75-7.

However, one consequence of this narrative move is that Gawain's culpability in the matter raised by Guigambresil is left undetermined, as it is in the Guiromelant dispute, and this may have influenced the significantly more negative constructions of his character that appeared in later incarnations of the Grail story.⁸⁰ If his two accusers are to be believed, then Gawain has been on a rampage killing lords and fathers unseen and unchecked. There is something almost comic about Gawain's trio of adversaries, Guigambresil, Guiromelant and Greoreas (a knight who Gawain punished for misconduct), all of whom, as Per Nykrog points out, have names beginning with 'G' and so allude to Gawain's own name.⁸¹ Together they turn Gawain's later exploits in *Le Conte du Graal* into a confusing hall of mirrors which makes the closing sequence seem bathetic in the context of the more serious land-wasting which is the consequence of Perceval's failed mission. It is arguably this that prevents him from being taken seriously as a 'Grail hero' with a role to play in the denouement of the romance.

The First Continuator, at least, agreed that the Guigambresil and Guiromelant strands were incomplete. Gawain recalls his pledge to retrieve the Lance for the King of Escavalon towards the beginning of the continuation and, though empty-handed, he returns there to do combat against Guigambresil. When a second knight (Disnadaret) challenges Gawain, Yvain persuades the company to delay the contest, which leads them to sue for peace. Similarly, Gawain's sister Clarissant calls a truce with Guiromelant, takes him as her husband, and consequently peace is made. Although this aesthetic of 'quick-fixes' is not necessarily out of keeping with Chrétien's own tendency to deferral, the continuator deliberately evades the tough issue of Gawain's guilt and removes his motivation for travelling back to the Grail

⁸⁰ Guigambresil's accusation is the first time in Chrétien's romances that we have heard something to make us truly doubt the conduct of Arthur's nephew, the paragon of knighthood against whom all others are measured. Though perhaps there are hints in *Yvain*, when Gawain leads the hero astray, and in *Lancelot*, when he takes lesser paths than the hero; later in the First Continuation and Gerbert's Continuation, Gawain is characterised as a rapist.

⁸¹ See Nykrog, p. 267.

Castle, leading the narrative further away from a solution for that part of the *fabula*. The First Continuator thus resolves these strands at the level of narrative in the style of Chrétien, but does not tackle the conceptual issues thrown up by these encounters: whether Gawain's conduct beyond Arthur's court requires greater scrutiny, and whether by setting this more morally questionable Gawain on the path towards the Bleeding Lance, Chrétien was preparing to pit his two heroes against one another in clearer opposition. Inadvertently or otherwise, the First Continuator contributes to the general sedation of Gawain as a character, who, having been repeatedly kept in check, is from then on unable to make any significant contribution to the action and measure up to the eminent Grail hero Perceval.

The idea that Perceval is more important than Gawain to the extant *Conte du Graal* has less to do, then, with the aesthetic of Chrétien's text than with the artistic choices made by the continuators, who gradually erode Gawain's narrative visibility and finally consign him to the less than subsidiary position he holds in Gerbert and Manessier.⁸² Though this decision was likely taken with a view to bringing the narrative to an end, the marginalisation of Gawain does not necessarily make for the most comprehensive ending, that is, one that addresses all of the narrative threads. As Hinton writes:

with a single hero, the text appears to struggle to contain all of the narrative threads it has put into play, and the hero's progress becomes a regression, always attempting to move towards the thing that has been left behind.⁸³

The privileging of one hero from the Second Continuation onwards means that many of the strands initiated by Chrétien must be disregarded. This is precisely because one hero cannot hold all the conflicting narrative strands relating to love, chivalry, and God simultaneously in their orbit. The focus on a single hero enables Manessier to write an ending to the corpus that addresses the primary strand relating to Perceval and follow him to his death, and which

⁸² 'The cycle flirts with the idea of a genealogical romance centred on the lineage of Gauvain (in the First Continuation) but ultimately chooses Perceval as its central character': see Hinton, p. 144.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

therefore achieves closure for his story. Manessier crowns Perceval at the Grail Castle after he achieves the Grail objects, and chronicles the remainder of his hagiographical life and death. But though it is an ending in name, it is not in spirit, for Gawain has been written out of the story. If a successful ending brings all the major narrative motifs and characters into harmony, Chrétien would have needed to maintain both Perceval and Gawain to bring *Le Conte du Graal* to a conclusion that satisfied the logic of the work. Moreover, there were other narrative elements that required further development. Chrétien brings the knights to many places in his narrative world, but at the Castle of Maidens and the Grail Castle, by far the two most symbolically charged settings, he chooses to leave crucial details frustratingly obscure. The next part of the chapter will investigate how the incomplete strands resulting from this decision contribute to the overall unfinishedness of the fragment, and how the continuators responded to the mysterious castles in their efforts to fill in the gaps.

3.5 Settings

There are several locations in *Le Conte du Graal* from which crucial details are omitted or to which one of the heroes promises to return. Many of these settings, such as the Waste Forest and Biaurepaire, are inseparable from the characters associated with them. There are two other sites, however, where key events are interrupted by paralipsis or prolepsis, which are not associated with one specific character, but for which the lack of closure is no less vital to our sense that the text is unfinished. These are the ‘Roche de Champguin’ (or the Castle of Maidens) and the Grail Castle. In both these settings, the usual flow of narrative gives way to dream-like spectacles populated by spectral figures, raising questions that are not necessarily comprehensible within the available framework of Chrétien’s existing romance model and reviving characters to whom the usual rules of narrative time do not apply. Indeed, when the text breaks off at line 9234, the secrets alluded to by the Grail procession, and later by the

extraordinary appearance of Arthur and Gawain's long-dead female relatives, remain shrouded in mystery.

In the continuations, the notion of narrative return is often bound up with the hero's return to a setting he has previously visited, as Hinton has recently observed.⁸⁴ Accordingly, all four of the continuations return to both the Castle of Maidens and to the Grail Castle. Yet in almost every case, the continuators choose not to engage with most pressing questions raised by Chrétien. Indeed, the prolongations of these two specific scenes become an exercise in deferral and misdirection, as their narratives are repeatedly diverted away from the more mysterious elements. Only Manessier carves out a definite meaning and destiny for all the objects in the Grail procession, which are, following Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie* and the Didot *Perceval* (c. 1190-1215), explicitly Christian relics.⁸⁵ But even Manessier does not confront the narrative marvels of Chrétien's almost purgatorial Castle of Maidens, whose inhabitants seem immune to the passage of narrative time.

Though it is possible that the secrets of the Grail procession and the Castle of Maidens remain undisclosed simply because the text of *Le Conte du Graal* is unfinished, the response of the continuations seem to confirm the difficulty of recovering meaning from the more enigmatic episodes of Chrétien's romance. The next section of this chapter, then, will investigate whether there was something about the elements introduced by Chrétien at these textual locations that precluded their resolution in the continuations. The patterns of Chrétien's text, together with the way the enigmatic themes are handled in the continuations suggest that in some essential way the parameters of the romance narrative established by

⁸⁴ Hinton, pp. 66 ff., 92.

⁸⁵ Like Robert de Boron, Manessier identifies the Bleeding Lance as the lance of Longinus, the Roman soldier who, in the Gospel of Nicodemus, stuck a spear into Christ's side as he hung on the cross, and explains that the Grail appeared to Joseph of Arimathea whilst he was imprisoned for taking down Jesus's body from the cross: see Rupert T. Pickens, Keith Busby and Andrea Williams, 'Perceval and the Grail: The Continuations, Robert de Boron and *Perlesvaus*', in *The Arthur of the French: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval French and Occitan Literature*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Karen Pratt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 215-73.

Chrétien in his previous works – the courtly couple and the test of their love ending in marriage, adventure in service of the hero's maturation, and some limited elements of the marvellous – were not sufficient to account for the emergence of these characters and objects, and the questions associated with them. This is not to say that Perceval does not mature over the course of the romance, for instance, or that *Le Conte du Graal* cannot be thought about in terms of these parameters. Rather, that the more indeterminate aspects of the Grail procession and the Castle of Maidens show Chrétien testing the capabilities of his romance form, and forging a more hermeneutically open narrative than that seen even in the antithetical endings of *Cligès*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain*.

3.5.1 The Castle of Maidens

When Chrétien pans away from Gawain at the Castle of Maidens immediately before the cessation of the narrative action, few of the marvels the knight witnesses there have been explained.⁸⁶ The significance of Gawain's victory over the Bed of Marvels and the extent of his new obligation as the new protector of the castle remain unclear. It is possible, for instance, that Gawain's integration into this hierarchy would have established his innocence in the misconduct of which he is earlier accused. According to the boatman, their protector must be someone with no trace of wickedness or evil (ll. 7548-604). There is also the question of how and why Arthur's mother, Queen Ygerne, and sister, the wife of King Lot, have been living, or, at least, existing in another part of the Arthurian world without his knowledge or admission (ll. 8742-53). This is the first time Chrétien has resurrected figures from the Arthurian catalogue presumed dead, and this may have paved the way for other

⁸⁶ For more on this specific episode, see Ronald M. Spensley, 'Gauvain's Castle of Marvels adventure in the *Conte del Graal*', *Medium Ævum*, 42.1 (1973), 32-7.

characters to be reanimated.⁸⁷ Such a shift in the rules of Chrétien's Arthurian world might have given Perceval the opportunity to return to his mother, making for a concordance of beginning and end, that more 'satisfying circular shape'.⁸⁸ As Per Nykrog suggests, had the implications of this episode been fully explored 'the whole Arthurian world [would have been] modified in its foundations'.⁸⁹

However, even if the material fragmentation of the text was not an issue, achieving closure for the narrative elements introduced in this episode would have been problematic. This is because the revelation that the two queens have been absent or dead for sixty and twenty years respectively ('Li rois Artus, si com je pens,/N'ot mere passé a lonc tens'; 'King Arthur, as far as I know/has not had a mother for a long time'; ll. 8735-56) suggests that they might be spectral figures that exist outside of narrative time, perhaps in a kind of purgatorial space. Such an assertion is reinforced by Chrétien's description of the queens and their court: Gawain's visit there is not framed as analepsis, but as though the long-dead female members of his family have appeared in his narrative present; he is told they arrived there with 'Uns clers sages d'astrenomie' who protected the hall with magic and enchantment ('A learned man of astronomy'), suggesting their presence is maintained through supernatural means; no finer fortress, Chrétien writes, was ever 'oeil d'ome qui vive' ('seen by any living man'), and the queens, and their many squires, are all described as being either white-headed or greying (ll. 7239-548).

Even if an ending for this episode had been written, the introduction of these spectral figures into the romance would have disrupted its closural force. This is because ghosts exist

⁸⁷ In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (followed by Wace's *Roman de Brut*), King Uther falls in love with Ygerne and acquires a potion from Merlin so that he may pose as her husband (Gorlois) and seduce her; Arthur is conceived from this deceptive union and they are later married after Gorlois dies in battle; in Wace, Ygerne becomes more of a courtly lady, perhaps a reflection of Eleanor of Aquitaine: see Joseph J. Duggan, *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 55-8.

⁸⁸ See p. 148.

⁸⁹ Nykrog, p. 269.

outside of time: ‘spectrality, properly thought, is, quite literally, “anachronistic”, not of this, or any other, time’.⁹⁰ This means that ghosts cannot be contained in an ending to a narrative that is governed by linear time or, indeed, by any temporal logic because, according to the theory of the spectral return developed by Derrida in *Spectres de Marx*, the text must be open to future returns of the ghost, who exists simultaneously before and after the story.⁹¹ Derrida writes: ‘a spectre is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*’.⁹² Thus, this episode projects an ending for the romance that cannot be definitive, and which implicitly endorses infinite returns to that part of the *fabula* because it conjures characters to whom the boundaries of narrative do not apply.

The castle materialises repeatedly over the course of the continuations. Yet in each of the last three, not only is the encounter given to another knight (Perceval in the first two, and Saigremor in the last), but the continuators choose to ignore the more mysterious elements of Gawain’s adventure at the castle. On the contrary, they return there only to add further intrigue to Perceval’s narrative. In the Second Continuation, the Castle of Maidens is merely the setting of a marvellous interlude in which Perceval knocks on a brass table with a hammer, revealing his hosts for a brief time before he is spirited out of the castle. Gerbert takes the connection between Perceval and the castle even further and writes a familial relationship into the episode by having the lady of the castle declare that Perceval’s mother

⁹⁰ Julian Wolfreys, ‘Justifying the Unjustifiable: A Supplementary Introduction of Sorts’, in *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 1-49 (p. 30).

⁹¹ ‘Derrida [...] opens himself, his text, his readers and Marx onto the future returns of the spectres of Marx, anticipating the anticipatable and waiting a wholly other, unpredictable spectral return’: Wolfreys, p. 29; ‘What is a ghost? [...] Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time, makes it also of last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time and a last time [...] Let us call it *hauntology* [...] After the end of history, the spirit comes by coming back [revenant], it figures both a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again’: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 10; for more on ‘hauntology’, see Colin Davis, ‘État Présent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms’, *French Studies*, 59.3 (2005), 373–79.

⁹² See Derrida, pp. 10-11.

was her cousin. The continuations therefore do little to assuage the lingering questions raised by Chrétien's episode and seem to attest to the elusive nature of the material.

3.5.2 The Grail Castle

The Grail Castle episode contains numerous paralipses and prolepses that are expanded in various ways in the continuations. The *preudom* of the castle is debilitated, but the cause of his ailment is not disclosed. He gives a sword to Perceval, apparently destined for him, and a prolepsis anticipates the 'tot seul peril' in which the sword will break (l. 3141). The vivid yet ethereal Grail procession draws attention to the mystical profundity of its components whilst seeming to pass over them:

Si vit bien ou ele fu faite [...]
 Et tot cil de laiens veoient
 Le lance blanche et le fer blanc,
 S'issoit une goutte de sanc [...]
 Li vallés voit cele merveille
 Qui la nuit ert laiens venus,
 Si s'est de demander tenus
 Coment ceste chose avenoit [...]
 Un graal entre ses deus mains
 Une damoisele tenoit [...]
 Une si grans clartez i vint
 Qu'ausi perdirent les chandoiles
 Lor clarté come les etoiles
 Font quant solaus lieve ou la lune. (vv. 3136-231)

[He (The Fisher King) could see where it (the sword) was made...And everyone in the hall saw/the white lance and the white tip,/from whose tip issued a drop of blood...The young man saw the marvel/who had come there that night,/but he did not ask/how it came about...A grail entered in the two hands/Of a maiden...a great brightness came/that made the candles also lose/their brilliance like the stars/when the sun rises over the moon.]

The obfuscation across this passage operates on several different levels: the elliptical syntax, Perceval's frustrating reticence, the spectral nature of the bearers and the ineffable Grail, its proper noun eluding both hero and poet, and its luminosity eclipsing the other light in the

hall. But it is through this paralytic ‘not saying’ that Chrétien achieves his greatest emphasis: as Charles Méla writes, ‘les silences du récit suffisent, on le voit, à insinuer la merveille’.⁹³

This surreal sequence proves most ripe for expansion in the adaptations of Chrétien’s Grail romance, where its elements are made to resemble specific holy relics: ‘Un graal’ becomes the ‘Holy Grail’ with which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Christ, and the ‘lance that bleeds’ is identified as the ‘Bleeding’ Lance of Longinus.⁹⁴ However, in the early continuations, the character and meaning of the spectacle is not so easily determined, and the strange procession undergoes a number of evolutions before it acquires this more definite Christian provenance. Chrétien alludes to the religious character of the Grail objects via his description of the tablecloth (l. 3278), and the Hermit uncle, but the text does not provide any clues as to their purpose or previous history. Though Perceval is initially eager to discover the truth of his adventure, Chrétien is quick to immerse him in the next episode and the Grail Castle fades into the background. Nevertheless, the expectation for a later episode in which he will recover the truth of the objects remains. Significantly, however, the Hideous Damsel seems to eradicate this narrative possibility when she reprimands Perceval for missing his opportunity to uncover the secrets of the Grail and heal the Fisher King, and she does not indicate that he will have a second chance (ll. 4671-83). In a comparable way to the treatment of the strand relating to Perceval’s mother, then, the romance implicitly promises to follow up the Grail episode and then disappoints these expectations within the narrative. This habit of leaving threads ‘dangling’ only to cut them off is a peculiar aspect of Chrétien’s aesthetic, and suggests he recognised either that he could not satisfactorily finish the many narrative

⁹³ ‘The silences of the narrative are enough, as we can see, to insinuate wonder’: Méla is in fact writing specifically here of *Le Chevalier de la charrette*: Méla, p. 43; see also Leupin, p. 250.

⁹⁴ For more on this transition, see D. D. R. Owen, ‘From Grail to Holy Grail’, *Romania*, 89 (1968), 31-53.

strands he brought into play in the space of one text, or that some elements of the romance he created, like the Grail, had an unfinishable quality to them.

Despite the revelation that Perceval's quest is a lost cause, following Frappier, many critics nonetheless affirm that Chrétien would have returned Perceval to the Grail Castle to complete his task.⁹⁵ The text breaks off regardless before either hero retrieves the Grail objects as pledged, leaving behind a symbolic lacuna created by the Grail procession. In response, all but one continuator return Perceval to the Grail Castle, each time moving slightly closer to a more definite exegesis for the Grail procession. In successive continuations, the hero leaves with new knowledge of what he must do to learn the truth of the mysteries, and this accumulation of expository material gradually layers more emphatically spiritual meaning into the interstices of Chrétien's text. Yet such a structure relies on the invention of new reasons for the hero to set out and new conditions for him to return, and the Grail episode becomes increasingly desultory over the course of the early continuations.⁹⁶ In the First Continuation, the emphatically Holy Grail flies through the air serving each knight refreshments, with the Broken Sword introduced as the initiation ceremony, while in the Second Continuation the adventure becomes tangled with the journey to Mont Dolerous and a mysterious child on a branch. Nevertheless, Perceval is eventually able to join the two parts of the sword together, though a small notch remains, and the Fisher King reveals this is because Perceval has not yet done enough for God, and so the possibility of another return remains open.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ 'We may suppose that if Chrétien had completed his poem, his hero would have returned to the Grail Castle to accomplish the miracle': Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, trans. by Raymond J. Cormier (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 130; Rupert Pickens, however, argues that there is nothing in Chrétien's unfinished poem to suggest this: Pickens, *The Welsh Knight*, p. 28.

⁹⁶ Hinton argues that 'the purpose of returning to the Grail Castle becomes somewhat opaque; ostensibly revelatory, these visits serve in fact to confirm what we as readers have already learned': see Hinton, p. 65.

⁹⁷ Tether argues, in line with Rosemarie P. McGerr's work on closure in medieval literature, that the tendency to defer or postpone conclusion throughout the corpus, if not deliberate, is designed to bring

Though Manessier is credited with fully decoding the Grail objects, Gerbert's exegesis of the episode is narratologically more faithful to Chrétien. Gerbert expands the Broken Sword narrative to address the relevant prolepsis in Chrétien's fragment about the man who forged it (ll. 3130 ff.), and reveals Perceval cannot know the secrets of the Holy Grail until he has atoned for the sin against his mother. Though not strictly finished, Gerbert's continuation provides in some ways a more comprehensive ending to *Le Conte du Graal* because it accumulates conclusions for episodes that Manessier does not even mention.⁹⁸ Manessier gets straight to the point and repeats the Joseph of Arimathea biography at the beginning of his continuation. He also reveals a familial relationship between Perceval and his uncle the Fisher King, and reinterprets the cause of the Broken Sword: a mortal blow that wounded the king and killed his brother. By the end of the continuation, Perceval has avenged the king, accomplished the Grail quest, served as king (and hermit), with the Holy Grail and Lance in place of a *globus cruciger* and sceptre. Manessier's verse style is vivid and compact, and though he represses the mysticism of Chrétien's Grail episode, he brings its objects into sharp focus, fixing these Christian definitions in place.

The myriad transformations of the Grail objects across the continuations, and their eventual similarity to the holy relics described in coeval adaptations, encodes the struggle to recover meaning from Chrétien's episode. The early continuations are particularly haphazard in their delineation of the elements that make up the procession, and any specific details seem

about the 'suspension of closure' (which, according to McGerr, was almost as pleasurable to the medieval audience as a satisfactory end): see Tether, pp. 57-108 (p. 70); see also Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp. 14-43.

⁹⁸ Though as Tether notes, because we do not have the final lines of Gerbert's text (if they were even composed), the extant manuscripts present Gerbert's continuation as an interpolation rather than a conclusion: see Tether, p. 166; also Sara Sturm-Maddox, "'Tout est par senefiance": Gerbert's Perceval', in *The Grail: A Casebook*, ed. by Dhira B. Mahoney (New York and London: Garland, 2000), pp. 201-17 (p. 202); following Bruckner's definition of the traditional romance ending, Tether argues that Manessier's end constitutes 'the perfect ending for a medieval narrative', because it sees a knight 'first in arms, then in prayer': see Tether, p. 172; Bruckner 'Knightly Violence', p. 29.

to have been lifted from the Didot *Perceval*.⁹⁹ Manessier's continuation dates after the emergence of the Vulgate Cycle, and he was likely more confident in his Christianisation of the story because he was writing post-Grail achievement.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, it only when Manessier incorporates hagiographical type-details about Perceval's saintly activities at the end of his life that the meaning of the Grail episode becomes stable, or, at least, there are no further 'continuations' reinterpreting the outcome of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. This suggests that the paradigmatic romance developed by Chrétien in the twelfth century, free of direct invocations to God, was not designed to fully expound the Grail objects or the mystical energies generated by them.¹⁰¹ When Perceval completes the Grail quest at the end of the final continuation, Manessier merges romance and history to ensure the clarity and permanence of his exegesis: he accelerates Perceval's life to the ultimate conclusion of his death, when he passes out of the world with the Holy Grail and the Bleeding Lance.

And yet, this pattern of appropriation and the subsequent crystallisation of meaning around the Grail objects jeopardises the special beauty of Chrétien's original, which alludes to something more than a single, fixed meaning or truth. Manessier's continuation in particular consistently smooths over the thematic tensions of his source, and teaches the mysteries of the Grail objects to his readership as if they are simple matters. But this transparency comes at the cost of aesthetic subtlety. It gives his continuation a flat, riskless quality and holds little imaginative power in comparison to Chrétien's Grail episode. For Derrida, the kind of secret alluded to by Chrétien's Grail procession, a secret that presents itself as essential to the text yet cannot be articulated by it, is a 'productive opening' of

⁹⁹ Roach looks at Manessier's dependency on the Didot *Perceval*, in *The Didot Perceval, According to the Manuscripts of Modena and Paris*, ed. by William Roach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1941), pp. 89-130.

¹⁰⁰ For more on this, see Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 186.

¹⁰¹ Pickens speculates that Chrétien's romance form, though previously adapted to deal with breaches of etiquette, might have been 'inadequate' for dealing with religious concepts like sin, guilt and moral responsibility: Pickens, *The Welsh Knight*, p. 31.

meaning rather than a determinate content to be uncovered.¹⁰² The Grail procession, much like the Castle of Maidens episode, is not a puzzle to be solved, but rather a ‘structural openness or address towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future’.¹⁰³ It is this essential openness that makes these episodes and, indeed, the text as a whole, unfinished, but also rich with possibility because it calls to continuators and adapters to reshape and expand the romance form, and to keep returning to its most enigmatic scenes to give new meaning to its mysteries.

3.6 Temporality

The temporal organisation of *Le Conte du Graal*, with its interplay of prolepsis and return and interlace of perspectives, is essential to its delineation of concurrent narrative events and ever-multiplying storylines. However, while the complexities of this temporal logic serve to both engage and satisfy the audience in the first half of the romance, the chronology becomes increasingly confused until it begins to hamper the resolution of the narrative events. It is true that Chrétien’s ‘other romans are complex, but they are all structured according to the beads-on-a-string pattern, one episode following the other through an ascending gradation. But in the last half of *Le Conte du Graal*,’ Per Nykrog writes, ‘the author’s lack of resolution seems extreme’.¹⁰⁴ In the second half of the extant romance, Chrétien initiates prolepses in rapid fire with no real indication of how and when they will be fulfilled, and forges a radical temporal disjunction between the adventures of Perceval and Gawain, which makes the return to a single chronology and, indeed, the achievement of a single, catchall ending seem impossible. All of this disrupts the continuity of the narrative action and builds a chaotic temporality into the romance for which there can be no straightforward resolution.

¹⁰² Davis, p. 377.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 379.

¹⁰⁴ Nykrog, p. 156.

The prolepses arising before and during Perceval's visit to Arthur's court in the early stages of *Le Conte du Graal* are resolved or fulfilled by Chrétien in order of occurrence. He promises to compensate the Tent Maiden and, as previously mentioned, he later redresses his offence against her by freeing her from her servitude. When Perceval arrives at court, he is greeted by a maiden who laughs and announces his distinction among knights. This maiden, the romance reveals by way of analepsis, has not laughed for six years and is prophesied to laugh only when she encounters 'Celui qui de chevalerie/Avra toute la seignorie' ('The one who is among knights/The supreme lord'; ll. 1061-2). In retaliation, Kay strikes the maiden and kicks the court jester; but both Perceval and the fool anticipate that the former will avenge this wrongdoing, a prophecy that is fulfilled when Perceval defeats Kay on the battlefield (ll. 4250-419). Chrétien thus completes the prolepses from the first half of the romance, with the exception of the Broken Sword, and a degree of closure is achieved.¹⁰⁵

This sense that the text is accumulating smaller conclusions is disrupted, however, by the arrival of the Hideous Damsel, whose prophecy triggers a number of other, more complex prolepses. These signal the irrevocable divergence of the major players and seem to allude to the impossibility of resolving the Grail episode. The damsel arrives at Arthur's court at Caerleon shortly after Perceval and Gawain convene there and addresses Perceval directly, reminding him of his adventure at the Grail Castle and admonishing him for his utter failure, because of which the 'Terres en seront escillies' ('the lands are wasted'; l. 4679). In response, Perceval swears an oath to seek the truth of the Grail and Lance, without seeming to fully acknowledge the ramifications of his earlier actions. While this prolepsis might ordinarily announce an eventual return to the Grail Castle, as previously mentioned, the Damsel's speech emphasises that Perceval's 'time has come and gone'.¹⁰⁶ In fact, rather than predicting

¹⁰⁵ See also Pickens, who calls them 'conflicts': Pickens, *The Welsh Knight*, pp. 17-56.

¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Hinton argues that the notion of redemptive Perceval questing for the Grail is a misinterpretation: Hinton, p. 57.

a return to the Grail Castle, the Damsel announces an unrelated quest to rescue the damsel besieged at Montesclaire, whose saviour will win great glory as the best knight in the world (ll. 4685-746). While Perceval does not seem to hear this call to arms, Gawain, along with another knight, Girflet, swear to free the maiden. At the end of this episode, then, Chrétien has set his two protagonists on divergent paths with no indication as to how they might be reconciled and indeed, neither the poet nor the continuators bring the heroes together in the more settled environment of the court again. In fact, the link Chrétien makes between Gawain and the Lance at the end of the Guigambresil episode would seem to be an effort to remedy this narratological difficulty. As with the other prolepses in the second half of *Le Conte du Graal*, then, the Montesclaire quest anticipated here is left unresolved, and serves only to impede the resolution of the text rather than giving notice of how it might end.

When Chrétien switches between his two heroes in the second half of the romance, dropping one and picking up another, these shifts in perspective are implicitly movements across narrative space rather than through time. Indeed, this interlace-type dynamic implies that though Perceval and Gawain are active in different parts of the romance landscape, their narratives operate on parallel timelines. After Chrétien has set Gawain on a path towards the Lance, he shifts focus to Perceval once again; but this time the movement is not a spatial one but rather an overt projection into the future:

Perchevax, ce nos dist l'estoire,
 Ot si perdue la miemoire
 Que de Dieu ne li sovient mais.
 Cinc fois passa avriels et mais,
 Ce sont cinc an trestot entire,
 Ains que il entrast en mostier,
 Ne Dieu ne sa crois n'aora.
 Tot ainsi cinc ans demora [...]
 Soissante chevaliers de pris
 A la cort le roi Artu pris
 Dedens cinc ans i envoia.
 Tot ensi cinc ans emploia
 N'onques de Dieu ne li sovint.
 Au chief des cinc ans si avint [...] (ll. 6217-38)

[Perceval, the story tells,/Had lost his memory/So that he no longer remembered God./Five times April and May passed,/That was five entire years/without him having entered a church/or adored God or his cross./Five years he remained like this...Sixty knights he had taken/to the court of King Arthur as prisoners/over the course of the five years./So he passed five years/Without remembering God/At the end of the five years...]

The temporal disjunction that Chrétien creates between the adventures of the two heroes here is both abrupt and emphatic. Indeed, D. D. R. Owen rationalises the ‘violent injury’ done to the time sequence here by attributing it to a ‘pious interpolator’.¹⁰⁷ Until this point, Chrétien’s interlace could have been said to take on a ‘chaptering function’.¹⁰⁸ However, the decision to accelerate Perceval’s visit to his Hermit uncle’s house five years into the future seems designed to emphasise the temporal otherness of his activities and their isolation from the overall narrative. Moreover, Chrétien does not leave this ‘temporal disjointment’ open to interpretation; he repeats six times in twenty lines that Perceval encounters the penitents five years after leaving Arthur, which, in the time of the Gawain plot, is only a few days before.¹⁰⁹

The prolepses of the Hermitage episode are more vivid and more fleshed out than those which precede it, and locate Perceval firmly in the future. As a narrative event, it seems to be a point of no return for the resolution for Chrétien’s romance: with Perceval taking his penitence at the Hermitage and Gawain racking up combats, trailing five years behind him, it is difficult to see how the two heroes might be brought back into synchronicity. If Gawain was to hold true to his oath at Escavalon, by the time of Perceval’s visit to the Hermitage, he would already have located the Lance. However, when *Le Conte du Graal* returns to Gawain after the Hermitage episode, past becomes present; it is later the same morning for Gawain, who has only just made that vow to find the Lance for the king. Though loosely tied together by their commitments to find the Grail objects, Perceval and Gawain now seem permanently divorced from one another in terms of both time and space.

¹⁰⁷ Owen, p. 37.

¹⁰⁸ Hinton, p. 39.

¹⁰⁹ Pickens, p. 46.

The continuations largely keep Perceval and Gawain separate from one another, and so avoid the inconvenient temporal discrepancy between the adventures of the two knights. There is some logic to the First Continuator's decision not to return to Perceval: there is no sense of urgency or direction to his adventures after the Hermitage episode, and there is a sense that the First Continuator is helping Gawain to catch-up. The other continuators pay little attention to Gawain and do not seem to have considered how the obvious chronological disturbance might have affected the events of their continuations. Only Gerbert brings Perceval and Gawain together in his Red Knight episode, showing himself once again to be a close reader of Chrétien.¹¹⁰ However, the knights quickly part ways and Gawain, outshone by Perceval, returns to King Arthur's court while Perceval pursues the Grail objects. The response of the continuators, then, who deliberately evade this tough issue in their source, attests to the difficulty of negotiating and ironing out the temporal anomalies that Chrétien wrote into his final unfinished romance. This analysis has shown that there were simply too many unfulfilled narrative promises relating to the Gawain character, too many unexplained mysteries surrounding the two castle settings and too severe a temporal disjunction in the original text for it to be finished by a straightforward return of Perceval to the Grail Castle.

3.7 Conclusions

When Chrétien resumes Gawain's adventures after the Hermitage episode in the final stages of *Le Conte du Graal*, his hapless protagonist is warned not to cross the border of Galvoie by the Haughty Damsel: none of the knights who have gone that way have ever come back, she tells him, since no knight can cross and return. Fittingly, neither Perceval nor Gawain return from their adventures within Chrétien's fragment, though of course his heroes reappear in various guises across the continuations. In Gerbert's continuation, even Chrétien himself

¹¹⁰ See also, Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued*, p. 203.

returns, as the continuator pays homage to the master poet through an epitaph inscribed in his own narrative:

Ce nous dist Crestiens de Troie
 Qui de Percheval comencha,
 Mais la mors qui l'adevancha
 Ne li laisse pas traire affin.¹¹¹

[This is what Chrétien de Troyes, tells us/ who began the story of Perceval,/But death which outran him/did not let him bring it to an end.]

The variance and disparity of the continuations show that bringing Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* to an end was not simply a case of writing a streamlined denouement to the text, but rather required continuators to return to the manifold characters, places, and times that had been left without closure. The more readers sift through the text, the more unfulfilled prolepses and paralipses emerge, particularly in some of the more mysterious sequences, such as the Grail procession, where narrative is obscured by allusion and enigma. This study has also shown that Gawain and other more secondary characters were of equal importance to the extant material as Perceval's return trip to the Grail Castle, though the temporal disjunction between the timelines of the two heroes might explain why most of the continuators chose to focus on just one of them.

This study has also indicated that even if *Le Conte du Graal* had been finished, the episodes at the Grail Castle and the Castle of Maidens may have disrupted the closural force of the ending, because their components cannot necessarily be contained or explained within the parameters of the specific form of romance established previously by Chrétien, and are, in that sense, potentially unfinishable.¹¹² How could the mysterious Grail objects have been fully reconciled with the love story between Perceval and Blanchefleur? Would the ghostly longevity of Arthur's mother and sister have obstructed Gawain's path towards narrative fulfilment? The compromises made by the continuators show that there may not have been

¹¹¹ Gerbert de Montreuil, *La Continuation de Perceval*, ll. 6984-7.

¹¹² See pp. 66, 160.

one wholly ‘satisfactory’ reconciliation of all the narrative parts. Scholars like John L. Grigsby and Thomas Hinton argue that the corpus bears witness to the shift from the oral to material transmission of literature, with ‘Chrétien’s entreaty to the audience to judge his text as an oral performance’ replaced by Manessier’s conception of his narrative as a material book (l. 42652).¹¹³ Under this model, the hermeneutic openness uncovered here could be explained by the oral milieu of the romance, which might have allowed and even encouraged Chrétien to ‘leave themes uncompleted, motifs truncated, mysteries unsolved’.¹¹⁴ Yet this conception of Chrétien’s text undermines the literariness and complexity of his project and contradicts the bookishness of his source, which he identifies as an *estoire* in the prologue. The openness of *Le Conte du Graal* is better explained by Chrétien’s aesthetic of anticipation and not-saying, which opened his narrative to continuation, adaptation, new meanings, and interpretations, whether this was intentional or not. It is possible to argue for this whilst also acknowledging and celebrating the textuality of Chrétien’s work.

Taken as individuals or indeed as a whole, the endings and additions written by the continuators do not constitute an orderly or logical conclusion in relation to Chrétien’s romance. Keith Busby’s overview of the corpus encapsulates the irreconcilability of its components: ‘Chrétien, spiritual and mystical; the First Continuation, wildly supernatural, exuberant and archaic; the Second Continuation, secular and conventional; Manessier, rational and reassuring; Gerbert de Montreuil, solemn and sermonizing’.¹¹⁵ If nothing else, the different energies that characterise these interlocking parts of the corpus reveal that the nature of the romance’s unfinishedness and the process of ending it were complex: there are multiple layers and levels of material, some of which are picked up while others are not;

¹¹³ See Hinton, p. 96.

¹¹⁴ John L. Grigsby, ‘Remnants of Chrétien’s in the Early *Perceval* Continuations and the Incipient Triumph of Writing’, *Romance Philology*, 41.4 (1988), 379-93 (p. 391).

¹¹⁵ Busby, ‘Perceval and the Grail’, in *The Arthur of the French*, p. 229.

some characters, places and scenes are overworked and even exhausted while other are left untouched. Yet any narrow interpretive focus on one hero over the other, on chivalry over love, or spirituality and Christianity over mysticism comes at the expense or neglect of the other strands, and so the continuations are finally unable to provide an ending to Chrétien's text that provides closure for all parts of the fragment, which, like the two white queens, keeps returning to haunt its continuations. The textual memory of these mysterious elements meant that finishing the text required something more than a mechanical 'tying up' of loose ends.

The cyclicity of the thirteenth-century Lancelot-Grail, for which *Le Conte du Graal* corpus was a prototype, resolved some of the problems that hindered the continuators' efforts to bring stability to Chrétien's fragmentary material. This is because the Vulgate Cycle inserts an elaborated version of his Grail story into a coherent chronology through a multiplicity of parts alongside material adapted from Geoffrey of Monmouth and Robert de Boron. In addition, these later Arthurian romances distanced themselves from the intellectual playfulness of earlier works; as Jane Gilbert writes, in the thirteenth century the 'Arthurian moral space becomes didactic, a place of lessons directed to the text's own present. Paradox and irony now signal a tragic mystery weighing on the human race'.¹¹⁶ Perhaps because of this, the later romances, much like the continuations, could not replicate the singular mystery and beauty of Chrétien's unfinished romance, nor its imaginative power:

Like a splendid fragment that evokes dreams of the whole statue, we might say that, had Chrétien brought it to a final conclusion, his romance might not have stirred to the same degree the immense fires of imagination which have prolonged for centuries the effulgence of the Grail.¹¹⁷

The dynamic of opening and closing inscribed across the *Conte du Graal* corpus finds new expression as an intratextual impulse in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, in which the adventures of

¹¹⁶ Jane Gilbert, 'Arthurian Ethics', *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 158-9.

¹¹⁷ Frappier, *The Man and his Work*, p. 155.

the heroes are repeatedly terminated by Theseus's desire for order, only to be started again by the forces of love and *aventure* intrinsic to the romance genre.

4. The Open Ends of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the Consolation of Theseus

4.1.1 Chrétien and Chaucer

Making the jump from the endings of Chrétien de Troyes's romances to those of Geoffrey Chaucer means advancing a whole two centuries into 'a cultural world of more spacious dimensions'.¹ Fourteenth-century England, though heavily influenced by French aristocratic culture, was a more 'horizontal', communal, mercantile society, with an emerging vernacular literary tradition which 'stretched and modified the received model of a divinely sanctioned and eternal order of vertically arrayed estates in order to include new and previously unrecognised social groupings'.² Where French courtly romance had taken the aristocracy as its principal subject, the English tradition of vernacular romance embraced the 'middle strata' of society as well. In a forthcoming volume, Ad Putter will nevertheless argue that Chrétien's Arthurian romances had a significant influence over the development of Middle English literature.³ Many of the themes and figures of Chrétien's Arthurian world, he points out, were taken up by English and Scottish writers and artists, even if they themselves were not aware of the poet by name. Because of the strong transnational court culture between England and France, which resulted in a complex linguistic and cultural interchange, it is perhaps not surprising that early thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman romances like *Yder*, *Gui de Warewic* and the *Roman de Fergus* show familiarity with Chrétien's near contemporary works, or even that the fourteenth-century *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Percyvell of Gales* include characters from his later romances. The First Continuation of *Le Conte du Graal* seems to have been especially popular; indeed, one of the Caradoc episodes inspired the beheading game in *Sir*

¹ A. C. Spearing speaks of an analogous flashforward from *Havelok* to *Troilus and Criseyde* in his discussion of narrative closure and endings: A. C. Spearing, 'Narrative Closure: The End of *Troilus and Criseyde*', in *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 117.

² Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. x.

³ Ad Putter, 'The Popularity of the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes and the Continuations in Medieval England and Scotland' (Confidential Festschrift, 2020).

Gawain and the Green Knight. But, in fact, Chrétien's influence seems to have extended into the fifteenth century in *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* and Scots *Golagros and Gawane*, and even into the 1530s, when a version of the *Conte du Graal* was printed with its continuations as a complete 'Perceval and Gawain' cycle in Renaissance prose. While Putter makes a point of saying that there is little evidence that Chrétien influenced Chaucer directly, there is plentiful evidence of allusions and borrowings in lost and extant manuscripts to suggest that Chrétien's romances circulated in medieval England and Scotland.

It is not my argument that Chaucer read Chrétien, though it is true that Chaucer seems to have been something of an 'evangelist' when it came to French poetry.⁴ He would have been intimately familiar with the *Roman de la Rose* written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, which he translated, and that he drew regularly on 'the love vision machinery' of the more contemporary *dit amoureux* written by Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart is clear from the complaints made by his lovers in *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Squire's Tale* and *The Knight's Tale*, in which the symbol garden setting of the *Rose* also features. In fact, Charles Muscatine goes so far as to argue that Chaucer's literary style stemmed from the great forefathers of French romance: Gautier d'Arras, the *Renart* poets, and Chrétien.⁵ While there is less solid evidence for such claim, Chaucer has much in common with Chrétien, and it is this that provides a rationale for a comparison between them. First, both Chrétien and Chaucer were generic innovators within their respective languages in the vernacular. Where Chrétien pioneered and expanded the possibilities of courtly romance, Chaucer plundered the language, style, and register of romance for many of his literary works.⁶ The ingredients of

⁴ James I. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets: The Literary Background of The Book of the Duchess* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1972), p. 5.

⁵ Charles Muscatine, 'Introduction', in *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 5 ff.

⁶ It is sometimes implied of both Chrétien and Chaucer that they created vernacular traditions out of virtually nothing, but in fact this is not quite true: Chrétien would have been heavily influenced by the Celtic tradition, Marie de France's Breton *lai*, and possibly Latin romance, whereas Chaucer would

the genre are readily apparent in *Anelida and Arcite* and his other lyrics, in the vision poetry, and in *Troilus and Criseyde*; but, in Chaucer's works, they are always blended with other literary forms and modes. The prominence of the romance influence, Muscatine admits, diminishes in the 'vast area' of *The Canterbury Tales*. Yet Chaucer must have continued to find the genre imaginatively remunerative, since romance motifs persist across the work, often as part of surprising formulae and in absurd contexts, ingeniously mixed with contradictory literary elements as part of a grand generic play.

Second, both poets seem to have taken an active interest in representations of the human condition, and this study has established that Chrétien explored the contraries and multiplicity of human experience through his work long before Chaucer; indeed, some time ago, David C. Fowler drew a parallel between the poets in this respect.⁷ This is not the only basis for a connection between them, however; Mary Hamel points to similar themes and scenarios in *Cligès* and *The Franklin's Tale*; P. J. Frankis makes an argument for some continuity between the two poets on the basis of their use of the term 'vavasour', and D. S. Brewer suggests the 'Book of the Leoun' that Chaucer mentions in his *Retraction* may have been based on *Yvain*.⁸ In addition, C. S. Lewis suggests that *Troilus and Criseyde* especially shows 'Chaucer groping back, unknowingly, through the very slightly medieval work of Boccaccio, to the genuinely medieval formula of Chrestien'.⁹ The representation of Troilus as the devoted servant in love testifies to Chaucer's general investment in the conventions of the

have been able to draw on the existing tradition of English romance, as well as French and Italian vernacular traditions.

⁷ David C. Fowler, 'L'amour dans le Lancelot de Chrétien', *Romania*, 91 (1970), 378-91 (p. 387); as does F. Xavier Baron, 'Love in Chrétien's Charrette: Reversed Values and Isolation', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (1973), 372-83 (p. 383).

⁸ D. S. Brewer, 'Chaucer and Chrétien de Troyes', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (London: Routledge, 1974); Mary Hamel, 'The "Franklin's Tale" and Chrétien de Troyes', *The Chaucer Review*, 17.4 (1983), 316-31; P. J. Frankis, 'Chaucer's "Vavasour" and Chrétien de Troyes', *Notes and Queries*, 213 (1968), 46-7.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, 'What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*', in *Troilus and Criseyde*, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 453.

French poets, and Lewis catalogues the various ways in which Chaucer modified the design of *Il Filostrato* to make the narrative a more faithful espousal of the medieval code for lovers.¹⁰ No scholar, however, has sought to explore the poets' apparently common approach to ending and narrative closure, or, more specifically, their similar refusal, especially in their later works, to surrender to fantasies of transcendence and finality.

Indeed, finally, and most importantly for the purposes of this study, Chaucer, like Chrétien, seems to have had a bit of an artistic tussle when it came to finishing his narrative poems, and the process of ending is itself always at issue in his works. Chrétien left two of his five Arthurian romances unfinished, and gave a duality to those from the middle part of his career which allowed them to resist dialectical resolution and remain open-ended. Chaucer, meanwhile, left half of his major literary works unfinished: the dream visions *The House of Fame* and *The Legend of Good Women*, the lyric *Anelida and Arcite*, and *The Canterbury Tales* are all without endings. And, similarly to Chrétien, his finished works, among them, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parlement of Foules*, tend to avoid final resolution, or end abruptly, and always, in their different ways, toy with medieval conventions of closure. In this way, the two poets share a provisional and playful attitude to ending, a tendency which, in extreme cases like *Le Conte du Graal* and *The Squire's Tale*, results in the absence of any recognisable endpoint. The remainder of this study is interested in what reading Chaucer's nominal works of romance, both finished and unfinished, in the context of the textual processes observed in Chrétien's romances can tell us about his well-documented reluctance to deliver closure to his readers.

¹⁰ Lewis gives six examples of modifications made by Chaucer which allow him to give instructions on love through the medium of his story, including the expansion of the prayer to love, references to Ovid; he also emphasises the lover's virtue of secrecy and the duty of service to the lady more than Boccaccio: *ibid.*, p. 457; see also Corinne J. Saunders, 'Love and the Making of the Self: *Troilus and Criseyde*', in *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, ed. by Corinne J. Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 134-55.

4.1.2 Chaucer and Romance

Historically, scholars have questioned whether it is even appropriate to speak of Chaucer in the context of the romance genre, since he does not ever write a ‘straight’ romance and shows little interest in some of the central themes of the genre, including the hero’s quest.¹¹ Yet, even in the medley of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is to romance that Chaucer is perhaps most indebted: in his references to Arthurian literature, in the comic reimagining of romantic figures and mannerisms, in the identification of *The Franklin’s Tale* as a Breton *lai*, and in his persistent quotation of the chivalric language of ‘aventures and batailles’ and ‘love-longynge’, Chaucer is never far away from the romance genre. Chaucerians have sought to explain the scattered allusions to romance variously as evidence of the ‘unsuitability’ of the genre to his purposes, or as purely satirical indicators of his contempt for the genre, and in a dissertation on Chaucer’s use of genre in 1979, Patrick J. Panzarella concludes that ‘Chaucer did not succeed in writing perfect romances nor did he fail by writing flawed romances; he simply did not write romances’.¹²

Especially in the context of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is true that Chaucer did not write a straightforward romance, but then again, neither did he write straight fabliaux nor straight didactic tales. Not content to present a simple ‘index of tale types’ or a usual medieval compilation, Chaucer offers a collection of playful hybrids which vary the effect of generic types and exemplary narratives. Though he generally avoids the classification of his tales into distinct genres, and seems to deliberately eschew generic terms, as W. A. Davenport points out, Chaucer does outline three generic categories in the prologue to *The Miller’s Tale*: ‘cherles tales/harlotrie’, ‘storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse’, and tales of ‘moralitee’ or

¹¹ W. A. Davenport, *Chaucer and His English Contemporaries* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 132.

¹² Patrick J. Panzarella, *Chaucer and Literary Genre* (Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1979), p. 69; see also Charles Moorman, ‘The Philosophical Knights of *The Canterbury Tales*’, *SAQ*, 64 (1965), 87-99 (p. 99); Gardiner Stillwell, ‘Chaucer in Tartary’, *RES*, XXIV (1948), 177-188; Raymond Preston, *Chaucer* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 123; Judith Herz, ‘Chaucer’s Elegiac Knight’, *Criticism*, VI (1964), 212-14.

‘hoolynesse’, roughly corresponding to fabliau, romance, and didactic narratives.¹³ There are a handful of poems from the *Tales* that might be identified as largely or ‘majority’ romance: *The Knight’s Tale* is a chivalrous if philosophical romance derived from epic; *The Squire’s Tale*, though still chivalric in its milieu, is a more magical, composite romance set in the East; *The Franklin’s Tale*, too, is a magical tale of love and loyalty, though Chaucer himself places it more line with the specific mode of the *lai* associated with Marie de France; *The Clerk’s Tale* and *The Man of Law’s Tale* are woman-centred romances, though almost too moralising to be called such; and *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *Sir Thopas* distort romance to the point of absurdity. In Chaucer, romance becomes uncanny: the plots and figures in these tales are strangely familiar in terms of the generic expectations of romance, but at the same time, none of these seven fully embraces the romantic world of love and adventure.

Chaucer’s romance pick-and-mix would have been informed not only by the French tradition but also by the existing body of the popular romance poetry in English, whose narratives included a freer use of figures of speech and devices of irony. Though Chaucer’s decision to write in English was significant in the context of his courtly milieu, there was an existing English vernacular tradition from which he drew much of his narratorial style and mode of address.¹⁴ Davenport highlights several fourteenth-century Middle English romances that Chaucer may have been reacting to when he came to write *The Canterbury Tales*: Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* and *Lybeaus Desconus*, both of which appear in the fifteenth-century MS Cotton Caligula A.ii, as well as *Bevis of Hampton* and *Guy of Warwick*, which Chaucer alludes to in *Sir Thopas*, earlier heroic, historical romances like *King Alisaunder*, *Richard Coeur-de-Lion*, and *Arthur and Merlin*, and romanticised adventure stories like *Gamelyn*, and the thirteenth-century *Havelok the Dane*. Some of these were contained in the

¹³ Davenport, pp. 92-3; Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor, 2nd edn (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012), p. 98, I. 3176-81.

¹⁴ Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 115.

Auchinleck manuscript of the 1330s which, Davenport notes, Chaucer may have been familiar with.¹⁵ And yet, in all these texts, the maturation, deeds, and triumphs of the male hero take centre stage, which is exactly the kind of romance plot Chaucer himself takes little interest in. His chivalrous heroes tend to sit on the side-lines of his tales, and seem always to fall short of the chivalric ideal: the Wife of Bath's anonymous knight is at the mercy of a faerie; Arveragus' exploits take place off stage in the Franklin's *lai*; Canace's walk usurps the adventures of her father and brothers in the aborted *Squire's Tale*; and even in the high-minded *Knight's Tale*, the hero's role splits into three. But it is the blustering and bumbling fool knight of *Sir Thopas* that seems to most clearly indicate Chaucer is not inclined to take the male hero seriously. All this might seem to suggest that Chaucer was indeed dissatisfied with the main subjects of popular romance.

But even when Chaucer seems at his most derisive, he is using the tools and features of the vernacular tradition to style his tales and contextualise his characters, delighting in its idiosyncrasies as he does so. In the case of *Sir Thopas*, Chaucer's dalliance with metrical cliché and minstrelsy suggests, as Panzarella convincingly argues, that 'Chaucer's attack was not directed at romances as such, but rather at the current absurdities of the rude rhymers of the highway, whose productions were little more than travesties of the old heroic stories'.¹⁶ In fact, this is a further parallel between Chaucer and Chrétien: where Chrétien had explicitly criticised 'cil qui de conter vivre valent' in his prologue to *Erec et Enide*, the *jongleurs* who corrupted courtly tales in their telling, Chaucer implicitly critiques the tail-rhyme romancers in *Sir Thopas* who perhaps, he felt, did not do the rich material of romance justice. Chaucer's vivid representation of scenes from chivalric life and court culture in other tales, his tendency to push his characters into a fit of dialectical heart-searching, and his love of colloquial style

¹⁵ Davenport, pp. 96-116.

¹⁶ Panzarella, pp. 38-9.

further suggest that he thought the genre worthy of serious treatment. Chaucer's attitude to romance is, then, more complex than the contempt initially suggested by his treatment of the genre in *Sir Thopas*. As Davenport writes, 'the cumulative effect of this group of texts within *The Canterbury Tales* is of a poet intelligently and adventurously reacting to particular examples and to the general possibilities of a literary kind, exaggerating its weaknesses in one direction and reassessing its strengths in the other'.¹⁷ The overall sense we gain from the treatment of romance in the *Tales* is not that Chaucer wanted to completely vilify the genre, but rather that he wanted to revitalise it, to stretch and modify the confines of the tradition to help it meet the demands of the new more 'horizontal' age.

However, in few of Chaucer's works is the 'colour of the parent stream' as apparent as in *The Knight's Tale*, which invokes many distinctive features of the chivalric romance genre: the love rivals, the fraternal combat, the splendid tourney.¹⁸ Further elements that ally the tale with the romance tradition include the *Rose*-like garden, the alliterative passage in the tournament section, Arcite's Havelok-like stint as a poor servant, and the suffering of the knights in love, which is not only reminiscent of the *dit amoureux*, but also of Tristan and Lancelot.¹⁹ Interestingly, the first tale in the Canterbury set has several points of contact with Chrétien's *Cligès*: both tales insert medieval figures into antiquity, both sets of heroes are embroiled in love triangles, and in both the paradoxical space of the prison-garden plays a pivotal role.²⁰ It is not necessary, as Hamel points out, to look for references to Chrétien's work in Chaucer; the French poet was likely not a source for *The Knight's Tale*, even if the

¹⁷ Davenport, p. 94.

¹⁸ Muscatine, pp. 6-12; Cooper argues that Chaucer rapidly qualifies the nature of *The Knight's Tale* as a romance 'by fusing it with its apparent opposite, tragedy – tragedy in that Boethian sense of the "unwar strokes" of Fortune': see Cooper, p. 92.

¹⁹ See also Davenport, p. 122.

²⁰ In *Cligès*, Bertrand discovers the lovers in their garden-tower sanctuary, a narrative reflex that triggers the denouement, see Kristian von Troyes, *Cligès*, ed. by Wendelin Foerster (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1910), p. 174 ff., vv. 6393-424.

Prose Lancelot is alluded to elsewhere in the *Tales*.²¹ That said, one legacy of Chrétien's elegant and complex Arthurian *conjointure* was that all romances since had attempted to include, as Helen Cooper writes, 'a level of meaning beyond mere narrative, a *sens* to inform their subject matter', and she adds, 'there is nothing to equal the metaphysical reach of the Knight's Tale'.²² Chaucer's take on the romance mode moved its stylistic conventions in new directions with wider 'metaphysical' scope, dispensing with the heroic themes of courtly romance in favour of increased focus on 'issues of a more personal and intimate nature [...] the joy and pain of love and the relationship between the transient and the eternal'.²³ It is a medieval romance in which the heroic role is diffused between three, motifs are fractured, and philosophical passages are appended, and perhaps it is Chaucer's insistence on generic play in this way that gives rise to the inconclusiveness that comes to shape the *Tales* as a whole.

4.2 Noble Designs and Chaos

The previous two chapters of this study argued Chrétien was writing interpretively open and, later, extensively unfinished romances. It is generally acknowledged that Chaucer also wrote open-ended texts: the work of scholars like Larry Sklute and Rosemarie P. McGerr most

²¹ Hamel draws out numerous verbal correspondences between *The Franklin's Tale* and Chrétien's *Cligès* and argues that Chrétien's irony is like Chaucer's in some respects: Mary Hamel, 'The "Franklin's Tale" and Chrétien de Troyes', *The Chaucer Review*, 17.4 (1983), 316-31; D. S. Brewer also suggests that Chaucer's two references to Launcelot de Lake show familiarity with Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrette*, and the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain* shows that Chrétien's work was still circulating in fourteenth-century England, though the 'dissimulynge' that prompt the allusion in *The Squire's Tale* are more Prose Lancelot. Brewer also notes in passing a brief parallel between lines in Chrétien's *Cligès* and *The Franklin's Tale*, lines which seem to agree on the 'lord and servant in love' theme: see D. S. Brewer, 'Chaucer and Chrétien and Arthurian Romance', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1974), pp. 255-59, and *Lancelot of the Lake*, ed. by Elspeth Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1989), p. 157.

²² Helen Cooper, 'The Knight's Tale: A Beginning', in *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 104.

²³ Nigel Saul, 'The King and His Court', in *Richard II, Yale English Monarchs* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 363.

explicitly highlights Chaucer's penchant for thematic inconclusiveness and his propensity to resist closure and resolution even in those poems that are demonstrably 'closed'.²⁴ Much has been written on the 'discontinuous' and apparently problematic ending of *Troilus*, as well as the tension between the hesitance of the 'narrator' and 'his' desire for closure.²⁵ The scope and fragmentary state of *The Canterbury Tales* make the question of closure somewhat more challenging, especially when deciding the relation of the parts to the whole. Interpreting the finishedness of *The Knight's Tale* might appear a more straightforward task; it marks the 'opening' boundary of the individual tales, which might partially foreclose its association with the unfinishedness of the Canterbury project.²⁶ Moreover, its entire narrative, as Jill Mann has recently suggested, is a series of 'ends' that prepare us for the ultimate end of the poem.²⁷ This should leave readers with a sense of the text as firmly closed.

And yet, there is something fundamentally precarious about the form of closure offered by *The Knight's Tale*, in which the optimistic romance ending of the thrown-together

²⁴ Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), passim; Larry Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), passim.

²⁵ Spearing aptly describes the ending as 'discontinuous': Spearing, p. 127; among those to discuss the ending and the narrator are, E. Talbot Donaldson, 'The Ending of "Troilus"', in *Chaucer*, Blackwell Guides to Criticism, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 139-49; Peter Dronke, 'The Conclusion of "Troilus and Criseyde"', *Medium Aevum*, 33.1 (1964), 47-52; Clíodhna Carney, 'Chaucer's "litel bok", Plotinus, and the Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*', *Neophilologus*, 93 (2009), 357-68; Thomas H. Bestul, 'Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: The Passionate Epic and Its Narrator', *Chaucer Review*, 14 (1980), 366-78; Sherron E. Knopp, 'The Narrator and His Audience in Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde"', *Studies in Philology*, 78.4 (1981), 323-40; Richard Waswo, 'The Narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*', *ELH*, 50.1 (1983), 1-25; however, Spearing has elsewhere cast doubt on whether it is accurate or useful to think of medieval texts, including *Troilus and Criseyde*, in terms of narrators: see A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 1-33, 68-100; also Spearing, 'What is a Narrator? Narrator Theory and Medieval Narratives', *Digital Philology*, 4.1 (2015), 59-105.

²⁶ Cooper, p. 91 ff; see also Joseph Westlund, who argues that *The Knight's Tale* is an especially suitable opening or beginning for the pilgrimage: Joseph Westlund, 'The "Knight's Tale" as an Impetus for Pilgrimage', *Philological Quarterly*, 43 (1964), 526-37.

²⁷ Jill Mann, 'Beginning with the Ending: Narrative Techniques and their Significance in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*', in *Romance Rewritten: The Evolution of Middle English Romance*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald, Megan G. Leitch and Corinne Saunders (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 85-102.

marriage only weakly suppresses the anxieties expressed and contradictions realised over the course of the tale. This chapter will argue that while Chaucer sets up the conditions necessary to end *The Knight's Tale* on a number of occasions, several more than even Mann identifies, the precarity of these 'end-points', and the narrative tendency to reopen the action after each one, anticipate a frustration of resolution at the close of the text. It will further argue that the characterisation of Theseus has implications for the ending: his behind-the-scenes evolution from a sovereign of Ricardian majesty, determined to restore order to the chaotic reflexes of the Providential scheme, to a Boethian figure of consolation, not only rationalises the narrative tendency to 'stop and start' but makes for a discontinuous and ultimately unresolved ending, which has significance and implications for the role of the artist far beyond the confines of the poem.²⁸

The Knight's Tale revises Boccaccio's *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*, itself derived from the *Thebaid* of Statius (92 AD), the authority on the fall of Thebes.²⁹ Where Chrétien chose Constantinople for the setting of *Cligès* and its antithetical ending, Chaucer saw an opportunity in the classical romance matter of Thebes to explore the operation of Providence, its temporal manifestations, fate and chance, and the extent to which a noble man is free to exercise his will over earthly events. The innovative conflation of the Boethian providential scheme with pagan machinery in *The Knight's Tale*, and the collective influence of these cosmic powers over the lives of Palamon and Arcite, has been well-documented by V. A. Kolve, Helen Cooper, and Derek Pearsall.³⁰ But Muscatine's comment that the 'history of

²⁸ For more on Chaucer's position at the court of Richard II around the time of *The Knight's Tale*'s composition, see Saul, 'The King and His Court', pp. 327-65.

²⁹ For more on Chaucer's truncation of his Boccaccian source, including the dilution of its epic qualities, see Cooper, p. 92; Robert Hanning, 'The Struggle between Noble Designs and Chaos: The Literary Tradition of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*', *The Literary Review*, 23 (1980), 519-41 (p. 529).

³⁰ For more on how Chaucer blurs and conflates astrological and divine apparatus, allowing the classical deities to be understood as figures for planetary influences, which were accepted in medieval lore as part of Providence and destiny, see V. A. Kolve, 'The Knight's Tale and Its Settings', in *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), pp. 85-157; Cooper, p. 91 ff.; Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*

Thebes had perpetual interest for Chaucer as an example of the struggle between noble designs and chaos' locates the poet's interest in a different dynamic: the dissonance between Theseus's perceived control over the events and the inevitable turns of Fortune's wheel.³¹ In Muscatine's reading, the significance of the tale lies in Theseus's perception of order beyond chaos: 'when the earthly designs suddenly crumble, true nobility is faith in the ultimate order of all things'.³²

However, even if Theseus eventually trusts the 'First Mover' to govern the vicissitudes of the world, for most of the tale he arrays himself as the majestic centre of authority, and makes noble attempts to resolve narrative 'crises' of his own accord.³³ These assertions of power have a significant effect on the narrative structure: his arbitrations of Palamon and Arcite (the imprisonment, banishment and tournament) repeatedly drive the narrative into a temporary closural mode complete with closural allusions, and the 'lystes', the visual manifestation of his majestic order, set the stage for the end of Arcite's narrative. In addition, Chaucer's use of *occupatio*, the figure of rhetoric, in the words of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, 'when we say that we do not want to say what we are saying' creates narratological

(London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 126; also Paul G. Ruggiers, *The Art of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), pp. 151-64 (p. 156).

³¹ Muscatine, p. 190; many subsequent scholars have based their studies on Muscatine's conception and tend to argue for the tale as an optimistic, ironic or tragic account of the civilising process, among them, Richard Neuse, 'The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Human Comedy', in *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 242-63; Elizabeth Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 9-36; Jeffrey Helterman, 'The Dehumanizing Metamorphoses of *The Knight's Tale*', *ELH*, 38 (1971), 493-511; Kathleen A. Blake, 'Order and Noble Life in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*?', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (1973), 3-19; Hanning, pp. 519-41; see also Patterson, who argues that it is specifically the chivalric order (and by extension chivalric identity) that is at issue: Lee Patterson, 'The *Knight's Tale* and the Crisis of Chivalric Identity', in *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 165-230.

³² Hanning, p. 520.

³³ The notion of the apocalyptic 'end' happening at every moment gave rise to the modern concept of *crisis*, the Greek work for both judgment and separation; for more on this notion of 'crises' see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 25.

‘dead ends’ throughout.³⁴ Because of all this, readers are left with the impression of many endings.

Yet the adventures of Palamon and Arcite are continuously reopened by the various haphazard and intersecting forces of fate, chance, and the impulses that Chaucer has assigned to them as heroes of the romance genre. This is an unusual configuration of *aventure*: at once the passive idea of adventure as ‘that which happens to a person’, which informs classical literature, and the episodic, open-ended, formative adventures native to romance.³⁵ In the first half of the poem, there is a tension between the stasis of certain characters and the ‘romynge’, of others, which is also the opposition between the desire for narrative continuation and the desire to freeze narrative time embodied in the concept of ending. Indeed, the young Theban knights are propelled forward by the forces of love and destiny in alternating instalments, but have their paths through the story closed off by Theseus, all the while struggling to come to terms with their powerlessness in a world devised by political, providential, and poetic forces outside their control.

Theseus is, however, as captive to recalcitrant forces as the characters he seeks to govern. The climactic intervention of Saturn makes a spectacle of the Duke’s civil impotence, shattering the illusion of control, and he is subsequently forced to confront the realities of his own human limitations. It is a critical commonplace that Theseus plunders the rhetoric of Boethian consolation in his final speech to mitigate the distress experienced by Palamon and Emelye after Arcite’s death.³⁶ Chaucerian scholars do not tend to read Theseus’s final speech

³⁴ The Latin reads, ‘Occupatio est quando dicimus nos nolle dicere quod dicimus’: Geoffrey of Vinsauf, ‘Documentume modo et arte dictandi et versificandi’, II, 3, 167, in *Les arts poétiques du XIIIe et XIIIe siècle*, ed. by Edmond Faral (Paris: Champion, 1924), p. 317.

³⁵ Michael Nerlich, ‘The Adventure of the Chevalier’, in *Ideology of Adventure: Studies in Modern Consciousness, 1100-1750*, trans. by Ruth Crowley, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 3-19 (p. 3).

³⁶ Chaucer makes several references to Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, a sixth-century Neoplatonic dialogue between Lady Philosophy the prisoner ‘Boethius’ concerning the latter’s quest for solace in the lead up to his execution, some version of which Chaucer translated into *Boece* in the 1380s, more or less contemporaneously with his composition of *The Knight’s Tale* or, at least, an

as a Boethian self-consolation, however.³⁷ Yet this monologue is as much an acceptance of his own subjugation to Providence as it is a stately explanation of the injustice suffered by Arcite.

Though the duke's new sense of his own frailty results in an incredible and almost frantic succession of closural gestures (the funeral, the speech and the marriage) as he tries to extract pageantry from chaos and death, *The Knight's Tale* is finally about the impossibility of stable closure. This notion is confirmed at once by *The Miller's Tale*, which rewrites the story of Palamon, Arcite and Emelye and destabilises both the meaning and value of *The Knight's Tale*. Yet behind the anxieties of control implicit in the pronouncements made by Theseus, the tale expresses a deeper truth that might be attributed to Chaucer: that textual signification is inherently unstable, and imposing final closure on a story is impossible. This chapter will finally argue that Theseus's closing address is in part an allegory of authorial control, which suggests relinquishing that control is a 'necessity' in the act of writing. Just as Chrétien could not close his *Conte du Graal* to the modifications of the later continuators, Chaucer's rewriting of Boccaccio itself expresses the impossibility of closing a text off to *mouvance* and future reinterpretation.

4.3 Theseus, Majesty and 'ordre'

To understand the multiplicity of endpoints in *The Knight's Tale*, we must first understand the character of Theseus, who provides a thematic basis for these ends in his efforts to create

early version of it: see *Sources of the Boece*, ed. by Tim William Machan and A. J. Minnis (London: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 3; for the Boethian rhetoric in Chaucer's address to Palamon and Emelye see, for example, Phillips, p. 51; Pearsall, pp. 123-36; also J. E. Cross's article on 'The Genre of *The Wanderer*', *Neophilologus*, 45 (1961), 63-75; and most recently Retha Knoetze, 'Social Flux in the *Knight's Tale*: Chaucer's Fourteenth-Century Reworking of a Romance', *English Academy Review*, 34.1 (2017), 85-98; most readings of *The Knight's Tale* have tended to argue that Theseus is an avatar for the Lady of Philosophy.

³⁷ For more on consolation in Chaucer, see Ian Bishop, 'Chaucer and the Rhetoric of Consolation', *Medium Ævum*, 52.1 (1983), 38-50.

a more 'stable' internal 'ordre' in the wake of the Theban war (I. 3003-4), in part to remedy the injustices he perceives in the higher Providential scheme under the dominion of 'Fortune' (I. 925). For Theseus 'ordre' seems to mean the ability to civilise, regulate, and determine the lives of his subjects, and the endpoints arise from his interventions in the narrative action as he tries to supply definitive solutions to the domestic issues upsetting the balance of things in his realm, chief among them the troublesome Theban knights Palamon and Arcite.

Chaucer is careful to emphasise the importance of Theseus in the 'prologue' to his tale. The poet takes the epitaph from Statius's *Thebaid*, 'Iamque domos patrias, Scithice post aspera gentis Prelia, laurigero', inviting the reading recently offered by Jill Mann that his poem is an epilogue to that work.³⁸ Yet Statius only summarises Theseus's conquest at the end of his twelfth book. It is Boccaccio who narrates Theseus's war against the Amazons in full, almost twelve hundred years after the Roman poet; his homecoming in Chaucer's tale is thus more of an epilogue to Book I of Boccaccio's *Teseida*.³⁹ Chaucer's excision of the beginning of that story draws attention to the arbitrariness of beginnings in general, and the indefinite nature of the beginning Chaucer does provide anticipates an instability in the ending.⁴⁰ The remainder of the tale roughly follows the narrative arc of Boccaccio's text, though Chaucer compresses his 10,000-line source into 2,000. It is all the more significant, then, that it begins with a last glimpse of Theseus's glorious journey: 'if abridgment was Chaucer's principal aim, he need not have begun with Theseus's homecoming and the

³⁸ The modern translation reads: 'And now Theseus, [drawing near] his native land in a chariot covered with laurels, after fierce battle with the Scythians [heralded by applause and trumpet celebrating the end of the war': see Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor, 2nd edn (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012), p. 63, n. 1, all references are to this edition; see Mann, p. 86.

³⁹ Both Cooper, p. 95 and Muscatine, p. 183 comment that this part of Chaucer's tale functions as a 'prologue' to the main tale of Palamon and Arcite.

⁴⁰ It is, as Kermode puts it, 'lost in the dark backward and abysm of time': see Kermode, p. 30.

unexpected intervention of the widow ladies: he could simply have begun with Palamon and Arcite'.⁴¹

For Mann, beginning with a summary of Theseus's previous exploits demonstrates his 'pity' for the destitute of society, in this case the widows of Thebes, and complicates the question of where the story could be said to begin.⁴² David Aers argues that this opening highlights Theseus' 'machismo', and 'displays the foundation of honour and aristocratic life so celebrated in the conventional romance literature'.⁴³ J. Stephen Russell, on the other hand, suggests Chaucer skips to the end of his expedition because the 'battle with the Amazons is unseemly, disgraceful and unchivalric'.⁴⁴ It is true that Boccaccio's Teseo conquers Femenye by digging under the walls, subterfuge unworthy of a knight.⁴⁵ This is the type of detail that Chaucer might want to suppress if the aim was to present Theseus as an ideal romance hero, and thus its omission here makes sense. In line with this, Walter Wadiak points out that the tale quickly announces its intention to avoid Theseus's heroics in war: 'but al that thing I moot as now forbere' (I. 885).⁴⁶ Indeed, his defeat of the Minotaur, expedition to Scythia, and marriage to Hippolyta have already happened, and by the opening lines of Chaucer's poem he has ticked off all the greatest accolades available to men: he is a noble 'duc', 'lord and governour', and 'swich a conquerour/That gretter was ther noon under the sonne' (I. 860-3). Yet the telescoping of Theseus's history does not make him some perfect romance knight; it does, however, allow Chaucer to introduce a loftier, more exalted, and contemporaneously

⁴¹ Mann, p. 87.

⁴² Ibid., p. 88.

⁴³ David Aers, *Chaucer*, Harvester New Readings (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 25.

⁴⁴ J. Stephen Russell, *Chaucer and the Trivium: The Mindsong of the Canterbury Tales* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), pp. 115-16.

⁴⁵ As Queen Hippolyta of Femenye herself observes in her letter to Theseus during the siege, 'You have not behaved as a knight who takes up a just war against an equal [...] fighting in dark places is neither the craft nor the art of a good warrior': all references are to Giovanni Boccaccio, *Book of Theseus: Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia*, trans. by Bernadette Marie McCoy (New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974), p. 40, I. 104-6.

⁴⁶ Walter Wadiak, 'Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the Politics of Distinction', *Philological Quarterly*, 89 (2010), 159-84 (p. 164).

resonant character under the name of Theseus, who has shades of the English monarch credited with the rise of majesty in the 1390s: Richard II.⁴⁷

The superlative narrative fulfilment of lines 860-3 might ordinarily result in the end of that character's story, especially in romance. Indeed, Russell feels Theseus 'all but disappears as a character in the Knight's Tale, reduced by Chaucer [...] to a fairly bloodless minor character, a quasi-parental functioning arbiter and dispenser of marriageable females'.⁴⁸ It is true that Theseus is distanced from the narrative action, but not in the way Russell suggests: Chaucer promotes an idea of Theseus as omnipotent or, at least, hierarchically superior, by keeping him at a distance from the other characters. The new distant figure of Theseus begins to emerge after his homecoming festivities are interrupted by the 'wo' and 'distresse' of the Theban widows (I. 919 ff.), who are prevented from burying their fallen husbands by Creon. New to Chaucer is the ranking lady's emphasis on the role of 'Fortune' in their downfall and Theseus' ascendance, and her implicit warning that, by her own example, all could be stripped from him by a turn of that same 'false wheel' (I. 915-50).⁴⁹ After responding to their cries with irritation, and then pity, Theseus comforts the ladies 'whilom weren of so greet estaat' by avenging the disgrace done to their husbands (I. 956 ff.). Most critics, like Mann and Cooper, reasonably view this interaction as a demonstration of Theseus' 'pitee',

⁴⁷ See Saul, 'Majesty, Dominion and Might', in *Richard II*, pp. 366-404; also Nigel Saul, 'Richard II and the Vocabulary of Kingship', *The English Historical Review*, 110 (1995), 854-77; it is worth noting, however, that Christopher Fletcher has cast doubt on Saul's argument that Richard was responsible for putting this usage of the word 'majesty' as referring to the theocratic character of the king's rule: 'if Richard remained restricted in a number of important ways into the early 1390s, then it seems worth reconsidering whether he would have been able to exercise the control over political discourse on which Saul's argument relies': see Christopher Fletcher, *Richard II: Manhood, Youth and Politics, 1377-99* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 204; nevertheless, this does not change the growing prevalence of 'majesty' in court documents during this period, and the subsequent cultural association between Richard and the concept of majesty, no matter who was actually responsible for putting it into practice; see also Phillips, who suggests a possible connection between Theseus and Richard in passing, pp. 48-9.

⁴⁸ Russell, pp. 100-101.

⁴⁹ Boccaccio does not put so much emphasis on Fortune's wheel during this encounter, see *Teseida*, pp. 57-60, II. 25-39; for a recent account of how Chaucer modifies Boccaccio's Teseo, see Gerald Morgan, 'Chaucer's Knight's Tale: The Book of the Duke', in *Chaucer in Context: A Golden Age of English Poetry*, ed. by Gerald Morgan (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 153-88.

‘gentillesse’, justice and mercy (I. 920).⁵⁰ Yet this opening scene marks a more significant transition for Theseus, not only from hubris to pathos but, in view of the burden of governance he assumes from this point onwards, from conquering war hero to domestic peacemaker.

Indeed, Theseus does not simply rectify the injustice done to the ‘wrecched wommen’ (I. 921). Their appeal sets in motion a more conscientious system of governance, which sees the duke resolve disputes in person, whilst maintaining the distance that separates him from his subjects. This seems to happen because the ‘wrecched’ queen frames their misfortune as symptomatic of a greater instability ‘That noon estaat assureth to be weel’: Fortune’s wheel (I. 926). It is the whims of Fortune that are at the root of the civil disorder, and which move Theseus to harness the power and authority ‘yeven’ to him to bring better peace and justice to the realm. For A. C. Spearing, this vision of life as a ‘matter of violent contrasts and changes’ conceptualised in terms of the ‘non-moral’ force of Fortune makes the poem ‘philosophical in an explicit way’.⁵¹ Yet the challenges faced by Theseus in his efforts to remedy social disorder reflect the real situation faced by Richard II in the late 1380s. The years between 1384 and 1390, during which *The Knight’s Tale* was most likely composed and revised, were a time of great turmoil for Richard and his court.⁵² Mismanagement of royal revenues and unpopular favouritism led to the Appellant lords’ takeover of 1387, from whom Richard

⁵⁰ Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, Chaucer Studies 30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 134-7; Mann, ‘Beginning with the Ending’, pp. 87-8; Cooper, p. 103.

⁵¹ A. C. Spearing, ‘Introduction’, *The Knight’s Tale, from the Canterbury Tales*, ed. by A. C. Spearing (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 52.

⁵² Chaucerians generally accept J. S. P. Tatlock’s dating of 1384-6 because of a reference to the story of ‘Palamon and Arcite’ in the prologue to *Legend of Good Women*. It is clear *The Knight’s Tale* existed in some form prior to 1386, and Tatlock suggests that it was put into its present form between 1388-90: J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Development and Chronology of Chaucer’s Works* (Chaucer Society, London, 1907), p. 66; however, Johnstone Parr makes a convincing argument for dating the revisions of the tale no earlier than 1390 on the basis of allusions to the tournament held by Richard in 1390 in the fictional tournament: see Johnstone Parr, ‘The Date and Revision of Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*’, *PMLA*, 60.2 (1945), 307-24.

recovered a precarious share of power in 1388.⁵³ Nigel Saul emphasises the new magnanimous character Richard assumed at this time: he became more stable, heedful, and more focused on healing internal political division.⁵⁴ At the same time, his public behaviour was characterised by a tendency to ‘self-assertion and self-dramatization’, which Saul suggests may have been a show of unity in the wake of the Appellant coup and the uneasy settlement that followed.⁵⁵ Like Richard, Theseus puts himself at the centre of every public ritual (the procession, the tournament, and later, the funeral and marriage) ostensibly with the aim of cultivating domestic harmony.

Yet Theseus also has shades of the later Richard of the 1390s, who deliberately drew attention to the sacred distance separating him from lesser mortals to ensure he would never again lose control of his royal prerogative.⁵⁶ This is especially apparent in the depiction of Richard from the later years of his reign; the ‘coronation’ portrait in Westminster Abbey, for instance, shows Richard undergoing ‘a virtual apotheosis’.⁵⁷ In the 1390s, ‘majesty’ came to refer to the theocratic character of the king’s rule, not only in the sense of ‘the divine right of kings’, but the idea that the monarch reflected the qualities and capacities of a supra-mortal, God-like being.⁵⁸ Majesty, though not mentioned explicitly in *The Knight’s Tale*, nonetheless resonates with the presentation of Theseus and rationalises his ‘distance’ from the narrative action.⁵⁹ When Theseus marches to Thebes to lay the foundation for his internal unity, he uses heraldic emblems to reflect the power of the gods:

⁵³ See Saul, *Richard II*, pp. 176-204.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁵⁵ Saul, ‘Richard II and the Vocabulary of Kingship’, p. 861.

⁵⁶ Saul, *Richard II*, pp. 384 ff.; but see also Fletcher, p. 204.

⁵⁷ Saul, *Richard II*, p. 385.

⁵⁸ Though the specific concept of the ‘divine right of kings’ was not developed until the reign of James I: see W. H. Greenleaf, ‘James I and the Divine Right of Kings’, *Political Studies*, 5.1 (1957), 36-48; Alan Orr, “‘God’s Hangman’: James VI, the divine right of kings, and the Devil”, *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, 18.2 (2016), 137-54; also Saul, ‘Vocabulary of Kingship’, p. 862.

⁵⁹ Notably, Coghill translates ‘Whan set was Theseus ful riche and hye’ as ‘When Theseus took his seat in majesty’: see Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Knight’s Tale’, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. by Nevill Coghill, ed. by E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), p. 94.

The rede statue of Mars with spere and targe
 So shyneth in his white baner large
 That alle the feeldes glyteren up and doun [...]
 Thus rit this duc. Thus rit this conqueror. (I. 975-81)

By co-opting this image of the mighty god of war, Theseus wraps himself in the ‘mystique’ of majesty, which not only stresses the divine origin of his sovereignty, but gives him an aura of invulnerability.⁶⁰ This pomp and ceremony is repeated at the tournament, during which the duke arrays himself ‘right as he were a god in trone’ (I. 2529), a comparison that implies his self-presentation is more suited to a divine being than any earthly ruler. If Chaucer, who was notably close to Richard II during this period, did not revise *The Knight’s Tale* in the early 1390s, then the portrayal of Theseus in this manner is remarkably prescient.⁶¹ Just as Richard’s desire to stress the divine origin of his kingship had historical consequences, leading to his eventual overthrow in the later 1390s, the lofty persona Theseus fashions for himself has several consequences for the shape of the narrative.

When Theseus arrives in Thebes, he begins to enforce his programme of reform and order ‘as hym leste’ (I. 1004). The Theseus of Statius and Boccaccio restores justice, piety, and harmony to Thebes, but does so without sacking the city. Chaucer’s Theseus not only conquers Thebes but razes it to the ground, even after Creon is killed and the people have fled (I. 1005-8). It is this sort of detail that leads David Aers to emphasise Theseus’ ‘tirannye’ and critique the ‘upper-class aggression’ that seems to form the basis of his government; this, he argues, is an implicit condemnation of the ideological dimensions of romance, which gives

⁶⁰ Marc Guidry writes that the vocabulary of kingship elevates the status of the ruler by wrapping him in ‘mystique’: see Marc S. Guidry, ‘The Parliament of Gods and Men in the *Knight’s Tale*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 43.2 (2008), 140-70 (p. 151).

⁶¹ Chaucer was Clerk of the King’s Works and oversaw the labour for the king’s tournament in 1390: see Parr, pp. 318-19; for a list of Chaucer’s other responsibilities, see G. G. Coulton, *Chaucer and His England* (London: Methuen & co. 1908), p. 61; Masatoshi Kawasaki indeed suggests that Chaucer adopted strategies of indirection and displacement to comment on Richard’s political power: Masatoshi Kawasaki, “‘My Wyl is This’: Chaucer’s Sense of Power in “The Knight’s Tale” and “The Clerk’s Tale””, in *From Beowulf to Caxton: Studies in Medieval Languages and Literature, Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. by Tomonori Matsushita, A. V. C. Schmidt and David Wallace (Bern: Lang, 2011), pp. 99-110.

rise to ‘shameful’ violence.⁶² However, the beginning of *The Knight’s Tale*, in a literal way, marks the death of one structure, as well as the end of Theseus’ ‘imperialist’ campaign of ‘military domination’, and the emergence of another under a less aggressive, more civil Theseus as he seeks to stabilise the machinations of Fortune and bring peace (which for Richard meant the ‘absence of internal political division’) to the realm.⁶³ Unlike Richard, however, Chaucer’s contemporaries would not have seen Theseus as a tyrant. The resolutions Theseus devises for the problem of Palamon and Arcite show that he has ‘heigh entente’; he acts out of a desire for justice and stability, and only appears when he is required to break an impasse between them. Theseus does ‘disappear’ from the narrative, then, but only in as much as he adopts majestic distance, as he attempts to construct a more stable order out of the chaos at Thebes. Indeed, where Richard’s rule descended into tyranny in the late 1390s, Theseus is the model of nobility throughout *The Knight’s Tale*. Nevertheless, his desire to control the narrative and achieve stability has implications for both the operation of closure in the text and the ending itself.

4.4 The ‘ende’ and ‘conclusioun’ of *aventure*

After the sacking of Thebes, the narrative gaze falls upon two knights lying side by side in the pile of bodies: the royal cousins Palamon and Arcite, not ‘fully dede’ (I. 1015). It is when Providence seems to have determined the manner of their deaths that Theseus steps in to alter the nature of their ‘end’. Indeed, having shaped the end-of-life arrangements for the Grecian husbands, Theseus turns his attention to Palamon and Arcite, who threaten to disrupt the delicate balance of peace repeatedly. From this point onwards, the poem follows the two

⁶² Aers, pp. 25-9.

⁶³ Saul, *Richard II*, p. 387; indeed, conversely Davenport thinks that ‘the secular order of chivalry is sympathetically presented in terms of excitement, pleasure, action, display, colour and honourable occasion’ (p. 121).

hapless Thebans, but Theseus keeps stumbling across, and terminating, their adventures. In fact, Theseus develops an omnipresent quality, appearing each time the antagonists reach an impasse to supply a new conflict resolution. These moments of resolution read like endings, and tend to be embellished with different closural allusions, words that signify termination or stability.⁶⁴ Some of the closural moments are reflected in the physical spaces of the narrative world, such as the prison and the lists, while others coincide with events associated with finality, repose or termination, such as Arcite's banishment.⁶⁵ The result is a series of interim endings over the course of the narrative which, Mann writes, echo the beginning-as-ending, creating an overall sense of open-endedness and a multiplicity of ends not unlike the illusory ends observed across Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*.⁶⁶

Sachi Shimomura describes these moments of closure in *The Knight's Tale* as a series of 'static circumstances', which accentuate the impossibility of a steady movement towards the ending.⁶⁷ While this is certainly true in terms of pace, the moments of 'stasis' are not devoid of meaning, or thematic significance: they are in fact a sequence of pressure points that dramatize the interplay between the desire for narrative continuation and its end. In parts one and two especially, these pressure points become sites of tension between the stationary characters and those who seem able to 'rome' free (I. 1065). This is analogous to the tension between the forward motion of narrative time and the desire to fix it manifest in the process of ending a story. Paul Strohm and Lee Patterson recognise that the narrative structure, interspersed with lament, description, *occupatio* and *recusatio*, reflects this tension between

⁶⁴ For more on 'closural allusions', see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 172-81.

⁶⁵ See Smith on the events that are associated with finality, repose or termination in 'our non-literary experiences': *ibid.*, pp. 121-2.

⁶⁶ Mann, 'Beginning with the Ending', p. 89.

⁶⁷ Sachi Shimomura, 'The Walking Dead in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 48.1 (2013), 1-37 (pp. 2, 13).

stasis and forward movement, but do not mention the characters' relative states of motion as also revealing this textual dynamic.⁶⁸

Even though Theseus's resolutions repeatedly enforce a sense of closure, they do not prove to be final. In every instance, the narrative is set in motion again by *aventure*, love, and the related impulses of the heroic characters, who continue regardless of the closure imposed upon their stories in the preceding lines. Naturally all these conflicting forces of stasis and movement, *aventure* and resolution operate under the supervision of the poet, who adds his own moments of 'stoppage time' to the text via *occupatio*, which pause the linear narrative and highlight the threads of the story that have been 'disnarrated', not pursued.⁶⁹ Mann is interested in the possibility that the tale might end at different points and could also take an alternative direction leading to an alternative end, but does not fully explore the significance of all this beyond the sense of arbitrariness.⁷⁰ While these 'dead ends' are superficially designed to speed the movement towards the 'point' of Chaucer's tale, they too contribute to the open-endedness of the different adventures and the sense that the meaning of the story is ultimately unstable. The next part of the chapter will analyse the 'side-shadowing' of other narrative possibilities in parts one and two of *The Knight's Tale* alongside the pressure points of closure and continuation, which are seemingly determined by the power struggle between

⁶⁸ For Strohm on the 'slow and erratic succession of episodes', see Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 131; and for the effect of repetition and *occupatio* on the narration, see Patterson, p. 209-12; as Shimomura points out, critics have variously noted that the structure and pace of the narrative, reflect a tension between stasis and forward movement: see Shimomura, p. 13; however, there are no similar comparisons between this tension and the activities of the characters; Margaret Rogerson has more recently offered a new perspective on the tale as signalling transitions and 'scene changes': Margaret Rogerson, 'Reading Chaucer "in Parts": "The Knight's Tale" and "The Two Noble Kinsmen"', in *Storytelling: Creative and Critical Approaches*, ed. by Jan Shaw, Philippa Kelly and L. E. Semler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 167-80; Christopher Dean also speaks of the tale in terms of its 'iterative' patterns: see Christopher Dean, 'Imagery in the "Knight's Tale" and the "Miller's Tale"', *Mediaeval Studies*, 31 (1969), 149-63.

⁶⁹ For more on this concept of the 'disnarrated', that is, 'unrealised narrative hypotheses', see Gerald Prince, 'The Disnarrated', *Style*, 22 (1988), 1-8; also, Mann, p. 91.

⁷⁰ Mann, p. 92.

Theseus (unwittingly on his side) and Providence: the prison-garden episode, and the banishment-combat sequence.⁷¹

4.4.1 The Prison-Garden

The first ‘end’ that Theseus envisions for the knights is in the narrative space of the prison overlooking Emelye’s garden.⁷² When Palamon and Arcite are pulled from the battlefield they are saved from certain death, though not by their own volition (I. 1020-1). Just as they emerge into the narrative, however, the knights experience another form of death, the end of their participation in the action:

And ful soone he hem sente
To Atthenes to dwellen in prisoun
Perpetuelly. He nolde no raunsoun
And whan this worthy duc hath thus ydon,
He took his hoost and hoom he rood anon
With laurer crowned as a conqueror.
And ther he lyveth in joye and in honour
Terme of [his] lyve. What nedeth wordes mo?
And in the tour in angwissh and in wo
This Palamon and his felawe Arcite
For everemoore ther may no gold hem quite. (I. 1022-32)

There are several ways in which this passage is configured as an ending. Firstly, there is a cluster of closural allusions, words that thematically announce the approach of the end.⁷³

While such words and phrases, like ‘finished’ and ‘no more’, cannot in themselves bring about the conclusion of a poem, they nevertheless signify termination and stability.⁷⁴ It is possible that Chaucer selected words like ‘Perpetuelly’ and ‘everemoore’, as well as the

⁷¹ For more on ‘sideshadowing’, that is, unactualized narrative possibilities, see Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 117-72; also, Mann, p. 91.

⁷² As Phillips writes, ‘the thematic symbolism of this text is often spatial: the prison, garden, opposed cities, triple temples and the amphitheatre all illustrate the parallels and contradictions in human experience which the whole narrative explores’: Phillips, p. 49; also Kolve, pp. 85-157.

⁷³ These might include ‘finished’ ‘last’, ‘end’, ‘rest’, ‘peace’ or ‘no more’: see Smith, pp. 176-7.

⁷⁴ These sorts of words and phrases are clearly important in, if not determined by, the poem’s thematic structure. The allusions can be viewed as an option, selected from other possibilities precisely for its closural effect. Smith, p. 172-7.

phrase ‘And ther lyveth in joye and honour/Terme of lyve’, to give Palamon and Arcite’s incarceration in Theseus’s prison cell greater closural force. Indeed, where the *Teseida* notes that the knights have languished ‘presso che anno’, *The Knight’s Tale* emphasises eternal imprisonment.⁷⁵ The sense of cessation is secured by the caesura in line 1024, which gives a special weight to the allusion that precedes it. In the manner of an epilogue, the knights’ thoughts and feelings are subjugated to the recapitulation of events, and rhetorical assurance there is nothing more to add.

But this is not the end of the tale. Theseus leaves the scene in an insouciant manner, assured that imprisonment has resolved the problem of two hostile knights of ‘blood roial’ roaming freely about his territory.⁷⁶ In insisting on their inaction, Theseus deprives them the opportunity to construct a heroic identity for themselves: riding out on adventures is exactly what knights in romance, and classical heroes, must do to be worthy of narrative.⁷⁷ However, in Chaucer’s romance, *aventure* comes to Palamon and Arcite even when they are immobile. One ‘morwe of May’, just as their story seems certain to peter out, Theseus’s sister-in-law, Emelye materialises before Palamon’s eyes in the garden below their tower like an ‘aungel hevenysshly’, and provides them with a quest object (I. 1055). It is precisely because of their stasis that both knights are so enchanted by Emelye. It is true she is beautiful in the way of the usual romance heroine, her allure expressed through formulaic images of ‘floures newe’ (I. 1035-9), and Aers argues that such a representation emphasises Emelye’s passivity, since ‘Flowers are passive, do not subjectivity, do not answer back or run away’. Yet V. A. Kolve

⁷⁵ The modern translation reads, ‘for a less than a year’: Boccaccio, *Teseida*, p. 78, III. 4.

⁷⁶ This contrasts starkly with Boccaccio’s Teseo, who keeps the cousins under minimum security in his palace where they are seemingly served at their pleasure, see *Teseida*, p. 72, II. 99.

⁷⁷ Wadiak writes, for instance, that adventure is at the core of knightly romance and allows the heroes to ‘construct their own identities’: Wadiak, p. 162; as E. D. Blodgett remarks, ‘the knight does *not* go forth’: E. D. Blodgett, ‘Chaucerian *Pryvetee* and the Opposition to Time’, *Speculum*, 51 (1976), 477-93 (p. 486); for more on how the space of the city in *The Knight’s Tale* contributes to the identity of the protagonists, see Jean E. Jost, ‘Urban and Liminal Space in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*: Perilous or Protective?’, in *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 373-94.

argues conversely that the knights really fall in love with the ‘beauty of her freedom’, and cites as evidence the repeated use of the verb ‘to roam’ through this section, which does not appear in Boccaccio (I. 1065-119).⁷⁸

The emphasis on her ‘romynge’ as the desirable quality in the subsequent dialogue between the two knights dramatizes the wretchedness of their inertia, but also injects a new sense of thematic motion into the text, as if each utterance of that word is building towards some sort of sea-change. Although Helen Cooper argues that neither Palamon or Arcite are able ‘to measure their own state’, they remind each other repeatedly of Fortune’s role in curtailing their movements and thus demonstrate an understanding of the conditions that have led to their arrest and captivity (I. 1086 ff.).⁷⁹ Having been resigned to their bleak lot, the knights slowly begin to grasp their free will within this design, and so powerlessness assumes power through the romance pursuit of the lady (l. 1091). At this point, the prison resolution begins to look unsteady and readers might sense that, quite ‘by aventure or cas’, there is potential for the knights to ride out after all (I. 1076). Despite this, the knights have fallen in love with an illusion: Emelye herself is confined to a narrative space of Theseus’s making. Marched away from her home in Femenye and dressed up as a courtly damsel, the fierce Amazonian warrior of Boccaccio must now pick flowers for garlands, her actions and even her words dictated by Theseus (as at I. 1833). She is only ‘romynge’, then, in the same way Palamon is ‘romynge’ the room of the tower (I. 1065), and the garden is only a more comely prison cell.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Aers, p. 77; Kolve, pp. 90-1.

⁷⁹ Cooper, p. 101.

⁸⁰ See Kolve, who observes that ‘Chaucer insists on the architectural contiguity of the garden and the prison cell’: Kolve, p. 86; a more recent perspective on architectural constructions of *The Knight’s Tale* has been offered by Dong Choon Lee, who argues that its walls are ‘double-sided’ because they both invite and discourage connection between inside and outside space: Dong Choon Lee, ‘Double-Sidedness of Architecture and Space in Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale” and “Troilus and Criseyde”’, *Medieval and Early Modern English Studies*, 25.1 (2017), 49-66.

Nevertheless, Palamon and Arcite's perception of Emelye's freedom is enough to stir in them a desire for narrative movement, as they strive to emulate the condition of their loved one. The realisation they have shared this 'aventure of love' gradually builds an adversarial tension between them, which necessarily requires narrative continuation to find resolution. Shimomura perceptively indicates that Emelye's 'May-time persona' breathes fresh life into the narrative; however, she further argues that the stasis in which Palamon and Arcite are held is that imposed upon them by love, not in their imprisonment by Theseus.⁸¹ But as Derek Pearsall writes, love is the 'fuel that drives the machine of the plot', and not what perpetuates the stasis of the heroic characters.⁸² Despite the temporary closural force of the imprisonment, the narrative 'restarts' in line with the new physical energy exhibited by the cousins ('up sterte'; I. 1080). Thus, the closural allusions used by Chaucer at this stage of the narrative are, like Emelye's freedom, illusions, or misdirection. Though the presence of closural signals that do not lead to ending may confuse and disorient readers, as McGerr concludes, 'we must not accept these apparent signs of narrative resolution as true closure [...] we are encouraged to look for the larger picture, the true end, and to defer judgment'.⁸³ Indeed, Chaucer brings the narrative into a closural mode twice more in this early part of *The Knight's Tale*, first with Arcite's banishment, and later when Theseus interrupts the combat.

4.4.2 The Banishment and the Combat

The conflict between Palamon and Arcite as to who loves Emelye best ends in an impasse (I. 1187-9). However, it is not long before the fortuitous arrival of Perotheus reopens the interval in the narrative. In classical myth, Theseus accompanied Pirithous to the Underworld to help rescue Proserpina, and the *Roman de la Rose* suggests Theseus followed Pirithous to 'Helle'

⁸¹ Shimomura, pp. 5-16.

⁸² Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 132.

⁸³ McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*, p. 152-3.

to save his life: 'But of that storie, list me nat to write' (I. 1201). This *occupatio* does help to make sense of Theseus's decision to grant his friend's request that Arcite be set free, on the condition that the knight never return to any country ruled by him: 'And he were caught, it was acorded thus:/That with a swerd he sholde lese his heed' (I. 1207-15). Though this turn of events has the potential for narrative momentum, at this point, it does not matter because Arcite interprets his banishment as stasis, an outcome worse than the prison:

Now is my prisoun worse than biforn!
 Now is me shape eternally to dwelle
 Nat in my Purgatorie but in Helle. (I. 1224-6)

Without sight of or proximity to his lady Emelye, he is a knight without a quest and his story is as good as 'deed' (I. 1274). The exile is itself an example of what Smith calls a 'terminal event', an event which is in our non-literary experience associated with finality or repose.⁸⁴ As he laments his unhappy fate, Arcite invokes the closural allusion 'eternally' and equates his exile with the everlasting torment of hell. As in the prison scene, these closural signals mimic a denouement. The sense of an ending is reinforced by Palamon's reflection on the simultaneous reiteration of his stasis: he too invokes closural allusions in his complaint against the 'eterne' decree of the cruel gods (I. 1294-1306). Both speeches are based partly on the arguments of the prisoner in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, who attempts to resolve the problem of determinism from a Neoplatonic standpoint. This might confirm, by association, that both knights remain confined to their own special prison (see I. 1223-74, 1281-3).⁸⁵

The sense of an ending is reinforced by the *demande d'amour* supplied at the close of this section. Having summarised the relative states of immobility endured by Palamon and Arcite with a flourish of closural allusions ('Perpetuelly', 'Forever mo', 'nevere mo', I. 1342-

⁸⁴ Smith, p. 172.

⁸⁵ See also Bishop, p. 45.

6), Chaucer turns to his readers for their verdict: ‘Yow lovers, axe I now this questioun:/Who hath the worse, Arcite and Palamoun?’ (I. 1347-8). In the medieval *demande* genre, questions are used to resolve debate as to ‘which lover, or which kind of love, a person should prefer’ if faced with suitors who are ‘different but equal in appeal’.⁸⁶ The question focuses attention on the main intrigue of the narrative, and is often situated at the end, as in *The Franklin’s Tale*.⁸⁷ The debate text typically introduces a figure of authority to pass judgement, but in some cases the story ends before a decision has been made, and with the implicit expectation that the reader will impose their own closure.⁸⁸ In fact, whether an answer is provided or not, the debate question constructs closure as something decided extra-textually because it is directed to persons beyond the text. This convention of resolution is therefore double-edged: it introduces the idea of ending into the mind of the reader whilst also surrendering control of that closure. McGerr also points to a number of cases where the resolution of the *demande* is not construed as ‘unique or final’ but is revised in variant versions of the text.⁸⁹ More than simply deferring resolution, then, the *demande* makes final closure impossible because the conclusion drawn depends on each individual experience of the story. It is for this reason, McGerr argues, that the *demande* genre prompts us to think of literary creation as a process of ongoing revision, and encourages us to treat conclusion as provisional.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ D. S. Brewer, ‘Introduction’, *The Parlement of Foulyls*, ed. by D. S. Brewer, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), pp. 11-12; also Jack B. Oruch, ‘Nature’s Limitations and the “Demande d’Amour” of Chaucer’s *Parlement*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 18.1 (1983), 23-37; Peter Elbow argues that *The Knight’s Tale* can be interpreted as an elaborate *demande* which calls into question the elements of the form: Peter Elbow, *Oppositions in Chaucer* (Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 73-94.

⁸⁷ The closing *demande d’amour* in *The Franklin’s Tale* reads: ‘Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?’, see ‘The Franklin’s Tale’, in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Boenig and Taylor, p. 258, V. 1622; Chaucer also inserts a *demande d’amour* at the end of Book II in *Troilus and Criseyde*: see Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 149, II. 1757.

⁸⁸ Boccaccio’s *Il Filocolo*, the probable source for *The Franklin’s Tale*, has thirteen ‘questions of love’ and the text ends with the decision of an authority figure: see Brewer, p. 11; and McGerr, who has also found evidence of inconclusiveness across the genre of the *demande d’amour*: see McGerr, p. 32 ff.

⁸⁹ McGerr, p. 33.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

The general preoccupation with ending across *The Knight's Tale*, and especially the expressed desire to get to the 'point' of the tale, might suggest this *demande* is designed to embed a resolution into the text at the end of the first part, and to control the direction of interpretation. In truth, however, its very existence automatically makes the narrative open-ended. Moreover, Chaucer does not provide an answer to the problem inside the text, and he precludes its resolution outside the text through the 'equalisation' of Palamon and Arcite, which makes the question an interpretive impasse. Chaucer's *demande*, then, reminds us that closure is always provisional. In line with this, Arcite's banishment does not prove to be final. The tension between the two heroes in this sequence gradually builds into momentum, which sends the narrative off in new directions, rather than moving towards resolution. Even before the *demande d'amour*, Palamon and Arcite, now remote from one another, imagine the other free to continue their 'aventure', convinced that their opposite has it 'better' than they themselves do (I. 1235-37, 1289-90). However, as with their perception of Emelye's movement, the freedom they sense on 'the oother syde' is an illusion (I. 1275). They remain equals in their narrative impotence and frame of reference: they each express their frustration with reference to domesticated animals, specifically mice and sheep (I. 1261, 1308). But this does not mean they are resigned to inaction. As in the prison-garden episode, their mistaken belief that other characters enjoy greater freedom of movement provokes 'the fyr of jalousie' (I. 1299), which eventually translates into narrative continuation.

The narrative follows the lovesick knights in alternating threads, which eventually collide, reaching a climactic impasse that Theseus must resolve. In the guise of a servant, Arcite insinuates himself into Theseus's retinue in Athens to be close to Emelye, while Palamon is almost written out of the narrative, left in prison for 'seven year', an interminable

length of time in romance (I. 1460).⁹¹ But ‘by aventure or destyne’, Palamon escapes (I. 1461-75). It is this ‘chance’ event that brings the narrative interlace into a single timeline, and the roaming heroes cross paths again in a grove, where they agree to settle their dispute in ‘bataille’ (I. 1515-606).⁹² The combat that follows is a culmination of the renewed narrative antagonism that began after Arcite’s exile. Like animals finally released from a ‘cage’, Palamon fights like a ‘wood leoun’, and Arcite like a ‘cruel tigre’, both frothing at the mouth ‘As wilde bores’ (I. 1294-659). This passionate, unbridled release of the tension that has built gradually over the second part of the tale, and the reorientation of earlier animal references, reflects the escalation of both the stakes and pace of the narrative. There is a sense, in view of the comment at line 1661 (‘in this wise I lete hem fightyng dwelle’), that this narrative action might continue indefinitely.

But by the machinations of ‘destinee, ministre general’, the skirmish ends abruptly at the close of the second part (I. 1663). Theseus discovers them whilst out with his hunting party, and once again devises a resolution for the narrative conflict. At first, he condemns both Palamon and Arcite to death for disturbing his peaceful order. However, after the Athenian ladies beg for leniency, Theseus takes pity on the cousins and, after delivering an empathetic speech on ‘loves peyne’, resolves to have them compete in the ‘lystes’, in a tourney with one hundred knights apiece: ‘Lo heere youre ende of that I shal devyse’ (I. 1742-1869). There are several ways in which this resolution once more evokes the sense of an ending, if only temporarily. The ladies’ appeal to Theseus plays out in much the same way as the pleas made by the Grecian women in the opening sequence, and so this resolution recalls the beginning-as-ending. The vivid image of the ladies, who ‘falle’ down on their

⁹¹ As Auerbach reminds us, seven is a fairy-tale number, and imparts a touch of the legendary and interminable to Palamon’s ordeal: Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 130.

⁹² Mann emphasises the shift from ‘a clear line of connection’ between events in Boccaccio to a whole narrative constructed by ‘chance’ in Chaucer: see Mann, ‘Beginning with the Ending’, p. 92.

knees as they beg for mercy, further provides what Smith calls a ‘terminal motion’, a word or event that simulates the end of something (I. 1758).⁹³ It is equally significant that, for the first time, Palamon and Arcite express ‘joy’ at the result of the arbitration, an optimism often found in the end of Middle English romances (I. 1870-3). At the level of language, there is a proliferation of closural allusions in Theseus’s ‘sentencing’ of the knights: the terms ‘conclusioun’, ‘everemo’ and ‘ende’ are repeated and can be viewed as ‘options’, chosen for their association with resolution and completion (I. 1742, 1836, 1844-5, 1865).⁹⁴

With the duplication of allusions in the final line of this pivotal speech there is a sense Theseus wants his audience to be certain of the absolute finality of his judgement (‘This is youre ende and youre conclusioun’; I. 1869). Readers may even detect an undertow of desperation behind these increasingly emphatic statements, as if he is trying to give credence to his ability to regulate the abidingly haphazard and uncertain course of events. Read in retrospect, the lines are ironic, for his ‘conclusion’ will ultimately prove insignificant. As before, these closural allusions are a structural illusion, not to be taken as legitimate signals of closure.⁹⁵ Here, as there, they instead align the ‘ends’ of the narrative with the resolutions devised by Theseus, and support the thematic illusion of his authority in all matters. When Theseus brings this narrative crisis to an end, he once again succeeds in discontinuing or, at least, deferring the stories of Palamon and Arcite. The idea of the tournament promises a more permanent solution to this narrative problem, but also presents Theseus with a new opportunity to bring order to a society still ruled by *aventure*. The next part of the chapter will explore Theseus’s attempts to give physical expression to his order and the consequences this has for the resolution of the narrative.

⁹³ For more on this concept of ‘terminal motion’, see Smith, *Poetic Closure*, p. 178.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-81.

⁹⁵ As per McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books*, p. 152.

4.5 The Rise and Fall of Theseus's Order

4.5.1 The Amphitheatre and the Temples

At the beginning of the third part of *The Knight's Tale*, the narrative works hard to create the impression that the problem of Palamon and Arcite will be resolved in the tournament. The pace slows, and Theseus's preparations for the tourney become an elaborate set piece, with the construction of the new Athenian amphitheatre taking centre stage. This section of the tale functions almost like a drum roll, building anticipation for the approaching climax. There is a long tradition in Chaucerian scholarship of identifying the structure of the lists with the architecture of the tale itself.⁹⁶ Yet this 'noble theatre' more closely resonates with Theseus's desire for resolution in the tale; it is simply a grander version of the prison-enclosure, which promises to bring the knights' story to a decisive close. In the *Teseida*, the amphitheatre pre-exists the tournament, but in Chaucer's tale its conception is the direct result of Theseus's efforts to bring order to the messiness of his world through the civilising process of a tourney.

Theseus summons the experts in geometry, arithmetic, portrait-painting, and sculpture to construct the arena, which feeds into the impression that all sectors of society are now committed to his vision of order. In fact the references to these disciplines, the planetary gods (astronomy) and later to 'pypes, trompes, nakerers, clariounes' (music), locate Theseus at the centre of a municipal *quadrivium* (I. 2511).⁹⁷ Like a poet, his mastery over the symbols and representatives of these subjects imbues his structure with a sense of harmony, learning and balance. Chaucer also reveals that the gates and oratories of the theatre stand variously on the eastward, westward and northern points or 'degrees' of its circumference, 'in manere of a compas' or a globe, which suggests the duke is creating a space in which every manoeuvre

⁹⁶ Wadiak, p. 173; Kolve comments that the building of the amphitheatre within the fiction of *The Knight's Tale* parallels Chaucer's 'own enterprise in the creation of the poem': see Kolve, p. 135.

⁹⁷ Medieval scholars were expected to be learned in the four subjects of the *quadrivium* (after mastering the *trivium*), which were geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music (or harmony): see *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 307-59.

and outcome, each cause and effect, can be mapped and made knowable (I. 1887-94). This is the place, the poet seems to be suggesting, where everything will be resolved and harmony will be restored.

More than this, the aesthetic experience of the new Acropolis taking shape under Theseus promotes the stability of his earthly order in relation to divine justice. Within the amphitheatre Theseus erects three temples in ‘worshipe’ and ‘memorie’ of Venus, Mars, and Diana:

First, in the temple of Venus maystow se
Wroght on the wal ful pitous to biholde
The broken slespes and the sikes colde,
The sacred teeris and the waymentyng [...] *...*
That loves servantz in this lyf enduren [...]

Withinne the grete temple of myghty Mars the rede? [...] *...*
Al ful of chirkyng was that sorry place [...] *...*
The careyne in the busk with throte ycorve,
A thousand slayn and nat oon of qualm ystorve,
The tiraunt with the pray by force yraft,
The toun destroyed: ther was nothyng laft.

Now to the temple of Dyane the chaste [...] *...*
Ther saugh I how woful Calistopee,
Whan that Diane agreved was with here,
Was turned from a woman til a bere [...] *...*
Ther saugh I Attheon an hert ymaked
For vengeance that he saugh Diane naked. (I. 1918-2068)

Far from depicting divine rewards for ethical behaviour in the way of a classical exemplum, these murals illustrate the pernicious influence of the deities and the interminable torment of their devotees, who suffer excessive punishments for minor slights. This depiction of divine retribution might at first seem inimical to Theseus’s vision of stability, and does seem out of place in a romance. Cooper points out courtly romance would ordinarily ‘prescribe idealised gods, an enchantingly beautiful Venus and Mars in glittering armour’.⁹⁸ These temples, by contrast, focus exclusively on the horrors of divine justice, and show the gods in a positively menacing light. The description of the murals leaves readers with the lasting sense ‘there is

⁹⁸ Cooper, p. 98.

no condition of life safe from the power of these gods', and looks forward to the catastrophic mediation of the tournament by Saturn.⁹⁹

However, the temple murals have another function more intimately linked to Theseus's aim of implementing peace and order in the world.¹⁰⁰ It is possible, as Marc Guidry argues, that the murals are a straightforward metonymy for Theseus's own power.¹⁰¹ But whether or not Theseus has the murals painted as an offering to the gods, the illustrated stories serve as a reminder to his subjects that his earthly justice is preferable to the absolute and egoistic 'morality' exercised by these supramortal beings. The duke imprisons, exiles, and civilises social dissidents rather than executing them and later, in a pretension to divine power, he eliminates the threat of death from the tournament. Compared to the 'grisly' power of the gods (I. 1970), and the violence endured by their followers, the proportionate, impartial social justice enforced by Theseus seems fairly innocuous, and his earth is constructed as the pacifistic, stable centre of planetary chaos.

In fact, since these are pagan murals portrayed by a Christian poet, it is not out of the realm of possibility that Chaucer depicted the planetary deities in this way as a negative, ironic exemplum.¹⁰² Indeed, Theseus's pantheon shares some qualities with the exempla of the later Middle Ages, which favoured 'diversion' over 'edification', because it distances him from the chaos of divine justice, and diverts attention away from some of his more despotic, 'tiraunt' tactics, such as the sacking of Thebes.¹⁰³ Yet the juxtaposition of the pagan gods'

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ For more on the traditional function of murals in Roman antiquity, see Frederic C. Tubach: 'the classical exemplum had served as a popular narrative form which told of great feats of glory undertaken in the name of Rome [...] The early exemplum illustrated man's sole means of relationship with the divine order': Frederic C. Tubach, 'Exempla in Decline', *Traditio*, 18 (1962), 407-17 (p. 409).

¹⁰¹ See Guidry, p. 162; Guidry also argues that Chaucer depicts the pagan gods as projections of the worst impulses of temporal governance: see *ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁰² The medieval Church did not deny that the planets influenced human life, only that they exercised a determining influence, which would exclude human free will. They could comfortably believe simultaneously in the gods and in God: Spearing, *The Knight's Tale*, p. 57.

¹⁰³ Tubach, p. 415.

policy of vengeance and the moderate approach to governance taken by Theseus may simply show that the duke is beginning to reflect a more Christological philosophy of leadership through forgiveness. As if to confirm this, when work on the amphitheatre is completed, a Genesis reference casts Theseus as a ruler reflective of God's majesty ('whan it was doon'; I. 2092), now able to preside over his orderly little world in peace.

4.5.2 The Prayers

Theseus's commitment to cementing the 'memorie' of the gods, whether for reasons of edification, intimidation, or validation, is ultimately the undoing of his vision for society. This is because his noble 'emprise' opens the door to more capricious narrative agents, the same divine powers he seeks to use as a foil for his earthly justice. Theseus's new temples provide a space for both Palamon and Arcite to pray to their chosen patron deity when they return to Athens. Palamon visits the temple of Venus and Arcite that of Mars, the former asking for 'possessioun' of Emelye, the latter for 'victorie' in battle (I. 2242-405). To complicate matters, unlike Boccaccio's Emilia who is content to leave her fate in the hands of Venus and Mars, Chaucer's Emelye does not want to be 'a wyf' (I. 2310-18).¹⁰⁴ Diana swiftly informs her, however, that her marriage to one of the two has already been 'by eterne word writen and confermed' (I. 2350), and her will is sacrificed to the demands of story. Curiously, this line characterises the gods' activity as one of arranging words rather than events, and equates the execution of their will with the creative enterprise of the poet. Despite the allusion to a preordained 'word' of the gods, the affirmative gesture made by the statue of Venus and 'murmurynge' of Mars, who whispers 'victorie' to Arcite, confirm that they have granted the prayers of both knights (I. 2265-434). In this way, the cousins are suddenly granted influence over the outcome of their story, reflected in the various closural allusions in

¹⁰⁴ See Boccaccio, *Teseida*, pp. 181-3, VII. 77-87.

these appeals (including, ‘everemore’, ‘everemo’, ‘ende’, ‘eterne’, ‘stynt’; I. 2234-59, 2412-21).

It is their sudden contribution to the operation of cause and effect in the narrative that turns the problem of Palamon and Arcite into a Gordian knot, ‘an impasse that only a trick of fortune’ can undo.¹⁰⁵ If both Venus and Mars are to keep their word to their devotees, and help them to defend their individual claim to Emelye’s affection, then both knights must somehow win the tournament. Robert Hanning notes that romances typically break this kind of impasse at the end by rekindling homosocial bonds, introducing a duplicate of the lady, or by simply having one knight withdraw to pursue other quests, none of which proves pertinent to this story.¹⁰⁶ This seems to confirm that, even before he began work on the Canterbury project, Chaucer was testing the boundaries of romance convention, a strategy that he would commit himself to more fully in *The Squire’s Tale* and *Sir Thopas*.¹⁰⁷ It would not be out of character for Theseus to envision one of these more typical romance resolutions as the consolation prize for the losing party at the tournament. But he does not get the chance to mastermind a harmonious denouement because, as well as causing a narrative impasse, the rival prayers also introduce divine agents, who give rise to an ending characterised by instability and uncertainty. This development brings the background of determinism into much sharper focus, which equips readers with at least some of the details necessary to appreciate the dramatic irony of the events at the tournament. The reader is not catapulted ‘into a position analogous to that of all-seeing providence in Boethius’, but they have a wider

¹⁰⁵ ‘As the story moves to its climax, the impression is created, in the account of the prayers in the temple, that the equality of Palamon and Arcite in desert and merit is an impasse that only a trick of fortune will circumvent’: Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁶ Hanning, p. 527.

¹⁰⁷ Pearsall notes the ‘clash of styles’ in *The Knight’s Tale*, p. 137; Cooper likewise notes that ‘rewarding desire with death is a violent transgression of the bounds of generic expectation’: Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 48.

field of vision than Theseus.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, readers watch as the gods take charge of the tournament, exposing Theseus's utter lack of control over its outcome and, in retrospect, all events leading up to this moment in the tale.

Though Jupiter 'the kyng' is the most obvious arbiter, it is the more unsettling figure of Saturn who steps in to resolve the dispute between Venus and Mars, promising a more sinister end to the conflict: 'Myn is the drenching [...] the prison [...] the strangling [...] the ruyne' (I. 2456-63). This is not going to be some benevolent *deus ex machina*, then, but a violent conclusion which will make a mockery of Theseus's idealistic bid to ban death from the tourney. It later becomes apparent that Saturn has taken advantage of the discrepancy between the strict semantics of the 'victorie' Arcite requests and the pragmatic implicature that he is in effect praying for Emelye's love. This tension is reminiscent of the 'ambages' (two-faced words) referenced in *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which 'choosing one of a word's various meanings sets up a web of resonances'.¹⁰⁹ Saturn's exploitation of this discrepancy is anticipated by the three sets of equivocal rhyme, on 'armes', 'queynte' and 'fare' in the three prayers, which combines harmony of sound with ambiguity in meaning in a comparable way to Chrétien's *rime équivoque* (I. 2247, 2333, 2435).

In Chaucer's tale, as in Chrétien's antithetical endings, and life itself, arbitrariness trumps a fair and just system of reward and punishment, and resolution is not always satisfactory or even desirable. Nevertheless, on the day of the tournament, Theseus is the picture of confidence: as a mortal, he lacks any insight into the machinations of the gods, and thus draws the faulty conclusion that he is in perfect control of the proceedings. It is not until the end of the tournament that readers realise that Theseus's relationship to Saturn is not all that different from their relationship to the ironic poet, since Chaucer withholds the outcome

¹⁰⁸ Alcuin Blamires, 'Philosophical Sleaze? The "strok of thought" in the Miller's Tale and Chaucer's Fabliau', *The Modern Language Review*, 102.3 (2007), 621-40 (p. 634).

¹⁰⁹ McGerr, p. 10.

of the contest from them until the last moment.¹¹⁰ This blindsiding of character and reader alike anticipates the epistemological void left by the poet's refusal to narrate the fate of Arcite's soul, leaving readers, as well as Theseus, to find their own consolation and closure in that regard.

4.5.3 The Tournament

The beginning of the tournament is the ultimate expression of Theseus's vision of order. Yet the dignified pageant quickly turns to a fracas and unfolds into disaster, a metaphor for the slow disintegration of Theseus's order. The festivities at Athens show how the duke has succeeded in transforming an animalistic brawl between two fools into an elegant contest between two glorious heroes, a chivalric ideal to which others aspire: 'For every wight that loved chivalrye [...] Hath preyed that he myghte been of that game' (I. 2106-8). The cultural refinement of Palamon and Arcite, and by extension the whole society, is reflected in the shift in style that takes place at the beginning of the fourth part (I. 2483 ff.). Stephen Knight observes that Chaucer adopts alliterative verse for the opening sequence of the battle itself, meaning that the tournament 'begins in a finely arranged order'.¹¹¹ Having styled himself 'as he were a god in trone' and eliminated mortal combat from the tournament, Theseus becomes an ossified idol for the people to worship and fear: 'Hym for to seen and doon heigh reverence/And eek to herkne to his heste and sentence' (I. 2531-2). This is the culmination of all Theseus's efforts: he has transformed himself from a noble duke to a majestic sovereign,

¹¹⁰ For more on the possible parallels between the ironic poet who manipulates words and the higher power who manipulates events within the fiction: see D. H. Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979), pp. 284-5; cf. a passage on the potential for misunderstanding when consulting the gods from *Troilus and Criseyde*: 'He hath nat wel the goddess understonde,/For goddess speken in amphibologies,/And, for a soth, they tellen twenty lyes': Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, p. 295, IV. 1405.

¹¹¹ He highlights lines 2598-616 in particular 'as a subtle pastiche of the thumping alliterative style that gloried in and legitimized the warrior ethos of the Germanic past': Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 88.

and has created an imitation of life, a safer, better version untroubled by death, over which he may now preside ‘ful riche and hye’ (I. 2577).

However, Knight points out, as the alliterative order fades, the combatants too lose their decorum and eventually their footing, and there is a sense the chivalric order represented by their initial display is itself collapsing: ‘He rolleth under foot as dooth a bal [...] And he hym hurleth with his hors adoun’ (I. 2614-16).¹¹² Even Palamon and Arcite begin to return to the raw animal aggression of their previous altercation, raining ‘jelous strokes’ down on one another (I. 2634). This return to the chaotic activity of earlier episodes is the first sign that Theseus’s makeover of the knights has not been permanent. The tourney continues nonetheless and, at the climax, Palamon is captured by King Emetreus and Theseus names Arcite victor (I. 2636-59). However, just when Theseus has emphasised the finality of this judgement (‘For it is doon!’, I. 2656), Arcite falls in a plosive tumble, his horse spooked by a fury sent at the request of Saturn: ‘He pighte hym on the pomel of his heed,/That in the place he lay as he were deed’ (I. 2689-90).¹¹³ If Theseus has moulded ‘Arcite of Thebes’ into an ideal romance hero, who readily commits his soul to the chivalric values ‘trouthe, honour [...] Wysdom, humblesse’ (I. 2789-90), then the breakdown of his body, narrated in all its medical and physiological minutiae (I. 2743-60), is analogous to the breakdown of Theseus’s vision of order, and is perhaps designed to fix attention on the ‘horror’ of Arcite’s death over Saturn’s ‘ingenious solution’.¹¹⁴

There are some ways that this textual moment appeals to the category of end: there are repeated references to ‘falling’, not only to Arcite’s fall but to the ‘falle’ of the lists and the ‘aventure’ itself, and this creates a greater sense of termination (I. 2662, 2703, 2722,

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Hanning notes that in ‘Boccaccio, Palemone constructs a temple in Arcite’s memory but he omits the detail of the mortal fall from the horse in the wall murals – this perfect work omits the one detail of the protagonist’s story that matters – perfect control in art (and life) is an illusion’: see Hanning, p. 526.

¹¹⁴ Spearing, *The Knight’s Tale*, p. 64.

2825).¹¹⁵ But Arcite's death has curiously little closural force: such a terminal event has the potential to offer relief or release, but it is muted here by the disquiet in Arcite's questions ('What is this world?'), which are not soothed by the promise of a Christian heaven. As Spearing points out, his miserable, prolonged and undeserved death provokes him to 'philosophical questioning' about the nature of life in general and the myopia of men who, like himself, seek goods that prove to be disasters and thus 'faren as he that dronke is as a mous'.¹¹⁶ While this may, as Spearing argues, provide insight into the 'human condition', it is these statements that counteract the potential sense of finality the narrative might have gained from this death. Indeed, by refusing to narrate his soul's ascent through the cosmos as told by Boccaccio, the poet dangles the possibility of learning Arcite's ultimate fate in front of the reader only to reiterate its indescribability (I. 2809-14).¹¹⁷

It is an unexpected outcome for the characters but also for the reader, who, despite being made privy to some of the cosmic machinations, might have imagined Saturn's compromise to be a little less bloody. Chaos has erupted from the ground, bringing with it a dramatic 'irony of events', a falsification of expectations for the audience, but also for Theseus, for whom the outcome represents a kind of reversal or peripeteia: it subverts his perceived relationship to his world, and reveals that his high stakes in life have always been at the mercy of Fortune and 'unintelligible powers outside of himself'.¹¹⁸ Thus Chaucer unravels the knot of Palamon and Arcite, but not in the manner expected. The best knight has proven himself, but this elect status has not brought him a beautiful wife, new title, or elevated place at court; his only reward is death. Yet the fall of victor opens the end of the

¹¹⁵ Wadiak notes that the moment of Arcite's fall shows how people may view things that happen as 'aventure' (I. 2722) when it is in fact preordained by the controlling presence of the gods: Wadiak, p. 167.

¹¹⁶ Spearing, *The Knight's Tale*, pp. 51-73.

¹¹⁷ See also Bishop, p. 43.

¹¹⁸ On the 'irony of events', see Green, pp. 277-86; Pearsall, p. 137.

text up to new possibilities away from the triumphant return to court that typically offers closure in romance.

The omission of Boccaccian Arcita's flight to the eighth sphere, and his laughter, directed at the vanities of the pagan world below him, can tell us something about Chaucer's intentions for the end of his tale.¹¹⁹ In the *Teseida*, Arcita's laughter is derisive, and undercuts the solemnity of the elaborate funeral ceremony that follows by making the rites performed by the Grecians seem pointless, their extreme grief foolish.¹²⁰ Yet just as Boccaccio blunts the closural force of his funeral, he allows Arcita to experience a sublime moment of revelation usually reserved for Christian figures, which secures another form of resolution: the hero's deliverance from the flawed pagan world. The elaboration of Arcita's apotheosis not only assures readers of his nobility by revealing the blissful destination of his soul but also builds up the more familiar Christian worldview of the fourteenth century, which might explain why Chaucer did not include the episode in his tale. Indeed, it is possible, Pearsall suggests, that Chaucer chose to omit this vision because 'the imperatives of Christian redemption' did not fully align with his Platonic-Boethian scheme or his pagan heroes.¹²¹

However, Chaucer did transplant the cosmic journey into *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which the hero's divine perspective has this same effect of distancing and revelation.¹²² The inclusion of this moment in *Troilus* suggests the decision to 'disnarrate' Arcite's ascension in *The Knight's Tale* was about more than the conundrum of whether to give a pagan character Christian salvation.¹²³ One possible reason for its absence is that Chaucer did not want to give

¹¹⁹ See Boccaccio, *Teseida*, p. 289, XI. 1-3; of course it is unlikely that a large proportion of Chaucer's audience would have known his Boccaccian source.

¹²⁰ See Timothy D. Arner, 'No Joke: Transcendent Laughter in the *Teseida* and the *Miller's Tale*, *Studies in Philology*, 102.2 (2005), 143-58; also John Steadman, *Disembodied Laughter: 'Troilus' and the Apotheosis Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 50.

¹²¹ Pearsall, pp. 124-5.

¹²² Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, pp. 424-5, V. 1800 ff.

¹²³ The question of the salvation of heathens was very much a 'live issue' of debate in Chaucer's day, though the fourteenth century witnessed the birth of a more 'liberal' attitude towards pagans, who

Arcite the ‘gift of posthumous vision’, as Pearsall puts it, so easily granted to Troilus and Boccaccio’s Arcita. Perhaps in a text so concerned with struggle of man placed in opposition to the power of the divine, Chaucer wanted this transformative moment of revelation to be earned through earthly ‘experience’.¹²⁴ The new perspective Arcita gains in Book XI is thus transferred to Theseus at the end of *The Knight’s Tale*, who eventually comes to realise his own human limitations through Neoplatonic contemplation and who, without the vision of a Christian heaven or any cosmic vantage-point, must comfort himself. The next part of the chapter will explore how the incremental ending of *The Knight’s Tale* reveals the breakdown of Theseus’s order, and will demonstrate that even an accumulation of recognisable closural gestures – a funeral, a consolation and a marriage – cannot guarantee definitive closure or stability of meaning.

4.6 The End of *The Knight’s Tale*

4.6.1 The Layering of Closure

Arcite’s fall is only the first act of Chaucer’s layered ending, which is reminiscent of the ‘discontinuous’ conclusion he gives to *Troilus and Criseyde*.¹²⁵ The Theban’s downfall and death are followed by Egeus’s verdict on the events, Arcite’s funeral, Theseus’s speech, and the marriage of Palamon and Emelye, all of which should contribute to the sense of a firm and well-rounded ending. In the aftermath of the tournament, Theseus puts on a brave face and reassures his company that the ‘gree as wel of o syde as of oother’ (I. 2700-38). Yet despite these words of comfort and ‘bisy cure’, his actions tell a different story, of a noble leader doing his best to resist the implications of the hand dealt to Arcite by the cosmos.¹²⁶

could be saved if they were ‘good’: Alastair J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), pp. 57-9.

¹²⁴ See Pearsall, p. 137.

¹²⁵ Spearing, ‘Narrative Closure’, p. 127.

¹²⁶ Theseus’s putting on of a ‘brave face’ is reminiscent of the persona that Donaldson assigns to the ‘narrator’ of *Troilus and Criseyde*, who ‘at first does his best to resist the implications arising from his

The speed with which he recovers his lofty manner anticipates Chauntecleer's determination to 'diffye' his nightmare in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*; like Theseus, the cockerel assumes the appearance of a 'grym leoun' to conceal his mental agitation (VII. 3179-84).¹²⁷ Nevertheless, when Arcite finally dies, Theseus's bold demeanour falters again and this triggers the spate of closural events as he tries to prove his order inviolable to 'aventure' (I. 2703). The individual layers of closure do not stand up to scrutiny, however; like Theseus's stoic exterior, they are a façade of stability. Even Theseus's consolatory speech cannot provide a final position from which to make sense of Arcite's misfortune, nor can it fully explain the discrepancy between Theseus's sense of personal and social sovereignty and the reality of the intractable and divinely randomised universe in which he operates.

When Theseus's father Egeus is introduced out of the blue to explain the injustices of the 'worldes transmutacioun', it seems his purpose will be to impose meaning onto the events and wrap up the story (I. 2839). Yet as Pearsall writes, his 'wisdom does not have the final word [...] any more than Saturn's solution to the conundrum provides the last act', which is lucky, too, since the short consolation Chaucer's Egeus delivers is infected by 'folk-wisdom' and hardly optimistic.¹²⁸ This might be why the narrative allows Theseus to throw a grandiose funeral as an additional layer of closure. It takes place in the grove where the knights first sparred over Emelye, giving the story of their conflict a sense of circularity and return. But like Egeus's speech, the minutiae of the proceedings mitigate its force as a closural gesture. The funeral is described in a chain of *occupatio* that forms the longest sentence in Chaucer's verse (I. 2919-62), but where the ceremonial element of an ending might ordinarily have a

ruined story [but goes onto display] a kind of nervous breakdown in poetry': E. Talbot Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 90.

¹²⁷ See also Karl Young who points out the reference to Geoffrey in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* and suggests some of Geoffrey's apostrophes can be linked to the characterisation of Chauntecleer; the third apostrophe addresses the person terrified by adverse occurrences, urges him to conceal his agitation by assuming a bold exterior: see Karl Young, 'Chaucer and Geoffrey of Vinsauf', *Modern Philology*, 41.3 (1944), 172-82 (p. 181).

¹²⁸ Pearsall, p. 124; see Spearing, *The Knight's Tale*, p. 75.

revelatory character, this description is based on the negation of detail (see the repetition of ‘ne’ from I. 2920-62).¹²⁹ Other details manifest Theseus’s loss of control: the ‘wood’ fire (I. 2950), igniting chaos rather than laying it to rest; the crowd of mourners riding round the bier anti-clockwise, bringing disorder to a ritual meant to restore order; the ‘laurer greene’, worn by Theseus in the beginning and now resting on Arcite’s head, marking the duke’s symbolic death, the end of his dominion over the events (I. 2875).¹³⁰

Yet despite all this, the deforestation of the woods and fields where the lesser gods and goddesses live suggests Theseus has not given up on his vision of peace on earth. The disinheritance of the ‘nymphs’ and ‘fawns’ indicates the funeral is as much a defiance of divine jurisdiction as it is a send-off for Arcite, and the tree catalogue gives his story the feel of a tragedy of epic proportions (I. 2924-30). At this stage, then, Theseus is still working to manage the divine order, unwittingly or otherwise, and he clings to his idealism, even as his romance elite turn to epic activities such as wrestling. By the time Theseus delivers his closing speech ‘yeres’ later, however, he is prepared to accept the absolute authority of a higher being (I. 2967). The power to which Theseus concedes is not his planetary saboteur, but the Aristotelian ‘First Mover’, who he as a pagan identifies with Jupiter. This was the expression some ancient philosophers, including Boethius, used to refer to God; it could be, then, that Chaucer is trying to convey Theseus’s drift towards Christological thought, or trying to make Theseus’s Neoplatonic (but pagan) realisation of the world – and advice on how to reckon with it – more accessible to his own readership.¹³¹ Yet, as Spearing points out,

¹²⁹ See Vincent J. DiMarco, ‘Explanatory Notes for *The Knight’s Tale*’, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 826-42; also ‘The Knight’s Tale’, in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Boenig and Taylor, p. 93, n. 2.

¹³⁰ Their movement stands in tension with the epic conventions of pagan heroic funeral rites, which, as in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Statius’s *Thebaid*, are meant to restore order: see Arner, p. 145.

¹³¹ The ‘most notorious fact’ about Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* is that its Christian author turns for solace to pagan philosophy (at the end of his life) rather than his religion, and Chaucer seems to be similarly conflating religious and philosophical apparatus: see Joel C. Relihan, ‘Introduction’, *Consolation of Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), pp. x-xxv (p. xxiv); Melissa J. Rack argues that Chaucer opts not to resolve the tension between philosophy and Christian theology, but allows for

it also ‘arouses suspicion’ since it is not the benevolent Jupiter but the malevolent Saturn who has dictated the events of the narrative, which might suggest that Chaucer intends for there to be a gap between Theseus’ ‘philosophizing and the facts of the tale’.¹³²

After the chaos of the tournament, ‘much strain is placed on Theseus’s closing speech in terms of narrative resolution’ and his take on the *consolatio mortis* genre goes some way to achieving closure for the tale.¹³³ Where Egeus’s dreary dictums are limited to the patterns of ‘wo’ in life as they happen up until the point of death (I. 2847), Theseus’s *solacia* (rhetorical comforts) ‘look beyond the world’, and offer a quasi-Christian consolation for the volatility of earthly fortune:¹³⁴

‘The First Moevere of the cause above,
 Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love,
 Greet was th’effect and heigh was his entente [...]
 For with that faire cheyne of love he bond
 The fyr, the eyr, the water and the lond
 In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee [...]
 Ther nedeth noight noon auctoritee allege,
 For it is preeved by experience [...]
 Thanne may men by this ordre wel discernen
 That thilke Moevere stable is and eterne.
 Wel may men knowe, but it be a fool,
 That everye part dirryveth from his hool [...]
 Speces of thynges and progressiouns
 Shullen enduren by successiouns,
 And nat eterne, withouten any lye [...]
 Thanne may ye se that al this thing hath ende [...]
 He moot be deed – the king as shal a page [...]
 Ther helpeth noight. Al goth that ilke weye.
 Thanne may I seyn al this thing moot deye.
 What maketh this but Juppiter the king,
 That is prince and cause of alle thing [...]
 Of no degree availleth for to stryve.
 Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me
 To maken vertu of necessitee. (I. 2987-3042)

a ‘freeplay of interpretation’: Melissa J. Rack, “‘I am no divinistre’”: Heterodoxy and Disjunction in Chaucer’s ‘Knight’s Tale’”, *Medieval Perspectives*, 25 (2010), 89-102.

¹³² Spearing, *The Knight’s Tale*, p. 77.

¹³³ See Pearsall, p. 137; Phillips, p. 49.

¹³⁴ Phillips, p. 51.

There is no need to ‘grucchen’ or have ‘hevynesse’, Theseus adds, because the benevolence of this order has been evidenced by the circumstances of Arcite’s death, who ‘Departed is with duetee and honour’ (I. 3035-60).

The idea that love unites all the elements of the world (‘the faire cheyne of love’; I. 2988), can be traced back to Plato.¹³⁵ However, the specifics of this passage are based on the description of the ‘chain of being’ as united by love in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer translated from Latin (c. 1377-8): ‘hanc rerum seriem ligat/terras ac pelagus regens/et caelo imperitans amor’.¹³⁶ This affirmation of the benevolent Providential order forms part of Lady Philosophy’s efforts to console the prisoner ‘Boethius’ as he awaits his execution. Through their dialogue, Boethius unsuccessfully tries to resolve the tension between free will and divine foreknowledge as an antidote to the injustice of his indictment. Scholars disagree as to whether Theseus improves or delimits the Boethian explanation. Retha Knoetze argues that he ‘shows in this speech that he is the self-possessed man whom Lady Philosophy urges Boethius to become’, but Pearsall feels Chaucer’s ‘grafting’ of Boethius onto Teseo is unsuccessful.¹³⁷ Whatever his relative merits, Theseus encourages the Athenian parliament to be resilient to the inscrutable processes of the world, and directs their attention to the truly stable things of the eternal realm. This counsel seems especially for the benefit of Palamon and Emelye, disconsolate after Arcite’s death. In the end, the philosopher-king argues for their marriage, making virtue of necessity. It is an imperfect solution to the

¹³⁵ Cf. the concept of the ‘Great Chain of Being’ (*scala naturae*), the idea that all matter and life is structured hierarchically, beginning with God, downward to angles, humans, animals, plants and minerals, is derived from Plato’s division of the world into the Forms, which are the full beings, and sensible beings, which are imitations of Forms and are both being and not being: see Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 289.

¹³⁶ ‘What binds this sequence of things so tight,/What is king over land and sea,/What the heavens obey, is Love’: Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. by A. Fortescue (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1925), II. 8, 25; ‘The Knight’s Tale’, ed. by Boenig and Taylor, p. 94, n. 1.

¹³⁷ Knoetze, p. 92; Pearsall, p. 124.

loose end caused by Arcite's default, but a glimmer of stability in their unpredictable earthly existence (I. 3072).

There are some ways this speech refracts the closural gestures of romance. Theseus brings the Greeks together in 'oon general assent' (I. 2969), and so they resemble the ideal romance community, united again after a period of hardship. This phrase also looks forward to the single-voiced discourse imposed by Theseus. With its authoritative tone, his speech is analogous to the closing remarks of an epilogue, but in this case the explanation shifts from the poet to a character within the fiction, a modification that will be seen in a more radical form in *The Squire's Tale*.¹³⁸ His implicit claim to the genre of consolation also lends itself to a sense of closure: one of the characteristic functions of the genre is to provide an answer to the question of why death is not to be feared.¹³⁹ Indeed, the subject matter thematically gives rise to closural allusions (I. 3026, 3067, 3072), which creates the impression his commentary on the eternal realm is the solution to the metaphysical problems raised in the tale. The whole monologue streamlines the dialogue between Theseus, Palamon and Emelye in the *Teseida*, which gives their union the feel of an authorial decision. Indeed, the marriage is the final layer of closure, which rounds off the rather sombre tripartite ending with a summary of the 'bliss [...] richesse, and [...] heele' enjoyed by the couple, thus ending the tale on a hopeful note (I. 3102). At the close of the tale there is, Bishop argues, 'a felicitous confluence of dynastic considerations, the expected "romantic" ending, and the fulfilment of Arcite's dying wish – so providing a kind of resolution of the conflict between love and friendship'.¹⁴⁰ This may also be Chaucer showing off, demonstrating how many different types of closure he can bring into play in one ending.

¹³⁸ See also Pearsall, p. 137; Bishop, p. 43.

¹³⁹ Relihan, p. xi.

¹⁴⁰ Bishop, p. 44.

All this should leave readers with a sense of *The Knight's Tale* as comprehensively closed. Yet certain issues undermine this sequence as a means to an end. Theseus's zeal as he ties Emelye and Palamon together in 'O parfit' marital bow is not necessarily out of keeping with romance conventions, but feels jarring considering he condemns the 'foule prisoun' of life only a few lines prior (I. 3061). Their union is also presented as something other than it is. When Theseus pitches the marriage to the couple, he does so through the register of courtly love, appealing to them as a knight and lady engaged in the practices of loving and serving, bestowing favour and grace (I. 3075 ff.). Yet according to earlier commentary on Theseus's intentions, the true aim of this arrangement is 'To have with certein contrees alliaunce/And have fully of Thebans obeisaunce' (I. 2973-4). This specific course of action does not make Theseus some great philanthropic ruler, then, only a mindful dynastic one.¹⁴¹ His approach is determined by his desire for security, over and above an impulse to find a legitimate solution to the love 'problem'. With the redaction of the Boccaccian dialogue, we hear neither the couple's assent nor protest to the match, and we do not learn of their ultimate fates as we might in other romances. All this makes their union seem more of a 'pat' ending than an authentic resolution; it has not resolved the issues raised in the poetic discourse, even though that is what Theseus's monologue seems to imply.

The speech on the mortality and mutability of the world in particular does not restore 'ordre' as fully as critics assume.¹⁴² It wears the trappings of some great revelatory ending about the truths of the universe, but the closure Theseus offers is precarious. Of course understanding his speech as 'a declaration of faith' in higher power, as Cooper, is not enough to trouble its closural force.¹⁴³ Many medieval poems end with an invocation to God, and

¹⁴¹ See also Phillips, p. 52.

¹⁴² See, for example, Pearsall, p. 124 ff.; Phillips, pp. 51-3; John Halverson, 'Aspects of Order in the *Knight's Tale*', *Studies in Philology*, 57.4 (1960), 606-21 (p. 616); Barbara Bartholomew, 'The "Knight's Tale"', *Fortuna and Natura: A Reading of Three Chaucerian Narratives* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), pp. 73-107 (p. 94).

¹⁴³ Cooper, p. 103.

Chaucer's milieu would have understood that comfort and certainty can be found in religious deference, even when the convictions are pagan. However, without a vision of the spiritual realm gifted to Arcite and Troilus, his consolation, like Boethius's own work, is not a consolation according to the practices of the genre. As Joel C. Relihan notes, all consolations conclude with some view of life after death, but in *The Knight's Tale*, as in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the 'beatific vision is never achieved'.¹⁴⁴ As Spearing argues, this may reflect 'the difficulty philosophy has in ordering the universe'.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, the death of Arcite is not the glorious 'liberation' Theseus makes it out to be. This assessment seems designed 'to meet the exigencies' of his political situation, since it is dramatically ironized by our prior knowledge of the darker Saturnian motives surrounding it, as well as the lack of clarity over the destination of Arcite's soul. His death is not heroic or special, but a by-product of a necessary trade-off predicated on semantic ambiguity, whose victim could have just as easily been Palamon.

However, of all the ambiguities present in this speech, it is the rumbling undertone of uncertainty that, more than anything else, troubles its ability to impart closure. Theseus's attempts to steady the indiscriminate hand of divine governance throughout the narrative have resulted in a bleak reiteration of death and disorder. It is hardly surprising, then, that beneath the optimism of his address it is possible to detect a sense of doubt once again, most clearly signalled by his damning indictment of 'lyf' at line 3061, which counteracts any renewed sense of stability we might otherwise gain from the speech (see also 'sad visage', I. 2985; 'wrecched', 2995; 'wasteth', 3023; 'Ther helpeth noight', 3031). This is more vivid than the sense of doubt we might expect to find in similar declarations of faith, and the speech on the whole is peaceable, so it is difficult to rationalise these flashes of despondency

¹⁴⁴ Relihan, p. xi.

¹⁴⁵ Spearing, *The Knight's Tale*, p. 75.

as wavering spiritual conviction. The alternative is to argue that Theseus does not truly believe his own statements, but that does not seem convincing.¹⁴⁶

However, Theseus's residual unease need not be interpreted cynically, and may reveal something about Chaucer's conception of ending and closure in the context of *The Knight's Tale*. Theseus's poetic liturgy of human experience and action cannot provide a whole and complete picture of his universe: he knows that Arcite's fate and afterlife, the machinations of Fortune, and his own failings are somehow intertwined in the Great Chain of Being, but their causal relations are imperceptible to him. Yet though his speech does not offer closure for the precise workings of this world, or console by revealing a vision of what lies beyond it, it stresses the comfort that the individual may attain within it.

4.6.2 The Consolation of Theseus: 'heigh was his entente'

It might seem to go without saying that Theseus's final speech offers consolation to Palamon and Emelye through a working out of the events of the narrative.¹⁴⁷ And yet the speech 'no more "explains away" the "tragedye" of Arcite's death than the mythological machinery of Part iii provides a teleological explanation of it'.¹⁴⁸ Bishop rightly casts doubt on the idea that Theseus's solemn pronouncements demystify the outcome of the tourney for the couple, but does not offer an alternative theory as to the nature of the consolatory message, save to designate him a 'skilful politician'.¹⁴⁹ However, even if Theseus is interpreted as an erudite politician or enlightened philosopher-king, he, a human actor, is not exempt from the distress

¹⁴⁶ At the time of writing, I was not aware that Spearing also argues that Theseus's 'repetitions' begin to sound 'nervously assertive' in his final speech ('the more Theseus repeats himself, the less convincing he sounds'): Spearing, *The Knight's Tale*, pp. 75-6.

¹⁴⁷ See note 24.

¹⁴⁸ Bishop, p. 44.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; Paul Beekman Taylor also sees Theseus as using the fair chain of love for his political designs, rather than a figure of hard-earned wisdom: Paul Beekman Taylor, 'Chaucer's *Faire Cheyne of Love*: The First Model of Mediation in the *Canterbury Tales*', *Reading Contexts*, ed. by Neil Forsyth (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), pp. 133-46 (p. 144).

of Arcite's death nor the existential crisis brought on by its circumstances. In fact, he loses more than any of the others: in one fell swoop, his illusion of control has been exposed, and he must accept his limited power in this now starkly brutal realm. Thus, to view the speech as consolation for the couple alone is to ignore the impact of the 'aventure' on Theseus himself; he deserves as much reassurance as the other characters. This may be the source of darker undertones in Theseus's speech: he is still coming to terms with the fact of his disordered world and he is, like 'Boethius', trying to console himself.

Other scholars have noticed a dissonance between the transcendental wisdom Theseus purports to offer and the actual content and the tone of his speech. Mann feels his perspective is limited to 'humdrum' commonplaces and notes his lack of explanation for the intent of the First Mover.¹⁵⁰ Bishop reads it as calculated bravado, and draws attention to the elements of 'window dressing' in Theseus's performance, as he tries to paint Arcite's death in a favourable light.¹⁵¹ Muscatine tries to pinpoint the source of the tonal ambiguities in the monologue:

In Theseus' majestic summary there is a final echo [of the ever-swelling undertheme of disaster in the temples and Saturn's monologue], the continuing rhetorical repetition as insistent as fate itself [...] This subsurface insistence on disorder is the poem's crowning complexity.¹⁵²

Perhaps this 'subsurface' of discomfort is less a result of Theseus's feigned wisdom, as Mann seems to suggest, or cracks beginning to show in a performance of authority, and more that he is himself full of doubt about his position in the world after the events of the tournament. It is a subtle difference, but an important one; the ambiguity is a symptom of noble defeatism more than scepticism or bravado. The final oration is revelatory, but in a way more personal to Theseus than has previously been appreciated: it is a revelation and a lesson, directed

¹⁵⁰ Mann, 'Beginning with the Ending', p. 99.

¹⁵¹ 'In lines 2981-5 we watch him calculate, like an actor, how to make the maximum effect upon his audience': Bishop, p. 44.

¹⁵² Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 189.

outwards and inwards, about the insignificance of man in the grand scheme of the universe. Theseus realises that despite his power relative to the people of Athens and Thebes, he too has human limitations and ‘moot be deed’ the same as any lowly ‘page’ (I. 3030).

Muscatine in fact warns against looking for delicate characterisation in this manner. Referring to Palamon and Arcite, he argues that there is neither ‘psychological analysis, nor delicate and revelatory “business” in the poem’.¹⁵³ Similarly, D. W. Robertson Jr. views the cousins’ speeches as ‘revelations of moral character or statements of principle rather than psychological revelations’.¹⁵⁴ But even if the lives of the characters are preordained, and there is a lack of ‘characterisation’ for Palamon and Arcite, Theseus stands apart from the rest and shows signs of being engaged in this ‘business’ of character revelation throughout. Spearing agrees that Theseus is the most well-defined character, but argues that ‘our interest in him is rather as part of a literary structure embodying a certain significance, a certain view of life’ in the general sense.¹⁵⁵

Yet there is a strong case for reading Theseus as a distinct personality in a way that does not necessarily undermine the philosophical significance of the poem. From the outset, Chaucer allows Theseus to arbitrate the events as he sees fit, and at each of the pivotal junctures, he devises resolutions based on his own personal experience of conquest, love, and fortune. But where his earlier orations read as strategic manoeuvres (I. 1785-869), with its meditation on the ‘wasteth [...] wende’ and ‘wane’ of the mutable world (I. 3023-25), his final speech is demonstrative of a ‘new awareness of the formidably antagonistic elements of life, and ever-threatening possibility, and the falling away of the supreme assuredness’, as he confronts the Boethian issues of free will and divine Providence.¹⁵⁶ Aers argues for the ‘sharp

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 180-1.

¹⁵⁴ D. W. Robertson Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 270; see also Stuart Robertson, ‘Elements of Realism in the Knight’s Tale’, *Journal and English and Germanic Philology*, 14 (1915), 226-55.

¹⁵⁵ Spearing, *The Knight’s Tale*, pp. 27-8.

¹⁵⁶ Muscatine, p. 181.

irony' of Theseus's use of Boethius, who wrote the *Consolation* whilst trying to 'cultivate a stoical detachment from the kind of world Theseus is devoted to' and 'whilst awaiting execution decreed by his own "worthy" ruler'.¹⁵⁷ Yet this ignores the implicit admissions of his own fallibility and the practical advice he ultimately offers to the Greeks. He has evolved from a man supremely assured of his power to resolve conflict to one conscious of his limited ability to achieve a secure position in world, wary of last-word pronouncements. Theseus is the exception to the apparent lack of 'character development' in this tale, and his evolution tracks a shift in the textual dynamic from a struggle between closure and continuation to the genuine open-endedness that characterises this final speech.

It is because of his 'new awareness' of life that the speech has such a strong thread of consolation running through it. Theseus has sought to build a more stable order of 'certeyn boundes', with 'heigh [...] entente', and indeed these words could just as well describe his motivations as those of the First Mover (I. 2989). But as Cooper writes, his 'attempts to impose order on the chaos of fortune are more persistent than successful' and the tournament lays bare his enthrallment to metaphysical authority.¹⁵⁸ His *solacia* are thus in service of self-consolation as well as being for the benefit of his public assembly. His 'experience' has shown him to be as powerless to divine Providence and the whims of its agents as the next man, irrespective of his wishes and merits. Like the cousins confined to his 'prisoun', he must now relinquish control of his designs for the world. When he teaches there is no point rebelling against fate in a mutable world, he is at least in part addressing his own attempts to overwrite the vicissitudes of Fortune and undermine the 'cause of al thyng' in earlier parts of the tale (I. 3036).¹⁵⁹ D. H. Green writes that for a figure like Theseus, who has been mocked by a cosmic power, 'the deception lies ultimately [...] with himself [and not with the higher

¹⁵⁷ Aers, p. 30.

¹⁵⁸ Cooper, p. 103.

¹⁵⁹ See also Phillips, p. 49.

being]. The discrepancy between expectation and fulfilment [...] results instead from the false nature of [his] hopes'.¹⁶⁰ Though it is not Theseus who falls in the field, the tale witnesses the downfall of his hopes, and it is for this reason the consolation resonates with him just as much as any of the other Grecians.

For the majority of *The Knight's Tale*, Theseus falsely believes he can exercise lasting influence over the progressions of the physical world as a little prime mover with his limited understanding of the universe as governed by feudal, knightly concepts. Like Boethius and Troilus, he 'cannot blame fortune for being true to her acknowledged nature in taking away what she has given, but only his own blindness in not realising her nature and its relevance to his position'.¹⁶¹ There has always been a harmonious 'ordre', a 'hool', divined by Providence (I. 3003-6), and Theseus, like Boethius, simply needed to perceive it. It would be hard to blame Theseus for reacting angrily to this realisation of his limits in a predetermined world. Certainly, Troilus at least initially speaks out in anger or rebellion against a higher power (IV. 260-80). Theseus, on the other hand, greets this 'reality' with dignity, and maintains his composure throughout the final speech. He dispenses with 'hevynesse' and uses the opportunity posed by crisis to reckon with the world, comforting himself with the imperfect but practical harmony of Palamon and Emelye. Without a benevolent Christian God, or the promise of some sort of narrative return for Arcite, Theseus must be his own consolation (I. 3064).¹⁶² This is why, in the end, the tale reads like an 'open-ended exploration' of man placed naked before the realities of his existence.¹⁶³ With his variously pagan and chivalric values, Theseus only has a limited frame of reference to draw upon for his explanation of the

¹⁶⁰ Green, p. 283

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Cooper goes so far as to say that this final act (his speech) is 'also an enlightened authorial one': Cooper, p. 104.

¹⁶³ See Cooper, p. 91; Pearsall, p. 120-1.

universe. Because of this, there can be no final answers or last-word pronouncements, only provisional and imperfect observations about human struggles in an ever-revolving world.

4.6.3 The Act of Writing

Theseus's noble acceptance of his inability to control the material world and the trajectory of human life expresses a truth about the act of writing a fictional text. It speaks to the larger experience of the poet, who releases his finished composition into the world in the knowledge that its meaning will be destabilised as the work is interpreted by his readers, copyists, and later poets: what Paul Zumthor called *mouvance*.¹⁶⁴ Even after Chaucer was long dead, later readers and writers would reconfigure his story as the literary culture and practices of the medieval period encouraged, and, indeed, John Lydgate wrote a 'prequel' of sorts to the tale with his *Siege of Thebes*.¹⁶⁵ Chaucer knew he himself was one of at least three generations of writers to have already handled this story alone. Boccaccio and Statius had supplied two earlier iterations of the narrative material arising out of the strife between the Theban princes Polynices and Eteocles, only for it to be reframed and repurposed by Chaucer. He must have realised he was never going to have the final say, that there could be no definitive text. Theseus's realisation that his authority is an illusion seems to be in part an allegory of Chaucer's understanding of his precarious authority over his own work, or at least mimics the experience of a poet comprehending 'in o strok of thought' the futility of strategic attempts to close off the meaning of a text.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ *Mouvance* is the term used by Paul Zumthor to designate the high degree of instability in medieval textual traditions, an 'interplay between variant readings and reworkings': Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 44.

¹⁶⁵ See John M. Bowers, 'The Tale of Beryn and The Siege of Thebes: Alternative Ideas of The Canterbury Tales', in *Writing After Chaucer*, pp. 201-225 (p. 214); also 'John Lydgate's Prologue to the Siege of Thebes', in *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. by John M. Bowers (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute of Publications, 1992), pp. 11-22; John Lydgate, *The Siege of Thebes*, ed. by Robert R. Edwards (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).

¹⁶⁶ As Chaucer puts it: 'seeth in o strok of thought alle thinges that ben, or weren, or schollen comen': Geoffrey Chaucer, *Boece, The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford

Although it is important to be cautious when looking for analogies between the poet and his characters, Chaucer seems to be urging us to look for parallels between work and world.¹⁶⁷ Just as Theseus is limited as a human, and subject to all the inadequacies of the human condition, Chaucer is limited in his human artistry; as a writer, he is not omnisciently and omnipotently free from the mutability inherent in every authorial voice. Every poet is destined to die and lose control over their artistic outputs, just as any ‘page’. Understanding this reality, he must have known that he would be unable to fix the meaning and significance of his story, much as Theseus is powerless to secure infinite peace and stability in a world where, as Mann puts it, “‘aventure” is the prime determiner of events’.¹⁶⁸ For both poet and character, the fallibility of ‘human strategic planning’ is exposed through the realisation of a creative vision.¹⁶⁹

Moreover, the concerns present in Theseus’s closing oration are readily applicable to the larger topic of literary practices. Theseus teaches that the only end with any finality is ‘death’ itself and that, even after death, the world will keep turning. He therefore envisages the wider process of human existence as a continuing sequence of life and death without end, thus reiterating the conclusions made by Boethius as he explores whether he can achieve inner stability in the midst of injustice and misfortune.¹⁷⁰ These arguments reflect a concept of narrative ending as fundamentally unsettled, interim, temporary. If we stand back from the

University Press, 1988), V, m. 2, 11-13; or Relihan’s translation, ‘in a single stroke of his own mind’: Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by Joel Relihan, V, m. 2, 12.

¹⁶⁷ Though Pearsall argues that we should not go beyond the most obvious congruence of tale and teller, Spearing argues that ‘Chaucer was more interested than most medieval poets in the ways that stories may be relatable to those who tell them’: see Pearsall, p. 116; Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, p. 94.

¹⁶⁸ Mann, p. 102; ‘Many late medieval authors felt anxieties attendant upon the manuscript as process, for the meaning of a text was constantly being renegotiated and reconfigured as soon as the author released his or her work’: Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen, ‘Introduction: Manuscripts and Cultural History’, *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*, ed. by Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 9.

¹⁶⁹ Blamires, p. 636.

¹⁷⁰ Mann, p. 100-1.

tale as a whole, this logic bears out in the structural rhythms of the narrative: over the course of this tale, the reader is assured repeatedly of the end only for the narrative to begin again. This is a conclusion that the tale has been working towards from the beginning, then, when the Grecian widows first accost Theseus.

In the real world of texts and narratives, the rationale that an end can never be final would have problematised the medieval writer's creative vision. For Chaucer, and all other poets, relinquishing control of one's text was a 'necessity' in the writing of literature of any kind. There is a perpetual tension between the desire for artistic, authorial sovereignty and the surrender that the dissemination of those texts demanded. As Spearing writes,

it is one of the greatest paradoxes of this new idea of the vernacular text as *poyesye* that having fixed its form as best he is able, the maker has no choice but to relinquish it to the mercy of future copyists and readers.¹⁷¹

Chaucer's awareness of this 'paradox' is conveyed most effectively at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, when the poet urges his text to go forth into the world of reading and interpretation, almost as if it is a bird taking flight: 'Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye' (V. 1786). The poet's affectionate distancing of himself from the whole of his made object captures this truth that poems enjoy an existence free from the controlling presence of their author regardless of the comprehensiveness of their maker's 'purveiance'. *Troilus* is not the only Chaucerian text that gestures towards this issue of textual instability, however.

In the *Retraction*, inspired by Augustine's treatise of the same name, Chaucer again acknowledges that high-minded authorial intent does not guarantee longevity or stability of meaning because texts cannot be closed to the unending possibilities of interpretation: 'And if ther be anythyng that displesse hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnyng and nat to my wyl'.¹⁷² Like Augustine, Chaucer knew that 'our vantage point is

¹⁷¹ Spearing, 'Narrative Closure', p. 126.

¹⁷² Geoffrey Chaucer, 'Chaucer's Retraction', in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Boenig and Taylor, p. 461.

never final; it can only be cumulative', and therefore the conceivable misinterpretations of posterity had to be apologised for, mitigated.¹⁷³ This is a fact Theseus too comes to understand through his own version of the 'Retractions': he tries to imitate the 'Divine Art of God' with 'heigh entente' but his authority is revealed to be impermanent, his words unstable. This is evidence that the sentiments Chaucer expresses in his *Retraction* were present in *The Canterbury Tales* from the beginning of the project, and were not a last-minute addition or afterthought. Nevertheless, the poet's attitude towards instability seems to evolve in the interim between beginning and end: Theseus accepts his powerlessness in an ever-changing world, but nonetheless maintains his status above the rest; the *Retraction* actively welcomes input from readers, inviting them to see what 'liketh' or 'displese' them, fully opening and democratising the creative process. Neither Chaucer, Theseus, nor *The Knight's Tale* can give a 'definitive view of the world and those who live in it'.¹⁷⁴ Instead the entire poem encourages readers to accept the *mouvance* of language and view writing as an ongoing process of creation.

4.6.4 *The Miller's Tale*

As Cooper observes, *The Knight's Tale* is a 'dynamic introduction' which sets a strong precedent for measured contributions to the tale-telling competition.¹⁷⁵ Yet while the aristocratic masterpiece seems to please the majority of the pilgrims, as Timothy D. Arner argues, it effectively silences them: 'Chaucer articulates their response in negative terms [...] so the tale's greatest achievement lies in its ability to preclude rather than produce additional commentary'.¹⁷⁶ The pilgrims' collective response to the tale is, Arner points out, expressed

¹⁷³ McGerr, p. 139.

¹⁷⁴ Cooper, p. 107.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁷⁶ Arner, p. 153.

negatively: no one ‘ne seyde it was a noble storie’ (I. 3111). Even as the denouement to the tale implicitly acknowledges the impossibility of truly monologic discourse, the tale forecloses dialogue in the immediate aftermath of its delivery.

However, there follows a ‘playful subversion of chivalric elitism’ in the *Miller’s Tale*, which reopens and parodies the concerns of the philosophical romance that precedes it.¹⁷⁷ The tale of the love triangle between Nicholas, Absolon and Alisoun is, as Phillips puts it, a ‘fable of the same provocative patterns’ of love, rivalry, and disruption that comprise the Knight’s narrative, with a twist of ‘fabliau justice’.¹⁷⁸ The closure imposed by Chaucer at the end of the first tale is thus revealed to be an illusion: he reopens and repurposes his courtly tragedy as churlish comedy. This opening sequence of the frame narrative thus reiterates the example of Theseus: no work, however seemingly authoritative, is safe from the intractable force of ‘aventure’ as it operates through discourse and in life.¹⁷⁹ The design of any man, king or page, is ‘merely a feeble fragment of a vaster pattern, woven by mightier forces than he’.¹⁸⁰ All the smaller ‘endings’ over the course of the tale have been in anticipation of the illusoriness of this final closure.

In fact, this dynamic of continual opening and closing, built over the course of the narrative and epitomised by the interaction between the *Knight’s* and the *Miller’s* tales, stands in for the dialogic rhythms of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. Indeed, John M. Fyler has recently argued that *Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee* are also the same tale ‘told

¹⁷⁷ Wadiak, p. 173.

¹⁷⁸ Phillips, p. 52; also, Guidry, p. 158.

¹⁷⁹ See also Pearsall, p. 115.

¹⁸⁰ As Blamires says of Nicholas in *The Miller’s Tale* and Jill Mann says of Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde*, his ‘grand design is merely a feeble fragment of a vaster pattern, woven by mightier forces than he’, and the same could be said of Theseus: Blamires, p. 636; Jill Mann, ‘Chance and Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight’s Tale*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. by Piero Boitani and Jill Mann, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 93-111 (p. 105).

twice'.¹⁸¹ The entire text of the *Tales* constantly teeters between stability and instability as the same narrative questions are reopened and reconsidered, themes interpreted and reinterpreted, including the themes and motifs of romance addressed in *The Knight's Tale*, and Chaucer's pilgrims challenge one another within their tales and in the frame narrative between them. As McGerr observes, 'Each tale qualifies the others so that any comfortably straightforward view of life soon fragments into glaring ironies and inconsistencies [...] Our temptation to come to a final decision about any issue is undercut by the introduction of another voice'.¹⁸²

In the final tale, the Parson argues for the moral authority of single form discourse, but if we stand back from the *Tales* as a whole, the type of discourse it advocates for is not that of a single-voiced commentator, but a concept of discourse as provisional, multiple, dialogic, balanced. Even the Knight expresses distaste for a totalising viewpoint later in the frame narrative, and urges the Monk to provide a balanced picture of those who 'abideth in prosperitee/Swich thing is gladsom' (VII. 2768-79). The dialogism, mixed style and tonal shifts of the *Tales* is in fact another way in which it recalls Boethius's work. Relihan credits the genre of Menippean satire with providing a framework for Boethius's unusual *Consolation*, which delights in multiple points of view, the presence of many genres within a single work, the frustration of expectation, and a mixture of prose and verse.¹⁸³ Following Boethius, and in the style of the Menippean genre, Chaucer tests rigid conclusions throughout the *Tales* by bringing together many different genres, a melee of voices, and by continually frustrating expectations for stable closure. Perhaps anticipating the perils inherent in the act of writing and the *mouvance* of discourse, Chaucer rejects monologism in the first tale and,

¹⁸¹ John M. Fyler, 'Doubling and the Thopas-Melibee Link', in *Essays on Aesthetics and Medieval Literature in Honor of Howell Chickering*, ed. by John M. Hill, Bonnie Wheeler, and R. F. Yeager (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2014), pp. 129-41.

¹⁸² McGerr, p. 143.

¹⁸³ Relihan, pp. xi-xii; for a fuller account of the potential influence of the Menippean genre on *The Canterbury Tales*, see Anne F. Payne, *Chaucer and Menippean Satire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981).

by constantly opening and closing the narrative through the figure of Theseus, he writes the activity of interpretation, reinterpretation and rewriting into the text itself.

4.7 Conclusions

A first reading of *The Knight's Tale* suggests that the tragic and philosophical romance is all about ending, and to some extent this is true: Theseus's entrance into the text presents itself as an ending; Palamon and Arcite's story is over before it has even begun and continues to be terminated by Theseus; the *occupatio* alludes to 'dead ends', and a *demande d'amour* appears half way through, all signs that Chaucer simply wants to get to the 'point' of his tale. But on closer inspection, the narrative is interested in a paradoxical conception of ending as 'open', ending that invites continuation and which is fundamentally temporary. Theseus's efforts to stabilise the chaotic frequencies of divine jurisdiction produce periodic stoppages throughout the tale, which read as potential narrative endpoints. Against the unfolding of narrative time, however, these moments of textual closure are shown to be mutable, and are reopened by the romance forces of love and *aventure*, as both chance occurrence and impulse to adventure. This leads to a tension between the stasis and movement of the characters, and an ongoing struggle between the closure and continuation of the narrative. Chaucer brings this textual dynamic to crisis point in the tournament: Theseus's victor Arcite falls in field, and such a direct contradiction of his will reveals to the philosopher-king the true extent of his limitation in a world shaped by the gods and goddesses of the classical world and driven ever-forward by the heroes and energies of romance.

This revelation that Theseus's words and deeds are impermanent undermines all his further attempts to bring order and stability to narrative chaos. Even the stockpile of closural gestures commonplace to romance in the final portion cannot guarantee a sense of closure, or even, as Chaucer seems to recognise, the stability of textual interpretation in the hands of

later readers and writers. These ideas are expressed thematically in Theseus's final speech, which is also a self-consolation in the style of Boethius. In the end Theseus is, like Boethius, left without a higher being to answer the metaphysical questions woven through the tale, and he is not rewarded with a vision of heaven; he, as his Roman forebear, must accept that there can be no certainties or stability in the mortal world. In his quest to organise and order the world according to his own human designs, he finds that there are no lasting solutions to larger human problems like death; there is only consolation and comfort to be gleaned from the knowledge that every man, woman, city, tree, rock, word, and monarch is transient. As this chapter finally argues, this conception of the world reflects the writing and reception of poetry itself, a process which by its very nature renders meaning unstable, making texts necessarily and inalterably open-ended. This fact is expressed through the figure of Theseus, but also in the opening sequence of *The Canterbury Tales*, where *The Miller's Tale* rewrites *The Knight's Tale*.

The genre of romance goes through several more iterations in *The Canterbury Tales*, all of which touch on this idea of instability and openness. Indeed, as the concluding chapter of this thesis will argue, *The Knight's Tale* is only the first in a sequence of texts across the *Tales*, some of them nominal romances, that trouble ideas of closure, a trend reflected in the overall unfinishedness of the work. *The Man of Law's Tale*, analogous to the Middle English Romance *Emaré*, takes up a similar theme to *The Knight's Tale* in demonstrating how human life is shaped by forces outside of its control, and concludes with a pious invocation to Christ, a traditional way of bringing closure to romance. Yet the happy ending – the reunion of Constance and King Alla – is offset and unsettled by the sudden misery of his death. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* takes up the themes and motifs of the classic Arthurian romance and sees a knight set forth on a quest to discover 'What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren' (III. 905). And yet even after the question is answered and the knight completes his quest, the tale

continues. While these tales only subtly challenge the norms and parameters of the romance ending, *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* trouble the integrity of the narrative form further still: both are unfinished, and both force us to entirely reconsider the sorts of meaning a romance text can transmit.

5. The Incomplete and Incongruous Tales of the *Squire* and *Sir Thopas*

5.1 Romance Counterpointed Against the Ridiculous

The two unfinished romances in *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Squire's Tale* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, have long been understood in terms of the many ways they flout the conventions of that genre.¹ In c. 1774, Thomas Warton wrote of *Sir Thopas*, 'Chaucer's design was intended to ridicule the frivolous descriptions, and other tedious impertinencies, so common in the volumes of chivalry with which his age was overwhelmed'.² More than two centuries later, Derek Pearsall finds 'all the expected features' of Middle English romance in *Thopas*, 'but everything is wrong'.³ The *Squire's* contribution to romance is so unconventional that Robert S. Haller and Joyce E. Peterson feel Chaucer deliberately attributes 'defective knowledge' of the genre to the only other poet in his merry band of pilgrims.⁴ Helen Phillips stresses *The Squire's Tale's* 'lineage to old romance' but reflects that the narrative 'goes nowhere'.⁵ Similarly, William Kamowski observes that 'the Squire continually flirts with the rich matter of romance [...] yet he never develops what he begins'.⁶ Of course neither *The Squire's Tale* nor *Sir Thopas* is allowed to play out its version of romance, both in some way cut-off and left unfinished.⁷

¹ It should be noted that Chaucer never explicitly categorises these works as romance or *romanz*, though their oddities are observable precisely because they are derived from and in relation to the traditions of that genre: see Kenneth Eckert, 'Harry Bailly and Chaucer-Pilgrim's "Quiting" in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*', *The Review of English Studies*, 68 (2017), 471-87 (p. 477); see also Corinne J. Saunders, 'Chaucer's Romances', in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 85-103 (p. 85).

² Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry*, vol. 2 (London: Richard and John E. Taylor, 1840), p. 198.

³ Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 163.

⁴ Robert S. Haller, 'Chaucer's "Squire's Tale" and the Uses of Rhetoric', *Modern Philology*, 62.4 (1965), 285-95 (p. 286); Joyce E. Peterson, 'The Finished Fragment: A Reassessment of the "Squire's Tale"', *The Chaucer Review*, 5.1 (1970), 62-74 (p. 72).

⁵ Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 133.

⁶ William Kamowski, 'Trading the "Knotte" for Loose Ends: The *Squire's Tale* and the Poetics of Chaucerian Fragments', *Style*, 31.3 (1997), 391-412 (p. 392).

⁷ Following John Burrow, I say 'apparently' incomplete because some critics have claimed in the case of *The Squire's Tale* that the tale is in fact a 'finished' fragment: see John Burrow, 'Poems Without Endings', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 13 (1991), 17-37, p. 17.

This chapter will argue that the tales' irreverent treatment of romance conventions and tropes contributes directly to their unfinished state. Indeed, it is too simplistic to locate the unfinishedness of these poems in their lack of an ending alone; it is not as though readers have a sense of these poems as almost finished, and in the case of *The Squire's Tale* at least, John Lane's continuation proves outstanding narrative issues could not be resolved by the inclusion of a 'final part'.⁸ This is because there are many generic and stylistic incongruities throughout both tales relating to the typical representation of gender roles, the material body, Orientalism, the distinction between humans and animals, and marvels, all of which disrupt the functionality and coherence of the tales as romances. While the lack of a recognisable ending is chief among these incongruities, this textual circumstance is amplified and, in part, determined by the perversion of romance matter; a sensical and fitting end is only possible if the poet places all the components into an intelligible sequence, however tenuous the connections between them. This chapter will suggest, however, that the tales of the *Squire* and *Sir Thopas* nevertheless have significant aesthetic and cultural value despite and even because of the absence of closure; their unfinishedness is a hugely generative artistic choice in the overall composition of the *Tales*.

This discussion will also address the circumstances that produced *The Squire's Tale*, over which, historically, there has been much debate.⁹ While *Sir Thopas* is deliberately

⁸ Lane adds ten Spenserian-type 'cantos' that attempt to continue the story in line with the projections of the Squire: as predicted, Cambyuskan wins a city, the falcon regains her love, Cambalus fights two brothers for Canace, and Algarsif wins Theodore with the aid of the horse. However, Frances Emerson feels the poem fails to develop any kind of consistent allegory, while H. S. V. Jones complains Lane's 'dull lines' have nothing in common with Chaucer's tale nor any 'native worth'; Thomas Warton, too, was 'disappointed' with what he felt was a 'weak effort of invention': Frances W. Emerson, 'The Spenser in John Lane's Chaucer', *Studies in Philology*, 29 (1932), 406-8 (p. 406); H. S. V. Jones, 'Some Observations upon the Squire's Tale', *PMLA*, 20.2 (1905), 346-59 (p. 346); Thomas Warton, *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser*, vol. 1 (London: Dodsley, 1762), pp. 155-6.

⁹ Select works in the include Gardiner Stillwell, who concludes that the intellectual realist Chaucer must have thought it better to abandon the work than to force an entrance into a fairyland that he could not take seriously: Gardiner Stillwell, 'Chaucer in Tartary', *The Review of English Studies*, 95 (1948), 177-88; R. K. Root, who suggests that Chaucer did not know how to finish the story and may

unfinished – the Host’s ‘namoore of this’ emphatically signals its unfinishedness and, as John Burrow and E. A. Jones show, the three-fit structure reflects an ‘arithmetical perfection’ which suggests the extant poem is what Chaucer intended – *The Squire’s Tale* nowhere demonstrates a design in its unfinished state and is not ‘interrupted’ by the Franklin in the same way that *Thopas* is interrupted, though scholars insist on labelling it as such.¹⁰ If the activities of the scribes are anything to go by, it was quite probably left, as John Milton speculates, ‘half told’.¹¹ John M. Manly and Edith Rickert identify six manuscripts where the tale was originally followed by a varying number of blank leaves, apparently left to accommodate the missing part of the tale.¹² It was the early fifteenth-century scribe of Cambridge Dd.4.24 who inserted an explicit after the second part, lamenting that it was ‘as

have thought its unfinished state all to the good because it had the beauty of the incomplete: R. K. Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), p. 268; Grace E. Hadow, who thinks the exuberant piling up of the plot material in the fragment is well suited to the ‘naive Squire’, but that his tale would have taken too long, and that Chaucer no doubt cut it off on purpose: Grace E. Hadow, *Chaucer and His Times* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914), pp. 79-8; and Furnivall, who decides that ‘The work wouldn’t have repaid the effort, and so the Poet turnd it up, as he did the Good Women when he’d done nine of them out of the proposed nineteen’: F. J. Furnivall, ‘Forewords’, *John Lane’s Continuation of Chaucer’s ‘Squire’s Tale’*, Chaucer Society, ser. 2, no. 23, ed. by F. J. Furnivall (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & co., 1888), p. xii.

¹⁰ Following J. A. Burrow, E. A. Jones shows the progressive halving in form reflects the dwindling away of narrative content. Both argue, following Macrobius, that this ratio of 2:1 is productive of harmony. Harry Bailey unwittingly interrupts Chaucer at a point almost exactly halfway through the fifth stanza of his third fit, which allows it to achieve a harmonious resolution despite its apparent raggedness: see E. A. Jones, “‘Loo, lords myne, here is a fit!’: The Structure of Chaucer’s *Sir Thopas*,” *Review of English Studies*, 51 (2000), 248-252 (p. 248) and J. A. Burrow, “‘Sir Thopas’ An Agony in Three Fits,” *Review of English Studies*, 22 (1971), 54-8; for scholars who designate this transition as an ‘interruption’ see for example Peterson, p. 64; Pearsall, p. 143 and Lindsey M. Jones, ‘Chaucer’s Anxiety of Poetic Craft: The *Squire’s Tale*’, *Style*, 41.3 (2007), 300-82 (p. 302); and more recently, Takami Matsuda, ‘The Interruption of the “Squire’s Tale”: The Disillusionment of Wonder in the “Canterbury Tales”’, in *Chaucer and English and American Literature: Essays Commemorating the Retirement of Professor Masatoshi Kawasaki*, ed. by Yuichiro Azuma, Kotaro Kawasaki, and Koichi Kano (Tokyo: Kinseido, 2015), pp. 44–59.

¹¹ See John Milton, ‘Il Penseroso’, *Milton’s L’Allegro, Il Penseroso, Comus and Lycidas*, ed. by T. F. Huntington (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900), pp. 7-13, l. 109; also Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer*, ed. by Thomas Tyrwhitt, vol. 1, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1798), p. 98.

¹² *The Text of The Canterbury Tales* ed. by John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), pp. 41-455; the manuscripts are MS Harley 7335 (two folios left blank), Additional 35286 (seven folios missing), Harley 1758 (two folios missing), Hatton Donat 1 (one folio blank, two missing), Rawlinson Poetry 149 (one folio missing), and Rawlinson Poetry 223 (eleven folios missing); see also Burrow, ‘Poems Without Endings’, p. 20.

meche as Chaucer mede'.¹³ Later copyists of the tale, from William Caxton to Wynkyn de Worde, express similar dissatisfaction with their failure to locate more of the tale, which suggests they shared the scribal assumption that Chaucer did not intend to leave *The Squire's Tale* incomplete.¹⁴ Modern Chaucerians remain divided on this point since, as Kamowski points out, 'no one has satisfactorily explained how so massive a narrative (if it were finished as the Squire projects it in his final lines) could have been embedded in its entirety into the *Canterbury Tales*'.¹⁵ This study will take a revisionist position on the matter: in the larger context of the *Tales*, it does not matter whether the poem was left unfinished by intention, accident, or necessity in the initial stages of composition; both of the tales in question sit within this larger framework with purpose, meaning and aesthetic value, paradoxically productive because of their unproductiveness. It is because of their generative properties that these romances 'counterpointed against the ridiculous' come to symbolise the polyphonic, diverse narrative project of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.¹⁶ The next section of the chapter will look at some of the critical approaches common to both tales, before turning to their generic and stylistic incongruities.

5.2 Common Critical Approaches

Though the two tales clearly have distinct critical histories, common to both are the explanations supplied for their comparable treatments of romance, which tend to fall into one of three categories. Recent work by Kenneth Eckert and Jessica Brantley reflect the general

¹³ Manly and Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. 2, p. 297.

¹⁴ For a more comprehensive summary of the copyists interpreted the blank and missing folios, see Burrow, p. 21 ff.: 'There was evidently continuing uncertainty on this point, as the early printed editions also show. Caxton's first edition ends *The Squire's Tale* with a simple explicit: "Here endith the Squyeris tale," but this is altered in his second edition to "Ther is namoore of the Squyers tale." Yet Wynkyn de Worde, a little later, had still not given up hope: "There can be fownde no more of this forsaid tale, whyche I have right dilygently serchyd in many dyvers scopyes".'

¹⁵ Kamowski, p. 391.

¹⁶ This phrase is taken from Pearsall's introduction in which he comments that in the *Tales*, 'Romance is counterpointed against the ridiculous': see Pearsall, p. xi.

consensus that *Sir Thopas* is a parody or burlesque; Derek Pearsall also finds ‘elements of parody’ in *The Squire’s Tale*, while Kamowski sees possible burlesque.¹⁷ Robert S. Haller and M. C. Seymour argue, independently, that *The Squire’s Tale* is designed to satirise romance, though the idea that the tale is a satirical portrayal of the ‘Squire’s’ poetic ‘incapacities’ has declined in popularity in more recent years.¹⁸ In the case of *Sir Thopas*, however, assessments of this kind persist: Joanne A. Charbonneau, for example, assumes *Thopas* is intended to expose only the ‘extravagances and faults’ of romance through satire.¹⁹ A third view of *The Squire’s Tale* is offered by Lindsey M. Jones, who goes so far as to suggest that Chaucer’s peculiar handling of romance material in this case creates a ‘pseudo-tale’.²⁰ This recalls historic arguments about the poem, epitomised by the work of F. N. Robinson, for whom Chaucer’s engagement with the ‘defective’ metrical romance was evidence he had put his aesthetic ‘sophistication’ and legitimate tale-telling activities to rest.²¹ Similarly, Helen Phillips writes that *Sir Thopas* also ‘moves beyond the expected definition of story’ and should ‘be taken less seriously than other tales’.²²

¹⁷ Interestingly, Eckert argues that the target of this parody is intratextual because *Sir Thopas*, he feels, makes better sense as a requital to the Host: see Eckert, p. 472; see Jessica Brantley, ‘Reading the Forms of *Sir Thopas*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 47.4 (2013), 416-38 (p. 416); Pearsall, p. 115; Kamowski also identifies *The Squire’s Tale* as a possible burlesque of romance, see Kamowski, p. 391.

¹⁸ Haller, p. 286; see also M. C. Seymour, ‘Some Satiric Pointers in the *Squire’s Tale*’, *English Studies*, 70 (1989), 311-14; see especially, in response to Seymour, Vincent DiMarco, ‘Supposed Satiric Pointers in the *Squire’s Tale*’, *English Studies*, 78 (1997), 330-33; also Craig A. Berry, ‘Flying Sources: Classical Authority in Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*’, *English Literary History*, 68.2 (2001), 287-313 (p. 289).

¹⁹ Joanne A. Charbonneau, ‘Sir Thopas’, in Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, eds., *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), p. 651; though Eckert has recently called attention to the problem with the idea of Thopas as pure satire: ‘But if we are no longer sure that the romances deserve to be ridiculed, what if this was also never Chaucer’s intention in Thopas?’: Eckert, p. 472.

²⁰ Jones argues that *The Squire’s Tale* is essentially an examination of poetic craftsmanship, a ‘pseudo-tale’ designed as an exercise in the process and hazards of prosodic composition, ‘one which wears the trappings of a romance narrative but which was never intended as a fully operational story’: Jones, p. 303.

²¹ F. N. Robinson, ‘Introduction’, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1957), p. 9; see also Haller, p. 285.

²² Phillips, p. 171.

Despite the points of convergence in the scholarship on these tales, they are rarely considered alongside one another beyond the occasional mention of the similar way in which they seem to tactically mobilise ‘poor’ poetics to make an ironic point about romance motifs and traditions.²³ This seems to be because historically the two poems were quite reasonably evaluated via different criteria. As Joseph A. Dane observes, the newly available categories of burlesque and parody imported from France in the eighteenth century allowed *Thopas* to be read as a ‘meta-poem’, whereas *The Squire’s Tale* was considered to be first and foremost a noble and heroic narrative on the authority of Milton’s praise and Edmund Spenser’s before him.²⁴ And yet, A. C. Hamilton notes, Spenser’s explicit reference to *Thopas* in the earlier version of *The Faerie Queene* (1590) suggests that he took substantial inspiration from the tale in the creation of his chivalric world.²⁵ The hierarchy of seriousness that usually precludes comparisons between the two tales is a fallacy, then, and the parallels between their handling of romance material in the context of their unfinishedness deserve more scholarly attention than they have previously been given.

The controversy over the tone of the tales is undoubtedly fuelled by the fact of their incompleteness. In both cases, the lack of textual closure compounds the undecidability of the subject matter and drives the endless cycle of ‘contentious and antithetical interpretations’.²⁶ This difficulty has led some scholars to reject the fact of the tales’ unfinishedness. Indeed, Peterson and Jones use the example of *Thopas* to express a view of *The Squire’s Tale* as a successful, ‘finished’ fragment (intentionally fragmented and thus complete) to ground their

²³ See for example Jones, p. 303.

²⁴ Joseph A. Dane, ‘Genre and Authority: The Eighteenth-Century Creation of Chaucerian Burlesque’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 48.4 (1985), 345-62 (p. 354).

²⁵ A. C. Hamilton, *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990; 1997), p. 146.

²⁶ Kamowski, p. 391.

respective claims about the meaning and motive behind the offbeat romance.²⁷ Peterson, for instance, writes:

to continue to assume that the tale is unfinished limits its critical usefulness [...] as long as it is thought that Chaucer did not complete it, the “imperfections” in the work may legitimately be used in arguing that Chaucer abandoned it because he was aware of his failures as a craftsman, or some equally reductive dismissal.²⁸

However, there is no need to posit *The Squire’s Tale* or *Sir Thopas* as finished to derive their value as works of narrative poetry. Clearly both tales disrupt the mechanics of the genre and misuse romance tropes, whether by dilating *topos* and rhetorical figures, exaggerating conventions of style, metre, and register, or by simply refusing to provide a credible hero. But these so-called ‘imperfections’ have a generative power, calling for heightened interpretive activity and drawing attention to the aspects of romance ripe for revision.

However, such a revisionary outlook comes at the expense of narrative cohesion and, ultimately, closure. Because *The Squire’s Tale* and *Thopas* demonstrate such widespread incongruities in tone, form, and subject matter, the tales frustrate the structural and thematic logic upon which the various sub-types of the genre rely – including prose, metrical, popular, and Arthurian. The stability of this logic, which tends to reaffirm binary oppositions, gloss over ambiguities, and convey meaning through stock scenarios, is integral to the success of romance narratives. The abduction of a noble lady, for instance, will generally be followed by the hero’s rescue of her, an invading Saracen enemy will be defeated by a Christian knight, and marvels will be intuited by the characters and other inhabitants of the world: these are the some of the principles on which romances turn. This is not to say that the romance genre is

²⁷ Peterson, pp. 62-74; Jones, p. 302; John Burrow finds this sort of argument that ‘*The Squire’s Tale* is a deliberately botched job, designed to be cut off’ wholly unconvincing, see Burrow, ‘Poems Without Endings’ pp. 30-1; equally uninspiring are some of the conclusions made in recent assessments of these tales. Referring to *The Squire’s Tale*, Alan S. Ambrisco writes that ‘the text ultimately does fail’: Alan S. Ambrisco, “‘It lyth nat in my tonge’”: Occupatio and Otherness in the *Squire’s Tale*, *The Chaucer Review*, 38.3 (2004), 205-228 (p. 224); and for Lindsey Jones, the Squire ‘ultimately produces an unsatisfactory tale’, see Jones, p. 315.

²⁸ Peterson, p. 63.

monolithic, only that there are repeating patterns of themes and motifs. The next part of the chapter will show that the malfunction of this logic in Chaucer's tales of romance is at least a contributing factor, if not the reason why the different components of the narrative cannot cohere into a finished work.

5.3 Generic and Stylistic Incongruities in *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas*

This section of chapter will examine how the representations of story across *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* disrupt archetypal romance contrasts between male and female roles, ideal and real bodies, east and west, humans and animals, marvels and manmade objects. Instead, they organise romance matter into new formulations alongside the grotesque, the quotidian and the Other, everything the romance genre characteristically avoids or suppresses. In the case of *The Squire's Tale*, Gardiner Stillwell sees Chaucer 'importing humanity into his story, somewhat to its detriment as a typical romance'.²⁹ In both tales, the poet's incorporation of realism, humour, and humanity into the romance form causes tropological disruption, which in turn produces generic and stylistic incongruities and prevents the two texts from asserting difference between their characters and components, undermining the function of artistic resolution. The tales further manifest, in their individual ways, a breakdown of the mechanisms through which romance typically conveys its subject matter, and these abuses of metre and rhetorical figures result in a series of narratological 'gaps and fissures' comparable to those observed across Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, which open the text to greater possibilities for interpretation.³⁰

²⁹ Stillwell, p. 179.

³⁰ For an alternative view of gaps and 'fissures' in narrative structure: see Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), passim; for Macherey, 'fissures' are where the text turns away from possibilities and returns to ideological closure; from them we can read both the historical location of the text and its constitutive 'function' in that specific moment. The 'fissures' are a sequence in the text which realises and confronts material, attitudes and possibilities that are disturbing to a social ideology and predictive of forces hostile to the ruling ideology e.g. in Chaucer, the limit-revealing phenomena might be larger social omissions such as the

The ability of the tales to produce incongruities is predicated on a common notion of the motifs, scenarios, and characters that recur across the medieval romance genre. Though much work focuses on *Thopas* as a parody of popular English tail-rhyme exclusively, there is a broader range of allusion; as Brantley notes, ‘the horizon of expectations established by this form is so broad and varied that it almost ceases to exist’.³¹ Also relevant are longer chivalric romances with interwoven subplots of the type, Helen Cooper suggests, Chaucer may have intended in *The Squire’s Tale*.³² Chaucer’s parody of the traditions represented by the different types of verse romance might seem to satirize the ‘predictable and debased’ elements of the genre. Yet both tales delight in the world of romance as they deride it, and their expression of its tropes should not be written off as purely negative.³³ The next section will explore, in the context of other notable medieval romances, how the juxtaposition of romance tropes with extraneous material, as well as the elision of difference, leads to the breakdown of narrative order in the tales of the *Squire* and *Thopas*; it will finally suggest,

absence of the labouring classes and the relative absence of Christian thought. But whereas Macherey sees these possibilities then being closed off in a consoling way that ‘delimits’ the fissure, reveals the strain and, in locating it, contains it, I see the possibility for thought and imaginative response remaining open to the reader.

³¹ Brantley, p. 431; see Laura Hibbard Loomis, who proposed the parallel between *Sir Thopas* and the Auchinleck romances, also cites ‘pious legend, romance, or lyric’ for the ‘minstrel style’ that Chaucer is parodying: see Laura Hibbard Loomis, “The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330–40,” *PMLA*, 57 (1942) 595–627, and “Chaucer and the Auchinleck Manuscript: ‘Thopas’ and ‘Guy of Warwick,’” in *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown*, ed. by P. W. Long (New York: New York University Press, 1940), pp. 111–28; Kevin Whetter argues the genre and signification of a romance is only properly established by its reference to actual texts. Both tales do this, with an oft-quoted passage in *Thopas* referring to other ‘romances of prys’ like *Horne Childe*, *Bevis of Hampton* and *Guy of Warwick*, and the Squire invoking the figures of Gawain and Lancelot, see Kevin Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 40.

³² Helen Cooper argues that ‘The Squire’s is an interlaced romance – or rather, part of one, since it breaks off at the start of its third section’: see Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 145.

³³ While more recent work has tended to move against the idea of parody as being intrinsically satiric, the bulk of scholarship on these tales suffers from the persistent assumption that everything in *The Canterbury Tales* is satiric and therefore negative: see Burrow, pp. 30-1, and Pearsall, pp. 138-44, 160-5; Kenneth Eckert observes that ‘the majority of discourse on *Thopas* remains focused on the intensity of the satire [...] or the width of the satire’: Eckert, p. 474.

however, that this is part of a wider revisionary project Chaucer puts into practice across the *Tales*.

5.3.1 Masculine and Feminine Roles

The Middle English romances of the fourteenth century uphold the logic of certain binary distinctions in their delineation of chivalric and courtly material. Broadly speaking, male heroes encounter or rescue eligible maidens, enemies of the ‘Saracen’ east are converted or condemned, and giants, fairies and animals are either enemies or servants, seldom friends and certainly never equals. With respect to male and female roles, women are rarely centred in the action, with the exception of *Emaré*, and tend to be characterised as chaste and courteous maidens, haughty ladies, devious temptresses or loyal wives.³⁴ In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain’s honour is repeatedly tested by the advances of his female host, and in *Bevis of Hampton*, Josian remains loyal to her husband until death in the face of much adversity.³⁵ Descriptions of women are highly conventional and, Nicola F. McDonald observes, ‘a small number of formulaic tags [relating to flowers] are used over and over again’.³⁶ Citing David Aers, she draws out the implications of this literary practice: ‘Plucked flowers do not speak, let alone answer back and walk away’.³⁷ Their male counterparts are often distinguished by

³⁴ See Elizabeth Archibald, ‘Contextualizing Chaucer’s Constance: Romance Modes and Family Values’, in *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff*, ed. by Teresa Tavormina and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 161-75; also, *The Romance of Emaré*, ed. by Edith Rickert (London: Oxford University Press, 1906).

³⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by W. R. J. Barron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, ed. by Jennifer Fellows (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁶ Nicola F. McDonald, ‘The Seege of Troye: “ffor wham was wakened al this wo?”’, *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. by Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 195; in chivalric literature, the formal portrait or *effictio* ‘became the most invariable method of presenting feminine beauty’: L. A. Haselmayer, ‘The Portraits in Chaucer’s Fabliaux’, *Review of English Studies*, 14 (1938), 310-14 (p. 310); see also Brewer, who speaks of the ‘extraordinary fixity’ of formal descriptions of feminine beauty: D. S. Brewer, ‘The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, especially “Harley Lyrics”, Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans’, *Modern Language Review*, 50 (1955), 257-69 (p. 257).

³⁷ McDonald, p. 195; see also David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 127.

superlative physical excellence. The heroes of *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Percyvell of Gales*, are fair and strong, and it is precisely because of these good looks that they are allowed to leave their homesteads and pursue knightly adventures.³⁸ But a female character is rarely allowed to go unchecked, and, having been brought into view by her knightly hero, she is either expunged by the text or pacified by the bonds of marriage.

The representations of male and female characters in *Sir Thopas* and *The Squire's Tale* go against the grain of the safe polarisation in their contemporaries. There are re-appropriations of male and female traits in both tales, but the confusion of gendered descriptors is particularly apparent in *Sir Thopas*. We meet Chaucer's hero when he is riding through a forest, full of 'love-longynge' for an elf queen.³⁹ But 'Topaz', with his girlish name and suitably precious demeanour, is not a typical chivalric hero. His physical appearance is expressed in a flurry of confused imagery: he is as 'sweete as is the brembul flour', with lips as 'rede as rose' and his coat of arms is as 'whit as is a lilye flour' (VII. 726-867). Rarely commented on is how these floral and typically feminine similes are offset by the hero's beard, which hangs 'raughte adoun' to his belt (VII. 730-1).⁴⁰ This androgynous portrayal of Thopas, at once effeminate and flamboyantly masculine, highlights the arbitrary nature of the usual literary vocabulary assigned to male and female figures in romance. Phillips observes that 'Chaucer draws a lot of comedy out of attributing to characters details inappropriate to their sex, touches of stylistic cross-dressing' if only to affirm the 'sense of conventional

³⁸ Thomas Chestre, *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. by Maldwyn Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); *Sir Perceval of Galles: and, Ywain and Gawain*, ed. by Mary Flowers Braswell (Kalamazoo, Mich: TEAMS, 1995); see also Marianne A. Fisher, 'Nobility in Middle English Romance' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cardiff University, 2013), pp. 84-6.

³⁹ Citations to Chaucer refer by fragment and line number to Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor, 2nd edn (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2012).

⁴⁰ Beards were in fact the preferred fashion in fourteenth-century England: see Paul B. Newman, *Daily Life in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001), p. 122.

gender boundaries as power-boundaries'.⁴¹ Yet, as I will argue, the *Tale of Sir Thopas* is doing something slightly different.

The fact that Thopas demonstrates many of the qualities that female love objects of romance would usually possess means he has little hope of winning the fairy queen because, as Phillips notes, 'in many respects he is the elf queen'.⁴² The chivalric incompetency he displays on account of those qualities, Phillips points out, affirms gender stereotypes. Yet in focusing on the figure of Thopas we overlook a more subtle way that the poem challenges conventional gender relations. Because the knight is unable to make his beloved elf queen his 'lemman', or even locate her, she is not moderated by a male character and apparently in control of her own visibility, and this goes some way to subverting the traditional gendered power imbalance of the romance. This subtle realignment of the central heteronormative relationship is not without consequence: if the object of Thopas's devotion is invisible and intractable, and the qualities attributed to Thopas make him cowardly and generally non-functional as a knight, then the plot to find the fairy queen has little traction or credibility. In fact, the combination of these two types of generic irregularity causes the narrative action to stagnate. Unlike the opening of *Bevis of Hampton*, then, echoed in *Thopas*, the elaborate description of the 'fair' Thopas does not guarantee prowess or adventure.⁴³ The fairy queen is not courted, the giant is not slain, archetypes 'of prys' are not lived up to, and all the while Thopas only 'priketh' back and forth through the forest.

In *The Squire's Tale*, the reconfiguration of gender roles in fact becomes the catalyst for adventure, as the most prominent female character fills the space typically occupied by a male hero. After the initial description of Cambyuskan and the magical objects brought to

⁴¹ Phillips, p. 176.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ 'Chaucer's lines prove to be something of a pastiche of all extant versions of Bevis': see Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance: Tail-rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), p. 75.

court, the king's daughter Canace becomes the figurehead of the text, not as a love object, but as a free agent. She does not hand over the magical ring to a knightly hero as a token of love or goodwill, as Rimnild does in *Horn Childe*, but uses it as a tool for her own adventure: she takes it to the outskirts of the court where it allows her to understand the 'entente' of the birdsong and rescue the wounded falcon (V. 400). Though the falcon's lament about her false suitor seems to reinforce the gender dynamic seen in *Anelida and Arcite*, *The Squire's Tale* does not make Canace subject to the same rules. While Canace's bright 'morning joy' in her mirror and ring, and especially her impulse to 'walke aboute', conforms to the romance stereotype of the haughty maiden (V. 381), conventional structures cannot otherwise contain her.⁴⁴ Rather than being cast as something to be pacified, her bold temperament, more akin to a knight-errant than a lady, kickstarts the second part of the tale. It allows for another female story to be focalised through the narrative, and take precedence over the impulse to a more traditional line of adventure.

The pagan princess, Alan S. Ambrisco writes, is usually 'the most tractable pagan in the romance genre and the one who can, both literally and figuratively, be married to a Christian prince and Christianity itself'.⁴⁵ However, unlike Josian, Emaré, or the oriental analogue for *The Squire's Tale*, the 'Tale of the Enchanted Horse', in which three visiting sages ask to marry the king's daughters in exchange for magical gifts, Chaucer's Canace is not ultimately defined by her relationship to a male character.⁴⁶ Despite the tale's later projection that 'Cambalo' will 'wynne' her (V. 669), she remains unmarried when the tale

⁴⁴ Stillwell, p. 187.

⁴⁵ Ambrisco, p. 220.

⁴⁶ It is probable that Chaucer knew some earlier form of this story of the 'Enchanted Horse' found in the *Thousand and One Nights*, or the tale of the flying horse in the *Arabian Nights*, which doubtless circulated in Western Europe in the late thirteenth century as is made clear by the independent redaction of the story in two Old French romances *Cléomadès* by Adenès le Rois and the *Meliacin* of Girart d'Amiens (the gift-bearers are kings in the Old French retellings): for a more detailed account of the interaction between Chaucer's tale and these sources and analogues, see Carol Falvo Heffernan, 'Chaucer's Squire's Tale: Content and Structure', in *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 63-82 (pp. 64-6).

stops abruptly *in medias res* (V. 672).⁴⁷ The audience is left with the sense of Canace, not as a wife or lover, but as a heroic figure who rescues the falcon from her plight and prevents her from exacting further harm upon herself. *The Squire's Tale* thus privileges a 'newfangled' network of female characters and stories over the male to male and male to female transactions that typically structure romance narratives.⁴⁸ The characterisation of Canace also disrupts the build-up to the sequence of male combat or courtship followed by marriage as a means to end; her autonomy and its impact upon the tale structure marks a turn away from this type of resolution.

In distinct ways, then, both *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* stimulate incongruous gender relations which frustrate the progression towards the closural sequences of romance, but which also present new narrative possibilities to its stock figures outside of the limits of gendered conventions. This suggests that the dismantling of the narrative order of romance creates conditions favourable to transformation and revision. Such distortions are not limited to gender, however. In both texts, the glittering, idealised romance persona is travestied and materialised with grotesque embellishments, and, in *Sir Thopas*, the cultural integrity of the chivalric class is thrown into question.

5.3.2 Material Bodies

The courtly romances of the twelfth and thirteenth century are generally more concerned with the soul than the material body. Many of the references to the human body are symbolic, and

⁴⁷ Some critics have argued that *The Squire's Tale* projects a narrative of incest because of the similarities between the name of Canace's brother and the name of her future suitor Cambalo/Cambalus (*The Man of Law's Tale* also mentions this story), and it is this that problematises the ending to the tale; Elizabeth Scala, for instance, argues that 'Canacee's potentially incestuous relationship with her brother produces critical anxiety, even when the relationship is not there'; the tale can only be about incest 'in its absence': see Elizabeth Scala, *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 84-8; see also see Ambrisco, p. 221.

⁴⁸ See Jeff Espie, 'Spenser, Chaucer, and the Renaissance *Squire's Tale*', *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, 33.1 (2019), 133-60 (p. 144).

tend to be given in the context of a spiritual programme like the Grail quest.⁴⁹ Even in the later Middle English popular romances, such as *Bevis* and *Guy of Warwick*, idealised courtly figures circulate in the texts without generally being made subject to bodily realities.⁵⁰ When bodies are described in detail it tends to be for the purpose of exclusion from the aristocratic class, or to mark the inferior moral character of a Saracen or peasant, thought to correlate with repugnant physical features.⁵¹ In *Sir Thopas*, however, the repugnant body is the chivalric one. Chaucer imagines a corrupt version of the idealised courtly body and parades it in its grotesque, material reality, ‘semely nose’ and all (VII. 729), crystallizing the boorish status of the bourgeois fool-knight of Flanders to whom it belongs.

The adoption of formulaic flower imagery in the elaboration of the hero’s appearance is made even more preposterous by the addition of incongruities relating to food. Rosy-lipped Thopas is introduced in terms that evoke visions of the banquet hall, or more accurately, the kitchen: his face is like ‘payndemayn’, a loaf of white bread, his beard has the rich, yellowish hue of ‘saffroun’ and his complexion is like ‘scarlet in grayn’, red cloth dyed in corn (VII. 725-30). Derek Pearsall draws out the nuances in the vernacular here:

to compare the whiteness of his skin to ‘payndemayn’ is rather as if an advertiser should speak of a desired whiteness as the whiteness of sliced bread. ‘Saffron’ too has kitchen connotations, and is quite the wrong word to describe the colour of his beard.⁵²

⁴⁹ See *The Body and the Soul in Medieval Literature*, J. A. W. Memorial Lectures, ed. by Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), passim; Caroline Walker Bynum has written extensively on the medieval notion of the human body as a locus of sacrality, see, for instance, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), passim.

⁵⁰ Though these stories would have been shaped by the earlier Anglo-Norman sources from which they derived, ‘Boeue de Haumtone’ and ‘Gui de Warewic’, c. 1232-42.

⁵¹ In the Middle Ages, individuals were judged by their physical appearance, and it was believed that people’s facial features were indicative of their character and the predisposition of their soul (physiognomy): for a full account of this, see Jan Ziolkowski, ‘Avatars of Ugliness in Medieval Literature’, *The Modern Language Review*, 79.1 (1984), 1-20; Monica Green, ‘Bodily Essences: Bodies as Categories of Difference’, in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age*, ed. by Linda Kalof (Oxford: Berg, 2010), pp. 149–172.

⁵² Pearsall, p. 163.

That all the foodstuffs used to describe Thopas are considered to be ‘high quality’ only makes him seem more ridiculous: he embodies that which bears the name of the gentile but in the end is only something else to be consumed and forgotten. This cookhouse imagery is carried through the rest of the poem, and, for Chaucer’s hero, the entire world becomes a gluttonous feast. He is distracted by the sight of ‘lycorys and cetewale’, ‘clowegylofre/And notemuge to putte in ale’ (VII. 761-3), and later gorges on more ‘lycorys’ and ‘gyngebreed’ in the seat of honour at his feast of ‘geestours’, who he encourages to tell tales of ‘popes and cardinals’ (VII. 845-56).

In the context of his general buffoonery, Thopas’s request at this suitably uncouth feast evokes the medieval custom of appointing boy bishops and a Pope of Fools, which typically took place at the beginning of carnival.⁵³ In historical accounts of medieval festivals, one of the most prominent features of the carnival was the crowning of a Lord of Misrule, a jester or fool who presided over the mock ceremonies and feasts.⁵⁴ In *Thopas*, the hero is repeatedly characterised as a fool: his talent is not jousting but wrestling, he prances jovially through the forest and away from the giant, and when he returns to town, he calls upon his ‘myrie men’ to ‘make hym bothe game and glee’, just as a Lord of Misrule might oversee carnival revelry (VII. 839-40). According to Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the main attributes of the medieval clown is to make every high ceremonial gesture material or simply absurd, and Thopas achieves this wherever he goes.⁵⁵ Pearsall notes that the arming of the hero mixes ‘the plausible and the absurd, the momentary sense that sanity has been regained dissolving constantly into laughter at nonsense triumphant’.⁵⁶ He carries an empty sword sheath made of ivory and a shield of gold, and he clumsily swears his battle vows, not in

⁵³ See *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*, ed. by Robert Thomas Lambdin and Laura Cooner Lambdin (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 188-194.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; also, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 5.

⁵⁵ Bakhtin, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1-58 (p. 20).

⁵⁶ Pearsall, p. 164.

God's name, but on 'ale and breed' (VII. 872). The collective of 'Myrie men' is reminiscent of the legend of Robin Hood, the subject of a yeoman's tale better suited to the Miller or to Gamelyn. Far from being a conventional chivalric hero, then, Sir Thopas is the bumbling ringleader of a carnivalesque 'feast of fools'.

Surprisingly, there are also traces of the materialised courtly body in *The Squire's Tale*. Though Chaucer describes the experience of the feast itself in high terms, his report of the aftermath manifests a more real, more grotesque concept of the body than readers might expect to see in romance:

The norice of digestioun, the sleepe,
 Gan on hem wynke and bad hem taken keepe
 That muchel drynke and labour wolde han reste,
 And with a galpyng mouth hem alle he keste
 And said it was tyme to lye adoun,
 For blood was in his domynacioun.
 'Cherisseth blood, natures freend,' quod he.
 They thanken hym galpyng by two by thre,
 And every wight gan drawe hym to his reste.
 As sleepe hem bad they tooke it for the best,
 Hir dremes shul nat been ytoold for me
 Ful were hire heddes of fumositee [...] (V. 347-58)

The figure of sleep, with his gaping, yawning orifice, is personified as a cosmic body that both represents and governs every man, playfully encouraging 'hem' to give into alcohol-fuelled dreams and the impulses of bodily humours. It is noteworthy that the men's fatigue is a normal, human response to a day spent eating, drinking, and engaged in social activities. But it is not a romance response. Feasts at court are common in romance, particularly those held for the religious festivals of Pentecost and Christmas, and typically provide the setting for a challenge or pledge that marks the beginning of a new adventure.⁵⁷ And yet the details of the dishes consumed are rarely described, let alone their effects on digestion and sleep patterns, and especially not in this rhetorically heightened manner.⁵⁸ Where Thopas tries

⁵⁷ Such as in Chrétien's *Yvain* ('Pantecoste'; l. 6), and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ('kryst masse'; l. 37).

⁵⁸ See Spearing on the personification of death in *Havelok* as an elevation of style unusual in romance: Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, pp. 51-2.

desperately to engage the world of romance, then, the characters of *The Squire's Tale* do not appear to inhabit its timeless world, and seem better suited to the everyday reality of human social interactions and circadian rhythms. Indeed, this representation of courtly life means that the courtiers are too tired to venture out, and so no chivalric adventure materialises. This passage is also the first major example of the tale's tendency to decentralise and disjoint through incongruous narrative structure: there is no rationalisation or reassertion of a central intrigue to bring this segment back into line with the rest of the tale.

The materialised and, at times, grotesque characterisation of the knightly protagonist in *Sir Thopas* has more far-reaching structural consequences. Chaucer's poem invokes recognisable romance scenarios only to have them muddled and punctured by the misplaced chivalric posturing of its hero. Kenneth Eckert writes that 'The narrator ticks off the obligatory authorizing marks of the adventure quest, the love longing and chivalric battle, but the story never catalyzes them into a meaningful result'.⁵⁹ We see this 'humorous arc' of dramatic expectation as all the right narratological devices are brought into play, but nothing happens. In *Sir Thopas*, almost all the structural mechanisms that might ease the transition from one part of a romance to the next (the minstrel address, the division of the poem into fits, the bridging passages describing the knight's sleeping habits) only prevent the discrete components of romance material from cohering into a narrative.

This deflation of action at the scene level is reflected in the configuration of the verse. The general overuse of enumeration (see VII. 852-72), and tail-rhyme form, prevalent in so many other Middle English romances like *Bevis* and *Horn Childe*, create the illusion of action and momentum where there is none. It is surely true, as Brantley writes, that the 'form of *Sir Thopas* [...] is a joke', with tail-rhyme complicated by the use of single-stress bob lines at VII. 793, 803, 813, 823 and 887. These lines overcrowd the pattern of the poem and turn the

⁵⁹ Eckert, p. 482.

music of tail-rhyme into a farcical singsong of no apparent substance.⁶⁰ Rhiannon Purdie also emphasises the importance of the diagrammatic layout of the poem observed in the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts. The ‘graphic tail-rhyme’ in those manuscripts, characterised by the parenthetical arrangement of the tail- and bob-lines, and the difficult-to-navigate layout it creates, reflect and develop the incongruous humour of the subject matter through a ‘visual-metrical joke’.⁶¹

The discordant romance of *Sir Thopas* is reminiscent of the anti-peasant ditty David Wallace describes in ‘In Flaundes’, ‘Wi willen van den Kerels zinghen’, which mocks peasant lineage and dress, and whose ‘chorus singles out peasant diet and peasant gluttony for repeated ridicule: “broot ende caes,” “bread and cheese”’.⁶² Yet the absurd portrayal of a gourmandising knight seems to be a class issue of a slightly different order, an aristocratic formulation which places tropes associated with rustics and with the aristocracy side by side to mock the presumptuous figure of the *sire bourgeois*.⁶³ The opening lines of the poem emphasise Thopas’s origins ‘In Flaundes al biyonde the see/At Poperynge’, fittingly risible in name and famous for its trade in everyday staples from beer to pears: ‘The middling status of Poperinge befits Sir Thopas, a middling kind of knight and a distinctively Flemish one’ (VII. 719-20).⁶⁴ With their new-found economic prosperity in the fourteenth century, the Flemish found themselves in the position to imitate the ancestral social practices of France

⁶⁰ Brantley, p. 417.

⁶¹ Twenty of the fifty-three manuscripts use this graphic layout; it was a traditional layout for tail-rhyme but by no means universal: see Rhiannon Purdie, ‘The Implications of Manuscript Layout in Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 41.3 (2005), 263-74 (p. 263); also Judith Tschann, ‘The Layout of ‘Sir Thopas’ in the Ellesmere, Hengwrt, Cambridge Dd.4.24, and Cambridge Gg.4.27 Manuscripts’, *The Chaucer Review*, 20 (1985), 1–13.

⁶² David Wallace, ‘In Flaundes’, in *Premodern Places: Calais to Surinam, Chaucer to Aphra Behn* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 91-138 (p. 97).

⁶³ In other words, the ‘bourgeois man’.

⁶⁴ Wallace argues that the ‘middlingness’ of *Sir Thopas* is reinforced by the tail-rhyme, which offered the lower to middling Flemish urbanities the chance to consume the French or French derived chivalric adventures of the ‘romances of prys’ such as *Bevis* and *Guy of Warwick*: see Wallace, pp. 99-100.

and England, and Flanders became synonymous with bogus class pretensions.⁶⁵ According to Manly, the English audience of *Thopas* would have been accustomed ‘to poke fun, not without a little resentment’ at the efforts made by the Flemish bourgeoisie to imitate their dress, manners, and exploits.⁶⁶

Wallace finds a coded discourse of Flanders as a ‘place and as a way of being’ across *The Canterbury Tales*, which seems to be weaponized precisely for the purpose of comedic attacks.⁶⁷ The mention of the region in *Sir Thopas* suggests an enthusiastic patron of chivalry unwittingly compromised by his Flemish provenance, an implication that bears out over the course of the poem. The hero is positioned as a native of the local marketplace, not the court (VII. 720), he participates in contests at peasant agricultural fairs (VII. 740-1), and he is styled as ‘Sir’ throughout, though no such title is used in medieval romance.⁶⁸ In line with the other incongruities drawn out of the representation of the hero, the emphasis on the details of Thopas’s Flemish town life would have signalled, for Chaucer’s readership, the zealous ‘imitation of nobility in the land of the non-noble’.⁶⁹ Significantly, ‘Flaundes’ is mentioned in relation to the Squire in Chaucer’s *General Prologue*, though there, as Wallace points out, it is surely meant to evoke the recent English campaign in Ypres, which resulted in ‘the lower echelons of military society’ wreaking havoc on the territory.⁷⁰ However, the fact Chaucer assigned the tale of *Thopas* to his avatar suggests that he had a more complicated stance on the subject of Flanders, one which was not straightforwardly negative.

⁶⁵ Flanders was one corner of a trading triangle alongside England and Italy that flourished during the Middle Ages: for a full account of its cultural significance during this period: *ibid.*, pp. 91-138.

⁶⁶ J. M. Manly, ‘Sir Thopas, a Satire’, *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, 13 (1928), 57-73 (pp. 59-60).

⁶⁷ In *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Pardoner’s Tale*, for example: Wallace, p. 93.

⁶⁸ Calling a hero ‘Sir’ Thopas, common in contemporary English romances, would have also seemed unfashionable to a court audience used to modern French romances, see Burrow, ‘An Agony in Three Fits’, pp. 54-8; Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 306.

⁶⁹ Wallace, p. 100.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-9.

Despite its cultural notoriety, as the third point of a burgeoning trading triangle with England and Italy, the borderland of Flanders saw a wealth of economic and social exchange, which created new relations between different nations, classes and societal groups in the late fourteenth century.⁷¹ Wallace convincingly argues that Flanders was more than the setting of static encounters between distinct modes of language and habits of trade, creating conditions in which older social practices could be reviewed and, he suggests, in which a multiplicity of perspectives and voices could be heard: ‘In thus suggesting social and gendered relations of uncharted complexity, they further suggest new possibilities for poetic voices’.⁷² The sense that Thopas is traversing this border between two worlds, the world of the aristocracy and that of the bourgeoisie, is key to how the various types of textual incongruity are achieved. This juxtaposition of ideal and real does not seem conducive to narrative action or to ending, either in this tale or that of the Squire. But by bringing different elements of class-specific literary material into unfamiliar combinations, this configuration of romance is, like Flanders, a potential space for the exploration of new generic possibilities.

Although there is undoubtedly something a little acerbic in Chaucer’s portrayal of the above-his-station knight, then, when he assigns this tale to ‘himself’, he is doing something to embrace both worlds and bring them into humorous and revisionary coexistence with one another. Readers may begin to get the impression that the incongruities of *Sir Thopas*, and perhaps even of *The Squire’s Tale*, are not haphazard or inadvertent but are rather part of an alternative but reasoned narrative programme designed to merge different styles and genres to produce moments of originality and surprise. In this respect, the tales share common ground with *Le Conte du Graal*, which also includes figures, places and objects that do not sit comfortably within a romance context, ostensibly in the same spirit of experimentation and

⁷¹ See also Phillips, p. 24.

⁷² Wallace, p. 94.

renewal. In Chaucer's tales, the assimilation of language and motifs typically foreign to romance is reflected in the unusual portrayals of the eastern Other; indeed, where other romances might look to substantiate difference, the *Squire's* rhetorical mannerisms elide distinctions between east and west.

5.3.3 East Meets West

The Squire's Tale is situated in another liminal setting, not in Flanders, but in 'Tartarye', the territory of Genghis Khan. This marginal space also becomes the site of unfamiliar romance formulations, but rather than drawing attention to someone or something out of place, as was the function of the Flanders reference, it is not mobilised to highlight difference. Far from being constructed in opposition to the more familiar courts of the west, Cambyuskan's court is presented in much the same way as Camelot and Caerleon, unmarked and unthreateningly familiar. In fact, the tale misses every opportunity to confront the assumed racial and religious otherness of the exotic East. As a point of comparison, one of the Old French redactions of the Arabic tale of the flying horse, *Cléomadès*, removes this problem of demarcation by relocating the court to Spain, where the population does not need to be coded as racially other.⁷³ The Middle English romance genre tends also to substantiate or mollify the distinction between east and west, and any threat posed by a foreign community is effectively dispelled. At the beginning of *Bevis*, the King of Armenia encourage the hero to renounce Christianity, and when others mock him for preserving his faith, he kills them in a rage. Even in *Guy of Warwick*, which sees the hero allied with an eastern emperor, the unlikely alliance of east and west is united against a monstrous Saracen army.⁷⁴ Donald C.

⁷³ See Heffernan, pp. 64-5; for more on *Cléomadès* and the other related Old French tale, *Meliacin*, see H. S. V. Jones, 'The Cleomades and Related Folk-Tales', *PMLA*, 23 (1908), 557-98; H. S. V. Jones, 'The *Cleomades*, *Meliacin*, and the Arabian Tale of the Enchanted Horse', *Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy*, 6 (1907), 221-43.

⁷⁴ See *The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, Early English Text Society, ed. by Julius Zupitza (London: Trübner, 1883).

Baker points out that *The Squire's Tale* was almost certainly derived from the same traditions that produced Marco Polo, The Legend of Prester John and Mandeville's *Travels*, whether Chaucer was aware of those works or not.⁷⁵ However, in the context of larger romance trends, the *Squire's* westernised representation of the Mongol characters and customs that make up the eastern backdrop of his tale is wholly unconventional; it is 'Arabic fiction engrafted onto Gothic chivalry'.⁷⁶

From the outset of *The Squire's Tale*, the choice of language does little to emphasise the alterity of the Mongolian court. The opening description of Cambyuskan resembles the introductory vignette of Theseus in *The Knight's Tale*:

And in his tyme swich a conquerour
That greater was ther noon under the sonne
Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne,
With his wysdom and his chivalrie. (I. 862-5)

in his tyme was of so greet renoun,
That ther was nowhere in no region
So excellent a lord in alle thyng [...]
And thereto he was hardy, wys, and riche
And pitous and just alwey yliche,
Sooth of his word, benigne and honorable,
Of his corage as any centre stable,
Yong, fresshe, strong, and in armes desirous [...] (V. 13-23)

Leaving aside the fact that this lengthy description of Cambyuskan misrepresents his limited role in the plot (Canacee is not 'itemised' in the same way), these verbal echoes suggest that the leader of the Mongols is hardly different from Theseus or any other western knight or monarch. Moreover, though the poet initially declines to 'tellen of hir strange sewes', he goes

⁷⁵ Donald C. Baker, *The Squire's Tale: A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Vol. 2, The Canterbury Tales*, part 12 (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), p. 56; Skeat insists on Chaucer's indebtedness to Marco Polo for the setting of the Mongol court, while Manly thought that Chaucer rather had access to romances about Genghis Khan: see W. W. Skeat, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by W. W. Skeat, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894), pp. 471-73; John Manly, 'Marco Polo and the Squire's Tale', *PMLA*, 11 (1896), 349-62 (p. 349); see also Carol Heffernan, 'Chaucer's "Squire's Tale": The Poetics of Interlace or "Well of English Undefiled"', *The Chaucer Review*, 32.1 (1997), 32-45; also, Kathryn L. Lynch, 'East Meets West in Chaucer's Squire's and Franklin's Tales', *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 530-51.

⁷⁶ Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry*, vol 1. (London: Dodsley, 1774), p. 398; see Baker, p. 18.

on to describe the familiar dishes of ‘swannes’ and ‘heronsewes’ served at the feast (V. 67-8).⁷⁷ As Ambrisco puts it, the tale ‘rhetorically confronts the threat of the foreign by either reducing the cultural order to something known or completely removing it from the realm of signification’.⁷⁸ Indeed, the rhetoric arguably goes further still: by casting this traditionally marginal setting as the stable centre of things, the tale erases cultural difference between east and west faithfully upheld by other romances. There is thus absolutely no sense that the conversion of the Mongolian characters is in anyway urgent, or even necessary. This means that there is no religious conversion plot, no struggle to harmonise conflict, and none of the cathartic relief, release, or satisfaction that comes with the resolution of such difficulties in romance.

When *The Squire’s Tale* informs readers that it will not describe the feasting at the Mongolian court it does so in conjunction with *occupatio* and what Ernst Robert Curtius calls modesty *topos*.⁷⁹ These tropes of non-description would ordinarily allow the poet to express the transcendent nobility, beauty or wealth of the characters or setting without having to put it into words, either by highlighting the subject’s ineffability or apologising for the inadequacy of the rhetorician.⁸⁰ There is distinct uniformity to the way such qualities are described in romance: they are absolute, superlative and signalled precisely by their inexpressibility. The speaker in *Lybeaus* insists that ‘No man might telle with tale,/In ryme nor in geste’ of the

⁷⁷ On the matter of the feast, Stillwell speculates that such ironic understatement indicates that Chaucer might have been amused by the thought of what he was holding back from his readers i.e. exotic delicacies: Stillwell, p. 183.

⁷⁸ Ambrisco, p. 214; see also, John M. Fyler, ‘Domesticating the Exotic in the Squire’s Tale’, *ELH*, 55.1 (1988), 1-26.

⁷⁹ Geoffrey de Vinsauf defines *occupatio* as the colour of rhetoric used ‘when we say that we do not want to say what we are saying’; ‘Occupatio est quando dicimus nos nolle dicere quod dicimus’. *Documentume modo et arte dictandi et versificandi*, II, 3, 167 in *Les Arts poétiques du XIIIe et du XIIIe siècle: Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge*, ed. by Edmond Faral (Paris: Champion, 1924), p. 317; on modesty *topos* and inexpressibility, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 83-5, 159-62.

⁸⁰ See also Pearsall, p. 140.

celebration at court (ll. 2182-3). And as the previous chapter demonstrated, *The Knight's Tale* regularly uses *occupatio* to paraphrase the excesses of ceremonies and victories. While this earlier tale shows that the figure may also give readers a sense of alternative narrative possibilities, in general it 'serves its rightful purpose, to bring up important matters which must be dispensed with for the sake of brevity in narration'.⁸¹ The same cannot be said for *The Squire's Tale*, however.

Far from emulating the rhetorical finesse of *The Knight's Tale*, the execution of the relevant devices in *The Squire's Tale* seems far from successful or even functional.⁸² Before he begins to narrate any kind of story, the poet warns readers that his 'tonge' is incapable of describing Canace's beauty, but elaborates upon this lack of ability over seven verses (V. 35-9). He goes on to declare that the feast is unlike any other 'in this world' only to spend a further thirteen lines explaining his reasons for not describing it, negating the purpose of the device entirely (V. 61-75). Later he insists the only man who might do the festivities justice is 'Launcelot', though he is known for hiding his thoughts and feelings from the court (captured in the reference to 'dissimulynges'; V. 285-7).⁸³ As Pearsall and various others note, this habit of 'purporting to pass over some opportunity for narrative amplification' serves little purpose other than to show off 'the Squire's' superficial knowledge of rhetorical

⁸¹ Haller, p. 288.

⁸² Scholarly readings of the Squire's narratorial persona are often based on comparisons between his use of rhetoric and his father, the Knight's: see for example, Peterson, pp. 67-8; Jones, p. 302 ff.; Stanley J. Kahrl, 'Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and the Decline of Chivalry', *The Chaucer Review* 7.3 (1973), 194-209 (p. 207).

⁸³ D. S. Brewer suggests that Chaucer's two references to Launcelot de Lake show familiarity with Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrette*, and the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain* shows that Chrétien's work was still circulating in fourteenth-century England, though the 'dissimulynges' (pretences, concealment of thoughts) that prompt the allusion in *The Squire's Tale* are more Prose Lancelot: see D. S. Brewer, 'Chaucer and Chrétien and Arthurian Romance', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1974), pp. 255-59, and *Lancelot of the Lake*, ed. by Elspeth Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1989), p. 157; for some perspectives on the reference to Lancelot in *The Squire's Tale*, see Kristin Bovaird-Abbo, 'Lancelot Reborn: The Squire's Warning in *The Canterbury Tales*', *Enarratio*, 13 (2006), 104-32; also Kahrl, p. 201.

mannerisms.⁸⁴ If these devices ordinarily help to capture the wonder of the court and immerse the readers in the experience of it, then this rhetoric for rhetoric's sake approach repeatedly pulls us out of the narration.⁸⁵ In addition, the tale cannot seem to come up with enough narrative content to match the number of devices it brings into play. This not only results in an imbalance of form and content, but also creates the sense that we are being short-changed by the tale's approach to storytelling, and that the excessive use of *occupatio* and modesty *topos* conceals or glosses gaps in the narration and description.

While *The Squire's Tale* chooses not to stage a direct encounter between east and west, Thopas finds himself in a position to decisively defeat his Saracen antagonist, the giant Olifaunt. Sylvia Huot rightly points out that giants especially occupy the fringes of Saracen society 'where the non-Christian human blends into the demonic inhuman, while still retaining the possibility of responding to the Christian message of the crusaders with either conversion or doctrinal argument'.⁸⁶ Chaucer signals the giant's racial difference (and theological allegiance) by having him appeal to 'Termagaunt' in his address to the hero, erroneously believed to be a Muslim idol by western Europeans in the Middle Ages.⁸⁷ But even at this opportune juncture, the narrative stops short of affirming eastern difference. Far from subduing his opponent, Thopas ducks the giant's stone grenades, uses 'his fair berynge' to excuse himself from the battle until the following day and runs off to fetch his lily-white armour, deferring resolution once again (VII. 832). Yet *Thopas* is less preoccupied with the foreign east than *The Squire's Tale*, and the knight's refusal to engage with the giant is part

⁸⁴ Pearsall, p. 140; Ambrisco, pp. 208-9; Jones, p. 304 ff.

⁸⁵ 'Rhetoric for rhetoric's sake' is Mark Chinca's corruption of Aestheticism's 'art for art's sake': see Mark Chinca, *History, Fiction, Verisimilitude: Studies in the Poetics of Gottfried's 'Tristan'*, Bithell Series of Dissertations, 18 (Cambridge: MHRA, 1993), p. 10.

⁸⁶ Sylvia Huot, *Outsiders: The Humanity and Inhumanity of Giants in Medieval French Romance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), p. 84.

⁸⁷ 'Termagant' was the name of an idol Western Europeans in the Middle Ages mistakenly thought was worshipped by Muslims: see 'Sir Thopas', in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Boenig and Taylor, p. 294, n. 2.

of a wider trend across both tales, which allows figures conventionally treated as ‘Other’ a more ambiguous status in relation to their betters on the Great Chain of Being.⁸⁸ Just as the neutralisation of the eastern threat removes the defeat of the Saracen antagonist as a means to an end, the ambiguous treatment of non-human characters hampers the movement towards resolution. But this reimagining of the Other gives their representative figures new narrative potential, expanding the possibilities for the direction and meaning of the text.

5.3.4 Confronting Non-Humans

In romance, the hero consistently triumphs over monstrous figures from the otherworld. The obliteration of enemy giants in *Lybeaus Desconus* and in *Guy of Warwick* makes the defeat of the inhuman Other a necessary step in the formation of the protagonist’s identity. This pattern is particularly evident in *Guy*, in which the hero repeatedly overpowers enemy giants; his overthrow of the Saracen giant Amoraunt and decapitation of the formidable Colbrond are central moments in the development of his status as a hero-saint figure. These Middle English examples follow the earlier French poets of the *roman de chevalerie*, for whom giants symbolised ‘unusual physical strength and allegiance to the lord who had conquered them’.⁸⁹ In *Yvain*, the hero defeats the brutish giant antagonist who threatens to abduct a maiden, and in Jean d’Arras’s *Mélusine*, the Lusignan brothers defeat a range of giants. Rooted in this logic of antagonism, a fairy knight imprisons Guy, and *Sir Orfeo* outwits the king of the fairies to rescue his wife Herodis. However, Sylvia Huot writes, fairies like these are

⁸⁸ The medieval chain of being (*scala naturae*) ranked all life forms according to their proportion of spirit and matter, God and angels at the top, humans below, then animals, plants and minerals; it was derived from Plato’s division of the world into the Forms, which are the full beings, and sensible beings, which are imitations of Forms and are both being and not being: see Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 289.

⁸⁹ See Bakhtin, p. 341.

immortal and appear at whim; giants, on the other hand, 'are always killed in the end by the chivalric hero'.⁹⁰

Chaucer, meanwhile, allows non-human actors to run amok, especially in *Sir Thopas*. By postponing his battle with giant, Thopas misses the chance to construct himself as the human hero in opposition to the non-human enemy through sheer cowardice. In fact, the narratorial observation that 'Neither wyf ne childe' will go near Thopas, though obviously parodic, implies he is more aligned to the rustic savagery of the monster than the uplifting magnanimity of a knightly saviour (VII. 806). This is not to say that Thopas is threatening in practice. The illusion of chivalric masculinity projected by Thopas disintegrates as soon as he comes face to face with this real foe, and he is himself linguistically reduced to a quivering 'child' (VII. 810-17).⁹¹ Thopas does not have weapons, or even his armour; the giant, armed with a mace, is more prepared and thus more engaged with organised chivalric codes than the knight. In the absence of proper chivalry, the giant's uninhibited presence casts a troubling shadow of an alternative dominant masculinity across the text, one based on the primacy of 'sheer bodily might'.⁹² Because Thopas cannot be taken seriously as a hero, or even as a knight, the romance dichotomy between humans and non-humans is destabilised, and this effectively precludes the hero's defeat of the giant as a method of resolution. Rather than attempting to dispel the threat posed by the giant, Thopas's solution is to reschedule the combat, and this creates a prolepsis at the end of the first fit. That Thopas has not kept his word by the time the tale is interrupted at line 918 suggests that his failure as a knight is intertwined with the 'failure' of the text.

⁹⁰ Huot, p. 86.

⁹¹ Though it should be noted that 'child' was the standard term for a nobleman's son: 'Sir Thopas', p. 294, n. 2.

⁹² Huot, p. 89.

Though *The Squire's Tale* does not conjure figures from the Otherworld, it dismantles the standard hierarchy of humans and animals in the dream vision-like encounter between Canace and the falcon after the meditation on digestion and sleep. Chaucer's decision to transform the tragic lovers of *Anelida and Arcite* into birds, and channel the jilted queen's complaint through a breast-beating falcon, more at home in a medieval beast fable, marks a turn away from traditional romance treatments of animals. Dorothy Yamamoto outlines their usual function in romance: 'animals are used to say things about the identity of humans, and to this end their bodies are remade to answer human needs'.⁹³ Creatures like harts are hunted for sport, serving as an outlet of aggression for the hero or demonstration of his power, and then butchered for trophies and food:

It is part of this discourse that man should be seen as totally distinct from the animals he either pursues or enlists them as emblems of his prowess. Man dictates the terms of the relationship, extending to some creatures – such as dogs – the magic password of language, which gives them access to his privileged sphere, while construing others – such as boars and foxes – as enemies, to be vanquished in ritualized combat.⁹⁴

The heroes of *Bevis* and *Guy* are called upon to vanquish animal aggressors and in *Lybeaus* and *Gawain*, they are commodities or gifts. The hero of *Yvain* takes a lion for his companion; it does not, however, behave as his equal or as his advisor in matters of love, as proves to be the case in the human-animal relations of *The Squire's Tale*. Chaucer himself regularly uses animal references in *The Knight's Tale* to convey the superiority of Lygurge and Emetreus (I. 2156 ff.), the savagery of Palamon and Arcite (see I. 2437, 2692), and as a point of departure for 'the rightly constructed humanity' of Theseus, who is more merciful than a 'leoun' (I. 1775).

In *The Squire's Tale*, however, the introduction of an animal emphasises the kinship between humans and non-humans rather than the pre-eminence of the former. Canace's

⁹³ Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 132-43.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

‘queynte’ ring allows her to listen to the tragic story of a heartbroken, self-maimed falcon, deserted by ‘a tercelet [...] ful of tresoun and falsnesse’ (V. 504-6). This is an inversion of the ‘magic password of language’, then, because the princess is made privy to the bird’s ‘Leden’ (V. 435).⁹⁵ In line with this shift in power dynamic, their exchange is less a dialogue than a lecture conducted by the falcon on the perils of unrequited love, ‘to maken other bewar by me/As by the whelpe chasted is the leoun’ (V. 490-1). There is a warning embedded in the aphorism ‘Men loven of proper kynde newefangelness’, and this creates the impression of a network of women’s voices and stories (V. 610). Chaucer thus brings the human and animal figures into parity as women, making the bird’s experience of ‘womanhood’ more worthy of narrative attention. This episode may draw on an older Persian version of the faithless male pigeon in *The Arabian Nights*, but Princess Dunyā and her earlier analogue simply observe the betrayal of the female bird by the male and do not interact with them.⁹⁶ In Chaucer’s configuration, the authority of human experience is at least temporarily inverted, and the camaraderie between women is shown to be of greater importance than a divinely ordained hierarchy of being.

Yet any sense of the falcon’s knowledge and experience as valuable is modulated by Canace’s eventual treatment of her, not as a friend but as a pet. Canace’s decision to take the wounded falcon back to court rescues her from the tribulations of her natural habitat, and

⁹⁵ Because Latin was the universal second language in the Middle Ages, the term ‘Leden’ here can be taken to mean any foreign language: see Bernhard Bischoff, ‘The Study of Foreign Languages in the Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 36.2 (1961), 209-224 (p. 223); for more on this idea of a ‘magic password of language’: see Yamamoto, p. 32; see also Alison Langdon, ‘Introduction’, *Animal Languages in the Middle Ages: Representations of Interspecies Communication*, ed. by Alison Langdon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-10.

⁹⁶ This older analogue is found in a Persian tale collection known as *Touti-Nameh*: see Heffernan, *The Orient in Chaucer*, p. 66; also, Albert C. Friend, ‘The Tale of the Captive Bird and the Traveler: Nequam, Berechiah, and Chaucer’s “Squire’s Tale”’, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 1 (1970), 57-65; the only vaguely similar instance of this sort of human and animal interaction in romance is found in the Middle Dutch *Walewein*, in which a fox speaks to and saves a knight: see *Dutch Romances, Volume I: Roman van Walewein*, ed. by David F. Johnson and Geert H. M. Claassens (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000).

could be read as a woman caring for another woman. However, the installation of a mew above Canace's bed, however luxurious, deftly reasserts animal subservience to human leisure and reminds readers that the falcon is not a woman but only a falcon with human characteristics, in need of care and domestication. The conclusion to the episode therefore reinstates the relative hierarchical values of humans and animals, and is ultimately made to exemplify Canace's benevolent nobility, her 'wommanly benignytee' (V. 486).⁹⁷ It is rightly constructed humanity in a different manner to Theseus: the woman's offer of sanctuary to the bird elevates her behaviour to that of a saviour figure, and the supreme dignity of the human race is affirmed. Despite this reaffirmation of preconceived notions about the dependence of non-humans on humans, the dynamic of the woman-bird interaction, as Yamamoto writes of the characterisation of Palamon and Arcite, nevertheless 'problematizes the normative view of man's status as a "divyne beest" qualitatively distinct from animal creation', but in the opposite direction.⁹⁸

The introduction of the falcon also allows Chaucer to pursue a pattern of self-revision, of *The Knight's Tale* and *Anelida and Arcite*.⁹⁹ As numerous scholars argue, *The Squire's Tale* appears to offer a poor imitation of the *Knight's* subject matter and rhetoric.¹⁰⁰ However, the distortion of these earlier figures prepares readers for novel aspects of the falcon's lament, during which Chaucer conducts a more careful repurposing of his previous works by having the falcon reprise lines from both poems verbatim. The reflection that 'pitee renneth soone in gentil herte' after Theseus takes pity on Emelye is transformed into a moment of compassion

⁹⁷ An alternative view is offered by Sara Gutmann, who argues that the necessity for the falcon to be tamed runs parallel with the need for Canace to be managed by powerful males: Sara Gutmann, 'Chaucer's Chicks: Feminism and Falconry in "The Knight's Tale", "The Squire's Tale" and *The Parliament of Fowls*', in *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, ed. by Carolyn Van Dyke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 69-83.

⁹⁸ Yamamoto, p. 140.

⁹⁹ As Jeff Espie points out, *The Squire's Tale* is the second rewriting of the poem after *The Knight's Tale*, so constitutes a double revision: Jeff Espie, 'Spenser, Chaucer, and the Renaissance *Squire's Tale*', *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, 33.1 (2019), 133-60.

¹⁰⁰ See notes 82 and 84.

in a female-centred exchange between a motherly falcon and a benevolent noblewomen (I. 1761, V. 479), while the explanation of Arcite's 'newfangelnesse' in the *Anelida* is here used by a female character to protect another woman from a similarly tragic fate (I. 141, V. 610). In both their original contexts, the roles of distressed petitioner and wise instructor are divided between woman and 'narrator' respectively.¹⁰¹ However, as Jeff Espie points out, in *The Squire's Tale* these roles are fused in a single figure of authority.¹⁰² Espie sees this 'new type of female onlooker' as a combination of the nobility, injury and distress represented, respectively, by Theseus, Arcite and Emelye, as well as the focal point of 'a new system of gendered relationships [...] composed entirely of females'.¹⁰³

While this interpretation is entirely valid, there is something more to be drawn out of Chaucer's reconfiguration of his own material. The reassignment of narratorial commentary to a character, and to a doubly inferior female, non-human character that might ordinarily be assigned a minor role in romance, also constitutes a radical reimagining of the operation of free indirect style in romance, as well as the types of characters who are allowed inner lives in romance fiction.¹⁰⁴ Rather than providing his own elucidation of the falcon's emotional life, Chaucer engineers a different kind of female interiority in his tragic romance heroine, shaped by memory, sustained reflection and thoughtful instruction. When the falcon speaks the words reserved for tale-tellers in the earlier sources, she takes control of her narrative and, unlike the previous victims of this particular romance plot, crafts her own response to the fallacious stereotype of the honourable male lover. It is only the last-minute reassertion of a narratorial voice at the end of *The Squire's Tale* that sees her constructed as a pet; in fact, the

¹⁰¹ Espie, p. 144; cf. Spearing on the assumption about the need for medieval texts to have narrators: Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, passim.

¹⁰² Espie only mentions the connection between *Anelida* and the falcon in this context, and does not comment on the fact that Emelye is also making a kind of 'complaint': Espie, p. 144.

¹⁰³ Ibid.; see also Sara Deutch Schotland, who also argues for the model of female friendship: 'Avian Hybridity in "The Squire's Tale": Uses of Anthropomorphism', in *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, pp. 115-30.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, p. 67.

prominence of the falcon's subjectivity threatens to prevent the re-emergence of the single authoritative voice usually required to end romance; only after 150 lines of her speech is the vaguely central intrigue of court life is reasserted.

The evolution of this plot is made more incongruous by the decision to ascribe the starring role to a bird. Birds moralising about human behaviour undermines human lore, but a bird using a bird simile to rationalise her aphorism that men love novelty 'As briddes doon that men in cages feed', as if she were actually a woman, makes this interaction even more subversive (V. 611). This analogy of 'birds in cages' appears in *The Manciple's Tale*, but there it is used to argue that birds, or women, only want to escape and fly away (IX. 163 ff.). This in turn recalls John's approach to protecting his possessions in *The Miller's Tale*: Alisoun is held 'narwe in a cage' so that he can keep her under surveillance (I. 3224). The way the falcon speaks as a centre of subjectivity, and the intertextual discourse she engages with, echoes back through a string of stereotyped female lovers, and the doctrines that have been used to subjugate them, from a range of genres internal and external to *The Canterbury Tales*. This tale turns those established truths about women on their head: this talking bird-woman does not want to fly away, and it is her male lover who has been unfaithful.¹⁰⁵ The deliberate self-reflexivity of falcon's speech suggests that this section of the tale is concerned with the nature of poetry itself. Indeed, the reorganisation of typical characters, dialogue, and scenarios into a new 'gendered system' proves that romance poetry need not be about institutional male transactions or high-minded seriousness.

For all its apparent faults, *The Squire's Tale*, in a comparable way to *Sir Thopas*, is a space of generic and textual revision. It allows ideas about narrative authority and, more surprisingly, human superiority, to be questioned even if they are ultimately confirmed.

¹⁰⁵ Later the Manciple admits that men 'han evere a likerous appetite [...] Flessh is so newefangel with meschaunce' (IX. 189-93).

Significantly, these tales seem to aim less to dismantle the entire chivalric and courtly system of expression than to expand its scope and function. This revisionist outlook extends to the tales' treatment of the marvellous, which becomes a source of regenerative energy, especially in *The Squire's Tale*: rather than intuiting the fantastical as part of their world, Cambyuskan's court seek to understand the operation and provenance of the marvellous objects through the register of the everyday.

5.3.5 The Marvellous

The final category of incongruities across *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* is the treatment of marvels. There are few occurrences that could be comfortably characterised as marvels in *Sir Thopas*, but there is a strange moment when Thopas suddenly remounts his recently crippled horse, its 'sydes [...] al blood' from the knight's crazed galloping about (VII. 775-97).¹⁰⁶ When Lancelot finds himself at a similar loss in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, his steed injured in combat, he needs a new horse, as does the ill-treated Tent Maiden in *Le Conte du Graal*; Thopas does not. The horse's miraculous recovery is glossed over in the tale, yet this is undoubtedly an incongruous representation of the knight's steed in a romance context, and points to what Walter Wadiak calls the 'aesthetic exhaustion' of this trope.¹⁰⁷ This assessment bears out in *The Squire's Tale*, where the grotesque horse is transformed into a marvellous device:

This steede of bras that esily and weel
 Kan in the space of o day natureel,
 This is to seyn, in foure an twenty houres,
 Whereso yow lyst, in droghte or elles shoures,
 Beren youre body into every place
 To which youre herte wilneth for to pace,
 Withouten wem of yow thurgh foul or fair.
 Or if yow lyst to fleen as hye in the air

¹⁰⁶ Andrew G. Miller explores how the mutilation of the horse was bound up with the degradation of its master: see Andrew G. Miller, "'Tails' of Masculinity: Knights, Clerics, and the Mutilation of Horse in Medieval England", *Speculum*, 88.4 (2013), 958-95.

¹⁰⁷ See Walter Wadiak, 'Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the Politics of Distinction', *Philological Quarterly*, 89 (2010), 159-84 (p. 166).

As dooth an egle, whan that hym list to soore,
 This same steede shal bere yow evere moor
 Withouten harm, til ye be ther yow leste,
 Though that ye slepen on his bak or reste
 And turn ayeyn with writhyng of a pyn
 He that wroghte koude ful many a gyn. (V. 115-28)

This is a new type of transport for the chivalric class, not an ordinary steed but a mechanical, magical horse-like vehicle made of brass, which promises to carry the rider to their location of choice. The interlocking repetitions ‘yow lyst/leste’, ‘Beren youre/bere yow’, ‘Withouten wem/harm’ in the emissary’s explanation simulate the rhythmical motions of the contraption and invite readers to consider the intricate workings of the machine, and by extension the narrative. The emissary brings four other marvellous objects to court: a mirror that warns of approaching danger, a double-edged sword which can both heal and harm, and finally a ring which allows the bearer to understand birdsong, the narratological key to the second part of the tale.

Enchanted objects of this sort are a ubiquitous property of romance, and Donald C. Baker notes, ‘the atmosphere of an Oriental romance is expected to be perhaps even more concerned with magic and the exotic than are the romances of Western types’.¹⁰⁸ Speaking of the place and effect of the marvellous, John Finlayson writes: ‘the hero moves in a world in which there is no definite dividing line between the possible and the impossible, unmoved by marvels’.¹⁰⁹ In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the hero struggles with the ethical implications of the protective girdle more than its magical properties. Similarly, in *Ywain and Gawain*, Ywain uses a ring to conceal himself from a monster, but does not acknowledge the strangeness of this defence mechanism. For these heroes, marvellous objects are simply part of their world, and made to serve their own ends. The lack of amplification for these objects likely reflects the romance preference for ‘synecdoche’ over fully-fleshed out phenomena,

¹⁰⁸ Baker, p. 56.

¹⁰⁹ John Finlayson, ‘The Marvellous in Middle English Romance’, *The Chaucer Review*, 33.4 (1999), 363-408 (p. 364).

rather than being emblematic of some ‘uniform gullibility’.¹¹⁰ At first it seems the items presented by the exotic visitor in *The Squire’s Tale* will serve various chivalric adventures in the familiar way. The opening sequence is similar to *Gawain* and Chrétien’s *Lancelot*, and the arrival of the strange knight at Cambyuskan’s court seems to promise a new adventure as it does in those earlier romances.¹¹¹ Phillips further argues the gifts ‘all arouse suspense, and yet we also anticipate that each will form part of the tale to come. They are a half-veiled table of contents for the forthcoming narrative’.¹¹²

However, unlike the earlier romances, the visitor’s arrival does not set an adventure in motion, and if the magical objects are a ‘table of contents’, then Chaucer shows readers only a small part of the original narrative plan. The entry of foreign knight into the court is usually tantamount to a challenge, but the stranger does not issue one and no Mongolian knight rides out from Tartary. On the contrary, Cambyuskan and his ‘bachelers’ languish in a drunken stupor, more akin to an audience at a festive pageant than a group of warrior knights (V. 347-58). Far from being ‘invoked’ as narratological cues, the sum of the emissary’s address and the courtiers’ discussions make for an almost interminable elaboration of the magical objects, which become more of a spectacle than ‘a call to arms’ (V. 80-260).¹¹³ This stock scenario loses the dynamism it offers in other romances because the entrance of a stranger bearing

¹¹⁰ Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, p. 46; A. C. Spearing, ‘Medieval Narrative Style’, *Poetica*, 17 (1984), 1-21 (pp. 11-12); also, Anne Scott, ‘Plans, Predictions and Promises: Traditional Story Techniques and the Configuration of Word and Deed in *King Horn*’, in *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches*, ed. by Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 37-68 (p. 62); on ‘uniform gullibility’, see Finlayson, p. 364.

¹¹¹ Several critics have in fact pointed out parallels between *The Squire’s Tale* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: B. J. Whiting, ‘Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*’, *Medieval Studies*, 9 (1947), 189-234 (p. 234); see also C. O. Chapman, ‘Chaucer and the Gawain-Poet: A Conjecture’, *Modern Language Notes*, 68 (1953), 521-24; Karl Heinz Göller even notes verbal echoes of the *Gawain* poem from V. 80 ff., which might suggest an attempt by Chaucer to create a semblance of narrative and form: Karl Heinz Göller, ‘Chaucer’s “Squire’s Tale”: “The Knotte of the Tale”’, in *Chaucer und seine Zeit: Symposion für Walter F. Schirmer*, ed. by Arno Esch (Tubingen: Max Niemeyer, 1968), pp. 163-88 (p. 173).

¹¹² Phillips, p. 133.

¹¹³ See Finlayson, p. 404.

marvels fails to elicit any sort of urgency in the characters. In the Arabic and derivative French tales, the arrival of the gift-bearers is similarly privileged in the order of the narrative, but in those versions it is a direct catalyst for the marriage proposal and adventures of the young prince *Cléomadès*, who travels to Seville on the flying horse. In this case, however, the action lies in a state of inertia until Canace decides to explore the woods at the edge of the court on a whim.

More unusual still are the protracted reactions to the marvellous objects, which are far removed from the nonchalant responses to extraordinary events and objects more common to romance.¹¹⁴ The givens and postulates of the genre, including marvels, are usually absorbed by the community, and all the inhabitants of the world, from laypeople to magical creatures, sing from the same book. In contrast, rather than accepting the marvels as part of their world, the members of the Cambyuskan's court try to demystify the objects through a lively debate which occupies more than seventy lines of the poem (V. 189-262). The phrase that introduces this discussion also describes the rambunctious aftermath of *The Miller's Tale*: 'Diverse folk diversely they demed' (V. 202; variation on 'seyde', I. 3857). Because the phrase recalls the pilgrims' garrulous response to the Miller's fabliau, its repetition signals a shift away from the passive reception of narrative events:

Another rownded to his felawe lowe
 And seyde, 'He lyeth! It is rather lyk
 An apparence ymaad by som magyk,
 As jogelours pleyen at this feestes grete'.
 Of sondry doutes thus they jangle and trete,
 As lewed peple demeth comunly
 Of thynges that been maad moore subtilly
 Than they kan in hir lewednesse comprehende. (V. 216-22)

Romance intuition has been replaced by this clamour of inquisitive voices, who cannot agree whether the mechanical horse is an illusion or akin to the horse in the classical stories of 'Pegasee' and 'Troie' (V. 207-11). This 'janglyng' debate goes far beyond expressions of

¹¹⁴ For a fuller account of this, see *ibid.*, pp. 363-408.

‘novelty and wonder’; the language and tone of their chatter has suddenly become that of the everyday.¹¹⁵ The people of the court evaluate the sword with reference to Achilles’s spear, which could also both heal and harm, compare the ‘craft’ of the magical ring to the famed craftsmanship of Moses and Solomon and, quoting Aristotle, speculate whether the mirror works by ‘anglis and slye reflexiouns’ (V. 228-51). This community are not accustomed to such ‘unrealities’, and do not view them as part of their social fabric; their impulse is to analyse unfamiliar items placed before them. The ‘enchanted gadgets’ are thus confronted as man-made phenomena, and carefully dissected through imperfect, folkloric knowledge of classical epics and scholarly wisdom.¹¹⁶ This is not the world of romance, but the down-to-earth world of debate and disagreement, of half-baked theories and gossip thrown around amongst friends and peers.

This textual exploitation of marvels draws comparison with *Partonope of Blois* and *Valentine and Orson*, also characterised by ‘an inexhaustible appetite for marvels’.¹¹⁷ Yet where these ‘composites of courtly romances’ treat detailed segments on marvels as ‘building blocks for new and more flamboyant structures’, the much-discussed marvels of *The Squire’s Tale* stagnate the narrative action rather than enriching its context. Even the complex series of enjambments used describe the court’s reaction to the wondrous mechanical horse above fails to create any noticeable momentum. It is the magical ring to which the remainder of the tale responds, despite the comparative lack of elaboration it receives here. As Lindsey M. Jones implies, the intricacy developed in earlier moments of amplification is not carried through

¹¹⁵ This brings the tale into parity with the composite romance, which, according to Jennifer R. Goodman, regularly bring the marvellous into conjunction with the realistic element of the narrative: see Jennifer R. Goodman, ‘Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale* and the Rise Chivalry’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 5 (1983), 127-36 (pp. 131-2).

¹¹⁶ Stillwell, p. 179; Stillwell points to the prevalence of references to Arabic authorities in the field of optics, and the similarities of the simple castle folks’ position to the realist attitude taken by Nature (and Jean de Meun) in the *Roman de la Rose*; he also indicates that this ‘swarm of ignorant bees’ are ridiculously imaginative in one turn and in another ‘prick the bubble world of the principal actors with the pin of common sense’: *ibid.*, pp. 184-7.

¹¹⁷ Goodman, p. 129.

into the material of the poem itself.¹¹⁸ In fact few of the events that readers are led to expect materialise, not least the ambitious projections made at the close of the tale about the return of the falcon's lover, the cities conquered by Cambyuskan, the winning of Theodera by Algarsif and the union of Canacee and Cambalo/Cambalus, which some critics have read as incestuous.¹¹⁹ *The Squire's Tale* is finally about the disappointment of romance formulas rather than their fulfilment.

As the previous sections of this chapter have suggested, the incongruity of form and content in both *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* has consequences for the narrative order of the tales. There is a complete disconnect between convention and representation, projection and outcome, and there is barely a semblance of cause and effect. Instead there is only a random sequence of adventures, which do not settle into a sensible episodic scheme, even if they do bring diverse styles into new and original combinations. It would therefore be short-sighted to locate the unfinishedness of these tales in their lack of an ending alone: the end of a medieval romance will only make sense and feel pertinent if all the different components have somehow connected to one another along the way.

5.4 The Question of Ending

5.4.1 'I sholde to the knotte condescende/And maken [...] soone an ende'

Of all the material and structural incongruities that disturb the operation of romance conventions across the tales, surely the most significant is their lack of an ending. In medieval romance, the ending draws together all the major narrative motifs and subjects, whilst establishing the impression that all conflict has been resolved: this is how satisfactory closure is achieved. Neither *The Squire's Tale* nor *Sir Thopas* reach this point, however. Both

¹¹⁸ Jones, pp. 300-15.

¹¹⁹ Haldeen Braddy was the first to suggest the incest narrative as a possible reason for the unfinished state of the tale: see Haldeen Braddy, *Geoffrey Chaucer: Literary and Historical Studies* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971), pp. 91–93; for a good summary of the critical 'anxiety' around this matter, see Scala, pp. 84-9; also Ambrisco, p. 221.

texts are ‘cut off’ in some way, whether by intention, as is clearly the case for *Sir Thopas*, or by accident or necessity, which is more likely in the case of the *Squire*. Yet their textual unfinishedness is not as sudden as it might at first seem, even in the case of *The Squire’s Tale*. This is because the unusual tangents, absences, and amplifications that result from their disregard for romance traditions frustrate the movement towards an ending and impede the achievement of closure.¹²⁰ As the next section of the chapter will show, both tales put too much emphasis on beginnings, neither tale is able to develop a narrative dilemma that requires resolution, and the structural devices common to both tales open up narratological interstices in the texts, even before they are permanently discontinued.

Both tales demonstrate a preoccupation with beginnings and openings. The pilgrim-narrator seems to begin *Sir Thopas* again at the opening of each fit with his call of ‘Listeth, Lordes’, a refrain which becomes more heavy-handed as ‘Chaucer’s’ failure to distinguish between the different structural components of his narrative poem becomes more apparent: ‘Loo lordes myne, here is a fit’ (VII. 712, 833, 888). In addition, the hero initiates several ‘quests’ which he never finishes: the quest to find the elf queen and make her his ‘lemman’, the quest to kill the giant, and his desultory adventure at the beginning the third fit, which bears the trappings of a quest (‘And for he was a knyght auntrous/He nolde slepen in noon hous’, VII. 909-10), but has no obvious purpose. Similarly, the repeated use of the stock opening phrase ‘And so bifel’ in the first part of *The Squire’s Tale* underlines that, as these projections indicate, this passive romance never manages to form a middle section, let alone an end (V. 42, 76). As Ambrisco writes, with ‘all its narrative fits and starts, the *Squire’s Tale* [...] requires a different kind of “travelling and going” rather than starting and finishing’.¹²¹

¹²⁰ ‘Chaucer left those two studies of abandoned women and male deceivers unfinished too [*Anelida* and the *Legend of Good Women*]: perhaps he found the theme one it was impossible to leave alone but too much an emotional and moral *impasse* ever to bring to artistic closure’: Phillips, p. 134.

¹²¹ In the case of *The Squire’s Tale*, it is possible that the recession of one story into another, of the falcon’s story into the frame story of Cambyuskan’s court, was inspired by earlier versions of Arabic story collections like the *Thousand and One Nights* or the *Arabian Nights*, which might have

Indeed, neither of the two tales seems able to differentiate between the concepts of beginning, middle and end, which means they do not build up to a resolution in the same way other romances do, and, in their tendency to stop and start, manifest a sense of open-endedness from the outset.¹²²

The reflection on the techniques of poetic composition in the second part of *The Squire's Tale* ironically draws attention to the lack of economy in its own storytelling:

The knotte why that every tale is toold,
 If it be taried til that lust be coold
 Of hem that han it after herkned yoore,
 The savour passeth ever lenger the moore,
 For fulsomnesse of his prolixitee
 And by the same resound thynketh me
 I sholde to the knotte condescende
 And maken of hir walking soone an ende. (V. 401-7)

The word 'knotte' in this oft-quoted passage tends to be translated straightforwardly as the 'point' of the tale. This seems to be because the empty promise made here reads as a corruption of the guarantee to get 'shortly to the point' of *The Knight's Tale* (I. 2965).

Kamowski writes that 'the Squire' cuts Canace's walk short 'to get to the "knotte", or point, of his larger tale, which of course he never gets to'.¹²³ Phillips offers a more complex interpretation of the phrase, recognising it as a comment on 'narrative construction' and 'a rhetorical concept – the design of parts of the narrative lead to a point'.¹²⁴ The 'knotte' is not simply the point of the story, then, but the way in which the different parts of the story are arranged to express truth or meaning. Haller clarifies further: 'knotte (or *nodus*) appears in

circulated in isolated examples in the medieval West; in the *Thousand and One Nights*, no tale is ever complete before several more are under way: see Helen Cooper, 'The Frame', in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 6-7.

¹²² Cf. Mann on *The Knight's Tale*: Mann, Jill, 'Beginning with the Ending: Narrative Techniques and their Significance in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*', in *Romance Rewritten: The Evolution of Middle English Romance*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald, Megan G. Leitch and Corinne Saunders (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 85-102.

¹²³ Kamowski, p. 393; John M. Bowers also translates 'knotte' as 'stopping-point' in relation to the Squire-Wife of Bath spurious link: see *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. by John M. Bowers (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute of Publications, 1992), p. 43, l. 11.

¹²⁴ Phillips, p. 134.

Horace, but not with the meaning of “gist or point of the story” [...] Horace uses it to characterize the difficulties of plot which may require a *deus ex machina* to cut away’.¹²⁵ This Horatian understanding of ‘knotte’ recalls the concept of *conjointure* discussed in relation to Chrétien, not the method of composition but the ideal result: a complex sequence of form and content consisting of skilfully conjoined but diverse elements. The tensions between subjects and objects arising from this intricate combination of narrative components are resolved in the denouement, which offers a summation of some poetic truth contained in the preceding work.¹²⁶

Haller’s definition is relevant to *The Squire’s Tale* and *Sir Thopas* because in both tales the unconventional arrangement of romance material is not conducive to a *conjointure*. The incoherent components of the tale cannot crystallise into an elegant sequence; this in turn prevents the tale from reaching an end and making its ‘point’. If a text does not establish clear oppositions between subjects and settings, or maintain distinctions between its various structural units, then there can be no narrative conflict, no ‘difficulties of plot’ to resolve. Instead the tales are strewn with textual ‘fissures’ created by the promise of details which never emerge.¹²⁷ Even before *The Squire’s Tale* makes its final series of ambitious projections, its amplified *occupatio* and modesty *topos* create smaller gaps in the narrative (V. 35-75, for example), and the marvellous ‘table of contents’ alludes to separate episodes relating to the flying horse, mirror, and sword. In *Thopas*, the hero’s anti-challenge to the giant constitutes a prolepsis; the lack of return to his opponent thus creates a narratological ‘blank’ where the corresponding material, the defeat of the giant, might have been expected to appear. Referring to *The Squire’s Tale*, Kamowski writes: ‘Like any finished narrative, the

¹²⁵ Haller, p. 291.

¹²⁶ Robert M. Jordan has indeed described *The Squire’s Tale* ‘as *conjointure* without a *conte*’: Robert M. Jordan, ‘The Question of Genre: Five Chaucerian Romances’, in *Chaucer at Albany*, ed. by Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Franklin, 1975), pp. 77-103 (p. 86).

¹²⁷ See note 30.

tale also has points of indeterminacy which the reader is [implicitly] prompted to flesh out'.¹²⁸ But the gaps created by the tales' lack of coherence are more disruptive to closure than the 'points of indeterminacy' found in a completed tale. Does Thopas ever find the elf queen or fight the giant? How does the falcon regain her love, and does Canace marry her brother? These are not small questions but key to the major strands of the narrative, and vital to an understanding of the tales as romance texts.¹²⁹

The narrative 'promises' made in *Thopas* and *The Squire's Tale* are of course never fulfilled, and this retrospectively changes our understanding of the textual gaps they leave behind. The gaps might be rationalised as a consequence of the distinct 'pattern of leaving one subject for another' demonstrated by both texts, with Thopas distracted from his quest to find the elf queen by his encounter with the giant, and the tale of the enchanted horse waylaid by the story of the falcon's lost love. This structure is comparable to the interlace pattern in romances like the *Prose Lancelot*.¹³⁰ However, Rosemond Tuve stresses the importance of distinguishing

entrelacement from the mere practice [...] of taking one character through a series of actions, then deserting him temporarily [...] events connected by *entrelacement* are not juxtaposed; they are interlaced, and when we get back to our first character he is not where we left him as we finished his episode but in the psychological state or condition of meaningfulness to which he has been pulled by events occurring in the following episodes written about someone else [...] We digress, or seem to, and then come back, not to precisely what we left but something we understand differently because of what we have seen.¹³¹

Not one of the cutaways in *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* ever leads to resumption, and this means that none of the figures or places of significance are even returned to, let alone organised to augment our understanding of the primary characters. Though an ending might

¹²⁸ Kamowski, p. 394.

¹²⁹ Wolfgang Iser argues that as readers we are primed to 'fill in the blanks': see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Theory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 182-5.

¹³⁰ Several scholars have designated *The Squire's Tale* as an interlaced romance, among them: Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 145; Heffernan, 'Chaucer's "Squire's Tale"', pp. 32-45; Kamowski, p. 397.

¹³¹ Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and Their Posterity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) p. 362-3.

have realigned the events of the narrative in the case of the *Squire*, this does not explain the lack of signposting and sequentiality between the two parts of his tale, or why the Canace-falcon episode, with its long and fantastical elaboration of the romantic woes of a bird, is so tonally and generically out of step with the court scene that comes before. Similarly, in *Sir Thopas*, the hero's raucous feast does not show character progression or make his quest to find the elf queen or defeat the giant more meaningful. The disruptive structural patterns observed in these romances cannot be explained away as the digressions of interlace; what we have instead is a composite of 'juxtaposed' events that do not seem to inform one another or fill in the gaps left by their 'opposing' sections.¹³² We have a sense of these tales as unfinished not just because of their lack of an end but because in both the treatment of romance material creates multiple moments of unfinishedness throughout the texts.

5.4.2 The Endlinks

Internal fragmentation is not the only impediment to narrative closure in these tales, however. The treatment of romance material across the two tales prompts extended responses from other pilgrims in the frame narrative, and these reactions either forcibly terminate the tale proper, as with *Sir Thopas*, or are simply allowed to take over from the unfinished narrative, as is true of the Squire-Franklin endlink. In the case of *Thopas*, it is the Host's distaste for Chaucer the Pilgrim's 'rym dogerel' that compels him to cut the tale short, as he attempts to steer the proceedings into more heroic territory (VII. 925). In his affected tirade against the pilgrim-narrator's efforts, Harry Bailly takes Chaucer's 'verray lewednesse' of romance matter as a personal affront, invokes God three times, and generally denigrates teller and tale

¹³² Of course, as Spearing suggests, the component parts of a narrative need not cohere perfectly and 'smoothly whirr along', and he cites the extended non-narrative elements in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (the account of the pentangle, ll. 623-65) and the formal descriptions in *Troilus and Criseyde*. But in those texts there is some kind of unifying principle or narrative thread or central intrigue or action is reasserted after each more extraneous section or at the end which holds it all together': Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, p. 2.

with an onslaught of hyperbolic and exclamatory ‘speche’ (VII. 919-35). When ‘Chaucer’ moves to defend his ‘rymyng’, the Host further disparages his contribution with a scatological insult. This word ‘toord’ both literally and figuratively marks a lewd end to the tale of *Sir Thopas*, an end both as absurd and irredeemable as the tale itself in the context of romance traditions (VII. 930). Although in some sense the audience is robbed of an ending to Thopas’s story by this interruption, they are equally saved from ‘the unrealized horror of its continuation’.¹³³ In fact, *Thopas* may not have been able to impart closure even if it had been brought through to its logical conclusion, which may not have amounted to more than a ‘toord’.

The sense that William Provost and other commentators have of the Squire-Franklin link section is that the Franklin recognises the trouble the Squire has gotten himself into, and cleverly helps him out by imposing closure (V. 673-708).¹³⁴ Joyce E. Peterson argues that ‘The Franklin’s interruption is as much a part of the tale as any usual conclusion because no other conclusion is possible’.¹³⁵ And yet ‘the wordes of the Frankeleyn to the Squier’ do not constitute an interruption in the way that the Host’s words interrupt *Thopas*, which create a clear half line, in both a metrical and conceptual sense: ‘Til on a day [...]’ (VII. 918). *The Squire’s Tale*, on the other hand, stops on a complete couplet – ‘Appollo whirleth up his chaar so hye,/Til that the god Mercurius hous the slye’ (V. 671-2) – and therefore does not as clearly indicate a break in the narration of the tale. Moreover, Chaucer provides no fictional statement of interruption, but simply lets the text of *The Squire’s Tale* stop and the Franklin’s words take over. As Phillips notes, ‘it is hard to suppose the courteous Franklin interrupts the Squire: that would be *ungentil*’.¹³⁶ John Burrow also challenges the assertion that Chaucer

¹³³ Kamowski, p. 396.

¹³⁴ William Provost, ‘Chaucer’s Endings’, *New Readings of Chaucer’s Poetry*, ed. by Robert G. Benson and Susan J. Ridyard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 92.

¹³⁵ See Peterson, p. 64; Jones, p. 302.

¹³⁶ Phillips also speculates as to whether this moment ‘breaks the fictional illusion’ in the manner of *The Parson’s Tale*: Phillips, pp. 134-5.

expected *The Squire's Tale* to be understood, along with *Thopas* and *The Monk's Tale*, as a tale interrupted by another pilgrim, since this circumstance is not decisively signalled by the expression 'namoore of this' as the other two are. Burrow argues that 'the alternative is to read them as a lead-in to *The Franklin's Tale* designed to follow a tale which Chaucer never got round to completing'.¹³⁷

And yet if the Squire-Franklin endlink was intended only as a 'lead-in' to the tale of the Franklin, it is unclear why Chaucer felt it necessary to compose such an elaborate endlink or why the Franklin's 'wordes' were not better integrated into the prologue to that tale. If Chaucer's only purpose was to round-off the unfinished tale and inform our understanding of the next, surely a few verse lines would have been sufficient. The composition of this passage alone reveals something more about Chaucer's view of the unfinished state of *The Squire's Tale*, and is more illuminative than Burrow's argument suggests. The close association of the endlink with *The Squire's Tale* is apparently confirmed by the Hengwrt manuscript, which detaches the passage from *The Franklin's Tale* and instead positions it between the Squire and the Merchant. Ellesmere's 'Quod the Frankeleyn' becomes 'Quod the Merchant':

'In feith, Squier, thow hast thee wel yquit
 And gentilly. I preise wel thy wit [...]
 As to my doom, ther is noon that is here
 Of eloquence that shal be thy peere
 If that thou lyve. God yeve thee good chaunce
 And in vertu sende thee continuaunce!
 For of thy speche I have greet deyntee.
 I have a sone, and by the Trinitee,
 I hadde levere than twenty pound worth lond,
 Though it right now were fallen in my hond,
 He were a man of swich possessioun,
 As that ye been. (V. 673-86)

¹³⁷ Burrow, p. 30; Goodman argues that the 'form of the interrupted tale allows Chaucer to sketch in the distinctive effects, pace, and atmosphere of the composite romance without distending the frame story by requiring it to swallow an entire narrative of this kind at one gulp': Goodman, p. 135; David Lawton, on the other hand (like Burrow) is unconvinced that Chaucer never intended to write more of the tale: David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators*, Chaucer Studies, vol. 13 (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1985), pp. 106-29.

This commendation is the opposite of the Host's reaction to *Sir Thopas*. Like Harry Bailly, the Franklin/Merchant speaks in a hyperbolic register, invokes God more than once and is similarly moved to give a highly personalised response to the tale. But unlike the Host-Chaucer interaction, this is all for the purpose of praising the Squire. Even if there were a half-line at the end of *The Squire's Tale*, these overwhelmingly positive words do not constitute an interruption in the same way as the Thopas-Melibee link.

At first it seems that we can conclude little with certainty from these lines, perhaps aside from the fact that they represent, as Jennifer R. Goodman puts it, an 'elegant compromise' which allows the tale to exist within *The Canterbury Tales*.¹³⁸ The 35-line passage is, however, more than a simple 'compromise': its length and idiosyncrasy suggests that Chaucer felt that the inclusion of *The Squire's Tale* was necessary, unfinished or otherwise. Of all the link passages, it is the most developed link that is both distinct from a prologue and not at the beginning of a fragment. Other notable links between tales, such as the Knight-Miller link (I. 3109-86), are not clearly differentiated from the prologue to the second tale. The composition of such a detailed but fairly innocuous response to *The Squire's Tale*, which as the scribe of *group d* showed, could be repurposed for other pilgrims, more or less guaranteed its inclusion in the Canterbury frame.¹³⁹ Perhaps Chaucer felt there was a risk the tale might be left out of the frame in its unfinished state, and thus devised a malleable link passage to ensure that the tale could be slotted into other fragments if *The Franklin's Tale* shifted around in the order. From this narratological insurance policy, we can infer that Chaucer placed considerable value on his *Squire's Tale*, and it is possible this had something to do with the revisionary impetus of the Canace-falcon episode, and the other more unusual

¹³⁸ Goodman, p. 135.

¹³⁹ The Hengwrt scribe, who according to Carleton Brown, was following the ancestor of Manly and Rickert's MSS *group d*, also showed the Franklin's words could easily be reassigned to the Merchant: Carleton Brown, 'Author's Revision in the *Canterbury Tales*', *PMLA*, 57.1 (1942), 29-50 (pp. 41-8).

moments in the text. Even in the absence of closure, *The Squire's Tale* had something new to offer the romance genre, and it is clear Chaucer wanted the wider literary community to see it. In Chaucer's innovative romances, then, the absence of closure does not necessarily mean the absence of aesthetic value.

5.5 Conclusion: The Aesthetic Value of Incompletion

Chaucerian scholars like Peterson have felt obliged to assert the 'finishedness' of *The Squire's Tale* to ensure that its moments of irregularity are divisible from artistic failure:

to continue to assume that the tale is unfinished limits its critical usefulness [...] as long as it is thought that Chaucer did not complete it, the 'imperfections' in the work may legitimately be used in arguing that Chaucer abandoned it because he was aware of his failures as a craftsman, or some equally reductive dismissal.¹⁴⁰

However, as this study has shown, what might have once been read as 'imperfections' are perhaps more usefully thought of as stylistic incongruities that result from the unconventional handling of romance material. In *The Squire's Tale*, these incongruities undoubtedly create internal fragmentation which contributes to the unfinished state of the text. But this does not mean that Chaucer 'abandoned' the tale because of these irregularities. On the contrary, the tale is built upon the juxtaposition of conventionally incompatible elements; it just happens to have been left without an ending. Of course, in the case of *Sir Thopas*, the lack of an ending is just one of the many intentional incongruities that Chaucer decides to bring into play. However, the implication that unfinishedness is tantamount to failure is highly objectionable: these two tales might collapse the traditional structure of romance, but that does not limit their critical usefulness or aesthetic value. The existence of *Sir Thopas* is itself evidence that Chaucer did not consider an 'unfinished' tale to be a failed one.

The incongruities we sense in both *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* result from the specific aesthetic strategy that Chaucer develops and puts into practice across these tales: he

¹⁴⁰ Peterson, p. 63.

brings unfamiliar figures, places, elements and other details from various genres and worlds, actual and imagined, into coexistence with his realisation of romance. This means that, in their capacity as expressions of the medieval romance genre, the two tales frustrate many of the conventions of their contemporaries as well as their predecessors. On the one hand, there is the burlesque incongruity of *Sir Thopas*, a bumptious ‘knight’ of Flanders whose attempt to inhabit the romance world produces a motley performance of chivalric traditions, bourgeoisie food and other ridiculous oddities. On the other, *The Squire’s Tale*, which also steps out of the romance world, but in a different way: the first part of the tale presents a chivalric world in which romance intuition has been lost and Saracen communities are no longer recognised as Other; the second part of the tale takes readers into a slightly different world again, where a noble treats a bird as more of female friend than a wild animal.

The tales are, in part, a dramatic realisation of romance conventions, but they also pluck stock figures and scenarios from their specific romance contexts and throw them into alien territory and new contexts to see what alternative meanings might be produced. With its assemblage of multiple voices, *The Squire’s Tale* is particularly pointed in its intertextual confrontation and regeneration of the romance traditions observed in earlier Chaucerian texts. Yet, writing of *The Knight’s Tale*, Derek Pearsall notes that Chaucer brings a ‘clash of styles’ together in the poem ‘through which [he] disrupts conventional expectation and embodies in his poem a fuller vision of reality’.¹⁴¹ Perhaps, then, the disruptive ‘form’ of the *Squire* and *Thopas* was present from the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales* project, but only became a central impetus in the later tales. Of course, the distortion of romance material in *The Squire’s Tale* and *Sir Thopas* could simply be read as parody; but this does not mean that the parody is mean-spirited.

¹⁴¹ Pearsall, p. 137.

Indeed, far from being a negative shortcoming to be explained away as satire, the breakdown of romance logic has a positive impact: it opens a space for the revision of romance conventions. In both tales, Chaucer treats romance material in such a way that it leads readers to question customary assumptions about the givens and ideals of the genre. In addition, the inclusion of details about Flanders, newly significant as a place which challenges 'limits hitherto regarded as natural', and the conception of a new narrative voice in the falcon-heroine, suggests that Chaucer was trying to open the door to more thoughtful revision of the ideologies associated with the romance genre.¹⁴² This style of distorting, of making romance conventions incongruous, becomes a form in itself to be passed on and picked up by future writers; it provides a template for the creative practice of self-revision and wider generic renewal. Jeff Espie has in fact recently drawn attention to how the 'joly' and 'merie' tone of the alternate *Squire's* prologue, printed in all Renaissance volumes of the text, reframes the text as a force of regeneration in the *Canterbury* anthology; in fact, he convincingly argues that the methodology of self-revision developed by Chaucer in *The Squire's Tale* inspired Spenser's own rewriting of the 1590 version of the *Faerie Queene*.¹⁴³

The legacy of this revisionary impetus is helped rather than hindered by the tales' incompleteness. Both tales anticipate the regenerative spirit of the various *Canterbury Tales* that 'respond' to them, all of which bring an element of dramatic realism to their genre: the *Squire's* fragment leads to the domestic tragedy of *The Franklin's Tale* in modern editions and the Ellesmere Manuscript, the *Merchant's* bawdy love triangle in Hengwrt, and the 'anti-

¹⁴² Wallace, p. 94.

¹⁴³ Espie goes as far to suggest Spenser not only revises *The Squire's Tale*, but 'recreates the impulse behind Chaucer's creative process' by rewriting his own past works simultaneously: Espie, p. 139 ff., esp. p. 150; Brown shows that in all sixteenth century volumes of the text, and, in fact, in every volume from William Caxton's 1476 edition through to John Stow's in 1562, *The Squire's Tale* was printed, not with the now familiar, 'authoritative' prologue but with an alternative 'Prolog of the Squier', the Man of Law's endlink, sometimes attributed to the Shipman or the Summoner; Skeat attributed to the Shipman, Manly to the Summoner: see Brown, p. 35; for more on Chaucer's 'Renaissance spirit', see also Morton W. Bloomfield, 'Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and the Renaissance', *Poetica* (Tokyo), 12 (1981), 28-35.

knightly' *Wife of Bath* in Lansdowne, and *Sir Thopas* generates the woman-centred didactic *Tale of Melibee*.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, the unfinished tales proved to be two of the most productive in the Canterbury set, inspiring sixteenth-century continuations, additions and adaptations which revised elements of the romance genre: Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* with its 'Book of Friendship', John Milton's *Il Penseroso* and its romantic 'scholar-errant', the anti-*Thopas* 'Tale of Beryn', in which a man foregoes knighthood to pursue a mercantile life, Joseph Sterling's conclusion to *The Squire's Tale*, and John Lane's comprehensive continuation of it.¹⁴⁵ In this way, the unfinished ends of these tales became the beginnings of others. Yet the general denigration of Lane's work in particular shows, in a similar manner to *Le Conte du Graal* continuations, that writing a fitting end to a narrative poem calls, not for a continuator that simply follows the 'instructions' of its source text to the letter, but for a poet who understands the nuances of its narrative problems, and who will confront those problems with flair and imagination.¹⁴⁶

Regrettably, literary analysis can only shed so much light on the contentious issue of composition. In the case of *The Squire's Tale*, it is possible that the tale was a fragment of an earlier unfinished work that Chaucer returned to and repurposed, either by assigning it to a new teller in the same way the St. Cecilia story was given to the Second Nun, or by placing it into dialogue with other tales. But whatever the case, Chaucer obviously felt that *The Squire's Tale*, along with *Sir Thopas*, was an important unfinished work, significant enough to find a home for it in the polyphony of *The Canterbury Tales*. It seems Chaucer was trying to write romances in a different way, trying to 'get away from presenting tales simply as a sequence of autonomous stories'.¹⁴⁷ He was clearly experimenting with alternatives to the

¹⁴⁴ See Brown, pp. 41-8.

¹⁴⁵ See Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 51.

¹⁴⁶ For the criticism of Lane's continuation, see note 8.

¹⁴⁷ Cooper, 'The Frame', p. 7.

imposition of a single authoritative viewpoint to make an end, as the falcon episode and endlinks to both tales indicate. The overall shape of Canterbury project suggests he wanted to create a network of stories that would moderate and qualify one another, and produce debate within, between and outside tales. From this perspective, it did not matter, and even helped, that *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* were unfinished, as long as they were read in dialogue with the many other voices across the *Canterbury Tales*.

6. Conclusion: Inconclusiveness and Multiplicity in the Ends of Romance

Around the time it was in vogue to speak of Chaucer's 'postmodernity', Thomas L. Reed (1990) identified what he called an 'aesthetics of irresolution' in Middle English debate poetry, and pointed towards some other medieval genres and works with no formal elements of disputation, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which also avoid authoritative conclusions, single moral truths, and last-word pronouncements.¹ In fact, as this study has demonstrated, inconclusiveness is not limited to medieval debate poetry or 'almost debates': it is a major principle of medieval romance literature in both the Old French and Middle English traditions. It is true that the medieval *artes poeticae* usually advocate for strong formal closure, and indeed, such closure prevails in the majority of the texts examined across this thesis: *Erec et Enide*, *Cligès*, *Lancelot*, *Yvain* and *The Knight's Tale* all assemble the poetic resources necessary to secure formal closure, whether this comes in the form of a closural allusion like 'fine', an epilogue, or a prayer, and thus provide the general sense of completion that comes with the assertion of the 'end'.

Yet poets like Chrétien and Chaucer found playful ways to keep their romance narratives hermeneutically open, and consequently there are various types of thematic and narratological inconclusiveness in their complete works of romance. In the unfinished works, Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas*, inconclusiveness becomes a defining quality of the formal structures as well as the thematic ones, and this both amplifies the absence of an ending in those texts and contributes to the overall sense of their

¹ Thomas L. Reed, Jr., *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1990); scholars who have drawn comparisons between Chaucer and postmodern literature include, Robert M. Jordan, 'Lost in the Funhouse of Fame: Chaucer and Postmodernism', *The Chaucer Review*, 18.2 (1983), 100-15; Faye Walker, 'Postmodern Theory With/In Chaucer Studies' *Style*, 26.4 (1992), 577-92; M. Keith Booker, 'Postmodernism in Medieval England: Chaucer, Pynchon, Joyce, and the Poetics of Fission', *Exemplaria*, 2.2 (1990), 563-94; for a good overview of this critical trend, see Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

unfinishedness. Where in the postmodern age, unresolved and fragmentary texts are expected by fans of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, David Foster Wallace and Quentin Tarantino, though strange to those accustomed to dominant literary forms like the classic realist novel and the detective story, in the Middle Ages, and especially in the genre of medieval romance, such narratives are not only popular but commonplace. Perhaps, then, it is time to stop reading medieval poets like Chrétien and Chaucer forwards, stop hailing them as modern or even postmodern in their literary ‘experiments’, and instead recognise that writers were playing with form and content in a way that produced fragmentary and unfinished texts long before our relative contemporaries in the twentieth and twenty-first century.²

One of the major findings of this study is that some forms of inconclusiveness are common to the romance oeuvres of both poets, which indicates that this aesthetic tendency was not a quirk of Chaucer’s poetic experimentation but a time-honoured strategy in medieval poetics. Inconclusiveness manifests in several ways in the romances studied in this thesis. First, the various disparate narrative strands may not have been fully reconciled, making for a lack of ‘tight’ thematic closure and secure conviction, and leaving the outcomes of the narrative, the final positions of the principal characters, or the significance of key figures open to interpretation. This is the case in *Cligès*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain*, in which the hero’s final triumph is posited as both felicitous and arbitrary, but also precarious, since the imprisonment of the empresses, Godefroi’s authorship, and Laudine’s silent dissent loom large at the end of each romance. Secure conviction is similarly lacking in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, but here the various layers of closure are pervaded by an undercurrent of doubt stemming from Theseus’s uncertainty in a world of chaos and accident. Second, there may be a dilation, subversion or even a rejection of formulaic endings and singularity, of stabilising

² There is a growing recognition of this in recent scholarship: see, for example, Gareth Lloyd Evans, ‘An Unwitting Return to the Medieval: Postmodern Literary Experiments and Middle English Textuality’, *Neophilologus*, 100 (2016), 335-44.

and conclusive narrative events like marriage, coronation and death, as well as extradiegetic conventions like recapitulation, prayer, homage and exemplum, the concordance of beginning and end, and the teleological model of narrative, in favour of the multiplication of endpoints, potential endings, and possibilities for meaning. It is true that multiplicity does not always lead to inconclusiveness: in Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, which, as I have argued, lines up multiple points at which the story could come to an end, the analogous illusory ends serve rather than detract from the unity of the whole. But the multiple, spurious endpoints over the course of *The Knight's Tale*, and the rapid succession of closural gestures at the end, open the text to interpretation rather than closing it off. Finally, issues of thematic inconclusiveness and reinterpretation may be inscribed into the text itself; this is true of the multivalent *Knight's Tale*, in which Theseus's words and actions manifest an awareness of the instability of discourse and textual signification.

The indeterminacy of Chrétien's and Chaucer's early finished works helps to contextualise and rationalise the production of their later unfinished works, and to clarify how they are unfinished. The most obvious characteristic of an unfinished romance is the lack of an ending: neither *Le Conte du Graal*, *The Squire's Tale*, nor *Sir Thopas* has a concluding part that shows any of the conventional modes of closure or includes any of the usual signals, and all break off midstream, though *Thopas* is deliberately 'interrupted'. Yet this study has uncovered additional forms of unfinishedness which affect earlier parts of the text, and which may be experienced as points of unfinishedness in advance of its termination. There may be narratological gaps where a development implied by prolepsis is never delivered, as when a character whose return is promised is not returned to, or an event, figure or object anticipated earlier in the narrative does not materialise. The *Conte du Graal*, *The Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* are replete with loose ends of this sort: Thopas postpones his combat with the giant but is unable to see it through; *The Squire's Tale* makes a series of

projections promising further details about the falcon's lover and Canace's relationship to Cambalo which never arrive; Chrétien's Grail romance makes implicit promises to return to Perceval, Blanchefleur, and Gawain's opponents, but does not keep them.

In fact, *Le Conte du Graal* is a particularly extreme manifestation of this type of unfinishedness, making and then explicitly retracting promises within the narrative. For instance, Perceval's taciturnity at the Grail Castle creates the expectation for a later episode in which he will recover the truth of the Grail objects and yet, during her reprimand of him, the Hideous Damsel makes it clear that he will never have that same opportunity again and a return to the Grail Castle is thrown into doubt. Chaucer's works exhibit a similar pattern of setting up expectations and then immediately disappointing them, and perhaps this habit of leaving threads 'dangling' only to cut them off reveals something about medieval narratology in general: in complex romances that bring many narrative strands into play, perhaps some promises are meant to be broken. The final form of unfinishedness that has emerged from this study is the juxtaposition of narrative components that seem irreconcilable in the context of the romance genre, or indeed in the context of any narrative that eventually seeks to reconcile its elements according to whatever logic is developed over the course of the text. It is unclear how the extreme disjunction between the timelines of Perceval and Gawain's adventures, for example, could have been reconciled without an awkward compression of time foreign to Chrétien's usual subtlety, or how the articulate falcon heroine could have been comfortably inserted into the pragmatic court at Tartary, and this lack of internal consistency leads to a thickening of plot and decline in momentum at the point at which the texts break off, where it might be expected to lay the foundations for resolution.

These three works of romance are extensively unfinished, then, because their lack of an ending is only the tip of the iceberg. For instance, in addition to the fact that *Le Conte du Graal* breaks off at line 9234, the romance leaves narratological gaps and various promises

unfulfilled throughout, and its ‘centrifugal’ diffusion of narrative concerns suggests an intentional movement towards multiple endpoints and meanings.³ It is also unclear whether some of its larger unanswered questions, such as the true significance of the Grail, could have been fully explained even within the bounds of a complete romance. Manessier does fix the meaning of the Grail objects in his continuation, but this religious orthodoxy, as we have seen, does not capture the full significance of Chrétien’s objects. Of course, it is entirely possible that the fragmentary states of *Le Conte du Graal* and *The Squire’s Tale* (though significantly not *Sir Thopas*) are the result of *terminatio*, which, in Matthew de Vendôme’s formulation, is when the end of the work is brought about by the author’s death. Yet Chrétien’s and Chaucer’s proclivity for inconclusiveness and multiplicity over resolution and singularity in complete works, as well as the tendency of both to create formally disruptive generic vagaries and incongruous scenarios, suggests that the approach to poetic composition that created the unfinished works, and hampered their movement towards an ending, was present in the earlier stages of their literary careers and was not an accident, necessity, or the result of dwindling skills in the later years of their textual production. In addition, because the works in question contain many varied types and points of unfinishedness, and the poets’ handling of certain narrative strands precludes their resolution within the text, they are radically unfinished in a manner that cannot be undone merely by the addition of a concluding part.

These two conclusions – that some of the earlier finished works are unresolved, and that the poets explicitly abandon or corrupt narrative strands in advance of the final section of the text or its termination – suggest several things. First, while I cannot say exactly what

³ For more this use of the term ‘centrifugal’: see Thomas Hinton, *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien de Troyes’s Perceval, the Continuations, and French Arthurian Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), p. 25; Matilda Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued: A Study of the ‘Conte du Graal’ and its Verse Continuations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 15.

Chrétien and Chaucer intended to achieve through their writing, their tendency to leave things unresolved in this way suggests that they were trying to present a more realistic view of medieval life as fragmented and multiple; not more 'true' to life in the historical sense, but more representative of the contradictions, frustrations, and conflicts that characterise the life of man in society; in their works, the juxtaposition of diverse literary elements and refusal of dialectical resolution becomes a 'socially significant gesture'.⁴ Though scholars accept this about Chaucer, whose position as a member of the 'new gentry' of the fourteenth century was contradictory and markedly precarious, they do not typically find it in Chrétien.⁵ But there is a psychological realism to the lack of reconciliation at the ends of Chrétien's romances in Chapter 2 and the incompatibility of the narrative elements in the *Conte du Graal* as much as there is in the multiplicity of *The Knight's Tale* in Chapter 4 and the fragmentation of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

The lack of resolution in the complete works and the seemingly deliberate rejection of opportunities for closure in the unfinished romance further suggest that both poets were strongly exploratory writers, and were usually aiming to produce questions rather than answers. Romance is an inherently questioning genre, but Chrétien and Chaucer took this to such an extreme, through the multiplication of loose threads, thematic inconsistencies, and unresolved juxtapositions of narrative components, all of which are contrary to unity, that sometimes they produced unfinished texts.⁶ The above two conclusions finally suggest that Chrétien and Chaucer were not always writing 'end-determined' fictions, fictions in which

⁴ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 164-9.

⁵ Because he was included in the ranks of gentlepersons by virtue of his royal service, 'Chaucer and his peers were thus exposed to some of the deepest contradictions that affected the middle strata of society [...] Though inserted in a social hierarchy between knights and other gentile gentz, they lack the traditional support of lands and rents. Though aligned by their work with the growing body of clerks, scribes, lawyers, and literate tradespeople, they are separated from that body by their gentility': *ibid.*, pp. 12-13 ff.

⁶ On romance as a questioning genre see Elizabeth Archibald, 'Questioning Arthurian Ideals', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 139-53.

the final part would organise, impose meaning upon, and resolve everything that had come before. Chrétien's Arthurian romances and Chaucer's Canterbury romances seem to have been shaped instead by an ambition to make sense of the world through the juxtaposition of opposites, mixture of styles, and assemblage of multiple perspectives, thus allowing for debate, and for multiple solutions to be devised or conclusions freely drawn, rather than leading the audience to one end, answer, or revelatory meaning.

This technique of juxtaposition and multiplicity over resolution and clarification observed in Chrétien's and Chaucer's romances has implications for the meaning, aesthetic, and function of their works, which reveal some new perspectives on this type of textual composition. With respect to meaning, like Patricia Parker's late Spenserian romance, which 'deviates' from closure and thus distributes meaning throughout, these texts implicitly provide a critique of the teleological model of narrative and the single point or centre of signification it presupposes.⁷ Evidently, the unfinished texts have a piece of puzzle missing, but that does not mean that they are devoid of meaning; in these texts, as in the complete works, meaning is cumulative and not invalidated by the absence of a final part. Moreover, while we do not have the full signification of the texts left unfinished, or only a version of it, some of the devices used by the poets in their complete works suggests that, in some cases at least, final meaning was located outside of the text itself. The *demande d'amour* in *The Knight's Tale* and the antithesis of viewpoints at the end of *Cligès* and *Yvain*, surely designed to provoke debate, construct closure as something to be achieved extratextually: they put final meaning into the hands of the multiple readers and audience members. Both poets were aware of the potential for their texts to be reopened and resolved in a different way: Chrétien warns that any further additions to *Yvain* would be a 'mançonge' (lie; l. 6808), and Chaucer

⁷ See Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 9

apologises for his ‘unkonnynges’ should the reader dislike anything in his *oeuvre*.⁸ However, there is a distinction to be made between the expressed concerns about the potential for unfaithful continuation and misinterpretation and the hermeneutic subtext present in the work of both poets, which encourages readers to formulate their own meaning. This subtext is also served by their treatment of the romance aesthetic.

Jean Frappier’s comparison of *Le Conte du Graal* to the ‘splendid fragment’ of a statue ‘that evokes dreams of the whole’ might stand in for the aesthetic operation of all three of the unfinished texts treated in this thesis.⁹ Though Chaucer’s discordant romances do not have the special beauty and mystique of Chrétien’s text, they do have a similarly fractured aesthetic that fosters multiplicity, ambiguity, and creative responses. Indeed, this kind of ambiguity is constructive: because the unresolved and unfinished works refuse to provide unequivocal meaning, let alone last-word pronouncements, and enhance the imaginative structure of reference through the fragmentation of the romance aesthetic, they serve as an opportunity to explore and discover something greater than the sum of their parts. Thus, the greater potentiality of the romance aesthetic in these works is directly related to their function as a process of discovery rather than a set of answers. In addition, because Chaucer’s two unfinished romances make a familiar and predictable form unfamiliar and unpredictable, they expand the potential signification of the romance genre. The *Conte du Graal* is invested with this same spirit of renewal in the narrower context of Chrétien’s own oeuvre, where there is a clear evolution from *Erec et Enide* to his final unfinished work as he widens and probes the boundaries of his courtly romance. The virtue of an Arthurian text like *Le Conte du Graal* is that the lack of ending allows it to remain optimistic; without the passing of Arthur or the

⁸ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. by Mario Roques (Paris: Champion, 1978), p. 207, l. 6808; Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘Chaucer’s Retraction’, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor, 2nd edn (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012), p. 461.

⁹ Jean Frappier, *The Man and his Work*, trans. by Raymond J. Cormier (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 155.

decline of the kingdom into a wasteland, the narrative can be reconciled to more hopeful and consolatory narratives through continuation and adaptation. The rich, varied and, often, fragmented responses of the continuators and later adaptors suggest that these works may have functioned as a template or, at least, inspiration for later writers who sought to experiment with the romance genre and poetic style. Perhaps the most notable beneficiary of this revisionary spirit was Edmund Spenser, who apparently used *The Canterbury Tales* to modify the 1590 version of *The Faerie Queene*.¹⁰

Aside from illuminating the particular meanings, aesthetic and functions of fragmentary texts in the Middle Ages, one of the things that the juxtaposition of Chrétien and Chaucer shows is that the oeuvres of two apparently unconnected poets, writing in the romance genre at different times in different languages, were shaped by a similar penchant for inconclusiveness and multiplicity.¹¹ This aesthetic was not something that grew out of later experiments with the romance genre, or the reaction against it we sense in *The Canterbury Tales*, but was a conscious choice in earlier forms of romance. Evidently, the process of finishing a romance in a way that did not close down meaning was as complex a process for Chrétien as it was for Chaucer. Both had different and evolving ideas of textual completion at different stages of their writing careers, and both their oeuvres enshrine the

¹⁰ For more on the importance of poetic revolutions or renewals of the relations between poetic style and speech: see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 29-30; see Jeff Espie, 'Spenser, Chaucer, and the Renaissance *Squire's Tale*', *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, 33.1 (2019), 133-60.

¹¹ A handful of critics have mentioned the two poets in relation to their commonalities: among them, David C. Fowler, 'L'Amour dans Le *Lancelot* de Chrétien', *Romania*, 91 (1970), 379-391; F. Xavier Baron, 'Love in Chrétien's *Charrette*: Reversed Values and Isolation', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (1973), 372-83 (p. 383); D. S. Brewer, 'Chaucer and Chrétien de Troyes', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (London: Routledge, 1974); Michelle Sweeney, *Magic in Medieval Romance: from Chrétien de Troyes to Geoffrey Chaucer* (Portland: Four Courts Press, 2000); David Lyle Jeffrey, 'Courtly Love and Christian Marriage: Chrétien de Troyes, Chaucer, and Henry VIII', *Christianity and Literature*, 59 (2010) 515-30; P. J. Frankis, 'Chaucer's "Vavasour" and Chrétien de Troyes', *Notes and Queries*, 213 (1968), 46-7; Mary Hamel, 'The "Franklin's Tale" and Chrétien de Troyes', *The Chaucer Review*, 17.4 (1983), 316-331.

paradoxical dilemma of the medieval poet who wants to protect their work from the uncertain fate of future misinterpretation within a culture of scribal interference, *translatio*, and continuation, whilst simultaneously keeping it sufficiently ‘open’ enough to nourish the minds of readers and inspire creative production in writers.

Indeed, there is more work to be done on how inconclusiveness and multiplicity of endings in the romances of Chrétien and Chaucer influenced the literary traditions that derived indirectly from the work of the two poets: the Arthurian verse romances and French prose cycles after Chrétien, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poets like John Lydgate and Spenser after Chaucer, as well as how fragmentary works of romance fared in the ‘fynished’ books of early print culture. There is currently no edition of the Renaissance and early modern continuations of Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*, for instance, nor a monograph on the subject. Moreover, there are countless works of romance not covered in this thesis that came between Chrétien and Chaucer, like the *Roman de le Rose*, and many of Chaucer’s other works, like *Troilus and Criseyde*, which have more to contribute to the discussion around the multiplicity of endings in romance literature. The ‘discontinuous’ ending of *Troilus and Criseyde* and the slippage between the endings written to the *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun would surely confirm the thesis of this study: inconclusiveness is a key feature of the medieval romance genre, which sometimes gives rise to unfinished texts, and, because of this resistance to resolution, romance narratives inscribe the potential for multiple endings or, at least, there is always room for multiple and diverse ideas about what the final meanings, the thematic and narratological ‘ends’, of the text are.

The unfinished works of romance composed by Chrétien and Chaucer had particularly rich afterlives in the Middle Ages and beyond, then, not only because they lack an ending, but because meaning creation is invited at all levels of the text: in the lack of resolution for their thematic and narratological structures, in their multiple, ambiguous and fragmented

aesthetic, and in their handling of the larger issues of genre and poetic style. This proposition brings me finally to the crux of this thesis: from the twelfth through to the fourteenth centuries, certain types of romance writing were valued, not for their completion, but for their possibility. In fact, the works of romance in question seem to belong to a class of textual production that is not driven by a desire to comfort and gratify readers by telling them what they should think or know at the end, but which encourages them to imaginatively engage with and actively interpret the text rather than passively receive ideas. The texts examined across this study speak to a sophisticated type of knowledge transfer, a means to discover one's own position on issues of love, marriage, duty, responsibility, class, social mobility, religion and spirituality, rather than simply being told what to think. Of course, this process of discovery is possible within completed texts, but in an unfinished narrative the experience is made more urgent because the search for the missing piece of the text becomes bound up with whatever 'truth' the text seems to promise.

If Chrétien's and Chaucer's later works are understood as projects in reception, rather than a set of fixed answers simply waiting to be extracted, it makes sense that in the Middle Ages, unfinished and unresolved works of romance were engaged with and enjoyed in way that was exclusive from the desire to see them completed or resolved. In these works, completion and, more specifically, the presence of an ending, is not key to meaning. It is not that these works are deliberately fragmented or reactive in the postmodern sense of the *nouveau roman*; some medieval romance narratives are simply based on a pre-novelistic conception of textuality which 'contradicts itself', which takes its characters to unknown places and then inexplicably to other parts of the world, which introduces mysterious characters and objects with no explanation, and which leads to unexpected and unresolved

ends as a ‘challenge to creative co-operation.’¹² As an alternative to the arbitrary periodisation and ‘Othering’ of medieval writers inherent in the discussions of Chaucer’s ‘postmodernity’, then, this study offers a new awareness that in the twentieth century, writers like Alain Robbe-Grillet returned to something resembling a premodern aesthetic, an aesthetic which is brought into sharp focus in the unfinished romances of Chrétien and Chaucer.

6.1 Coda: The Whole Romances of Print

It is true that the fragmentation of the romance aesthetic in Chrétien’s and Chaucer’s works seems to have fostered greater ambiguity of meaning and helped to keep things open-ended on the textual level. Yet the openness and flexibility of their works was also served by the material circumstances of the book in manuscript culture: texts grew as they were continually copied, and were often only bound later, sometimes with new quires and additional tales. These new tales may have been just-remembered stories that had been transmitted orally, written on flyleaves, or scribbled down in margins, and owners could be expected to pop into workshops to order new attachments and other items. All of this meant that literary texts in the Middle Ages were fluid, ever-developing entities; there was none of the standardisation, regulation, or stability of modern-day book production. This was a hospitable environment for unfinished works: fragments were malleable and could easily be bound to other works, related and unrelated, creating ever-changing contexts in which readers could interpret and reinterpret the meanings of the explicitly open-ended works. As projects in reception, then, both *Le Conte du Graal* and *The Canterbury Tales* would have been helped and complicated by the open-endedness of the medieval book.

¹² See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 19-20.

The divergent and numerous surviving manuscript assemblages of *Le Conte du Graal* and *The Canterbury Tales* reflect the varied ideas about their meanings as well as medieval guesses about what the developing plans and ‘final intentions’ of the poets might have been. The many unfulfilled promises of the Grail story and Chaucer’s four-tale plan (two stories for each pilgrim on the way there plus two on the way back) would have given scribes and compilers a great deal to think about, and it makes sense that there were differing ideas about how the material should be presented and the poets’ projections accommodated. Chrétien’s unfinished work is sometimes presented on its own,¹³ frequently alongside the early Arthurian romances, or the continuations, or both, and it is occasionally amalgamated with Wace’s *Brut* to form a pseudo-history.¹⁴ Fifteenth-century scribes and editors of *The Canterbury Tales* composed a wealth of spurious links to join the discontinuous and unlinked fragments into various combinations, with fragments II and III-V proving especially troublesome.¹⁵ Nevertheless, general trends in the manuscript orders did emerge: in more than half of the manuscripts containing *Le Conte du Graal*, the ‘old Perceval’ is transmitted with its continuations, often in a continuous sequence, and the Ellesmere order of the *Tales* came to dominate as the ‘most satisfactory solution to an impossible problem’, though Manly and Rickert long ago concluded that Chaucer himself was not responsible for any of the extant arrangements.¹⁶ Derek Pearsall suggests that the *Tales*, as a ‘partly assembled kit with no directions’, should be presented as a partly bound book, with the first and last fragments fixed and the remainder loose in folders – reminiscent of B. S. Johnson’s ‘book in a box’ (1969).¹⁷

¹³ This is only the case in four manuscripts: thirteenth-century MS B (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 354), MS C (Clermont-Ferrand, BMI, 248), and MS F (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 2943), and the fourteenth-century MS H (London, College of Arms, Arundel XIV).

¹⁴ As in the thirteenth-century MS R (Paris, BnF, fr. 1450) and MS A (Paris, BnF, fr. 794), also thirteenth century.

¹⁵ See Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), pp. 14-23.

¹⁶ Pearsall, p. 22; J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, vol. 2 (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 475.

¹⁷ Pearsall, p. 23; see also, Introduction, p. 20.

It is not out of the question that this is what some compilers, those without the political imperative of Thomas Chaucer, had in mind.¹⁸ However, with the emergence of the printing press, open-ended manuscripts became whole books, and early printers necessarily imposed some limit and order upon the meaning of unfinished works.

It has now been shown that the ‘break’ between manuscript and print culture at the end of the Middle Ages was in fact a hybrid transition period that stretched well into the Renaissance, in which fluid textual entities circulated in a range of different configurations, some of them ‘book-shaped’.¹⁹ The emergence of the Gutenberg hand press on the Continent and the subsequent rise of print technology in England in the 1470s led to the slow attrition of manuscript culture. Yet there was actually a rapid increase in manuscript production in the later Middle Ages, thanks in part to the spread of literacy and the growing demand for books (Latin and vernacular), that prompted this gradual shift in cultural production as early printers looked for more efficient ways to meet higher demand for codices.²⁰ Early print culture was a logical evolution of manuscript production and exchange, rather than an antagonistic reaction against it, and early methods of book production retained many practices of the manuscript trade. Like manuscripts, early printed books were flexible, adaptable, and subject to addition, supplementation, and supersession by exemplars.

¹⁸ See Introduction, p. 14.

¹⁹ See for example, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982); Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books 1473-1557* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jeffrey Todd Knight, ‘Organizing Manuscript and Print: From *Compilatio* to Compilation’, *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*, ed. by Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 77-95; Julia Boffey, *Manuscript and Print in London c. 1475-1530* (London: British Library, 2012).

²⁰ Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen, ‘Introduction: Manuscripts and Cultural History’, *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*, ed. by Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 1-16 (pp. 6-10).

The print and parchment books circulating at this time themselves testify to the blurred distinction between manuscript and print forms. Jeffrey Todd Knight identifies some early printed compilations and miscellanies that incorporated actual manuscript material, and Alexandra Gillespie points to the example of the Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.15 manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*, sections of which appear to have been copied from William Caxton's 1476 edition of the *Tales*, or a shared exemplar.²¹ There are further examples: Ad Putter notes the 'peculiarity' of Oxford, St John's College, MS 266, which was formatted so that it could be bound with Caxton's 1483 printed edition of the *Tales*, among other texts, and given a full-page illumination on vellum in lieu of a first page; in addition, Caxton's 1478 edition of the *Tales* seems to have been the exemplar for the excerpt from *The Monk's Tale* in Trinity MS R.3.19.²²

Despite the proximity of manuscript and print culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the commercial and cultural considerations of print technology began to change the way that readers received and interpreted texts and ultimately culminated in a firmer idea of textual completion. As Gillespie has demonstrated, complete texts had 'good vtterance',²³ value as marketable goods, and so early printers like William Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde had to find complete texts to fill their presses or, at least, find ways to make fragmentary texts seem 'whole' and thus desirable to their customers. By writing epilogues and endings to the works they printed, as Caxton did in his 1483 edition of Chaucer's *House of Fame*, and by supplying title pages and colophons, made a standard feature of print books by de Worde, early printers implied there were limits to the meanings of the fiction contained within their books.²⁴ When Caxton wrote that he has 'fynshed' Malory's *Morte Darthur* in 1485, the

²¹ Knight, p. 90; Gillespie, p. 57.

²² Ad Putter, 'An East Anglian Poem in a London Manuscript? The Date and Dialect of *The Court of Love* in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.19', unpublished proofs of a chapter in *Historical Dialectology in Digital Age* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 212-43 (p. 215).

²³ Gillespie, p. 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

expressive and inconclusive form of romance had found its complement in a more contained and restricting form.²⁵

Yet different ideas of how the text should end persisted: one early owner of Thomas Pynson's 1492 edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, Robert Saham of Bury St Edmunds, inscribed the *Retraction* which Pynson himself had removed, before adding a prayer for his own soul.²⁶ The end of the text had not been fixed by Pynson's printing of the *Tales*. Indeed, this copy of Chaucer's *Tales* illustrates that, even as printers strove to make single marketable objects out of diffuse textual fragments, readers preserved their diverse and multiple ends.

²⁵ For more on Malory in this context, see Carol M. Meale, "The Hoole Book": Editing and the Creation of Meaning in Malory's Text', *A Companion to Malory*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), pp. 3-18.

²⁶ The book is JRL 10002: Saham's will, Archdeaconry of Sudbury, Prob. R2/6/62, was proved 1519 where he is described as a chaplain living in Bury: see Gillespie, pp. 90-2.

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Appendix 1: Typology of Unfinished, Incomplete, and Unresolved Works

1. Author dies (*terminatio*)
2. Author leaves text unfinished due to change of patronage, economic / political situation e. g. crusade, profession, or simply could / did not write an ending
 - a. Left in unfinished state
 - b. Continued
 - c. Continued and completed
3. Text is incomplete at the beginning, middle, or end due to loss / damage
 - a. Elements / time e.g. age, decay, mould, fire, water
 - b. Human factors e.g. scribal redaction, negligence, war, theft, or possibly authorial agency

Unfinished

4. No formal closure i.e. no recognisable end, and may also have
 - a. Narratological gaps e. g. paralipsis (sidesteps), prolepsis (unfulfilled promises)
 - b. Internal inconsistency / juxtaposition of irreconcilable elements e.g. generic / stylistic incongruities, disjunction of timelines

Unresolved / Inconclusive

5. Formal closure but the ending is unresolved / inconclusive
 - a. Lack of reconciliation / unresolved tension
 - b. Multiplicity of meaning
 - c. Manifests issues of instability / *mouvance*